

THE END OF THE *TRACHINIAI* AND THE FATE OF HERAKLES

I. THE PROBLEM

At the end of the *Trachiniai*, the dying Herakles gives orders for his cremation on Mt. Oita and is carried off to his fiery end. One of the thorniest critical questions about the play is what we, the audience, are to make of this. Did Sophokles intend the audience to remember Herakles' apotheosis from the pyre and complete the story in their own minds? Or did he omit it in order to deny it, the better to deepen the play's supposed general pessimism or censure of Herakles?¹ The case for assuming Herakles' exaltation suffers from two major weaknesses. Its champions do little to answer the arguments of their opponents, which are often forceful and take into account things in the play which the devout would rather ignore, and they do surprisingly little to explain how their position on the question affects the interpretation of the play. Nevertheless, their case is a strong one and deserves better support than it usually receives. This study will present it in some detail, addressing the objections and in the process offering an interpretation.

There are basically two arguments to be answered. One, which may fairly be called the argument from silence, appeals to the indisputable fact that Herakles' exaltation, so well known in myth, is not presented in the play. The other, which I shall call the moral argument, maintains that the Herakles of the *Trachiniai* is too selfish, crude, and inhumane to merit superhuman status, and my treatment of it will deal in passing with another argument, less often advanced, that Herakles' exaltation would be out of keeping with the tragic tone of the play. We shall begin with the argument from silence.

II. THE TRADITION

The argument from silence sensibly recognizes that a Greek play is not the same as the myth on which it is based. The playwright selects part of a myth, perhaps from among conflicting versions, and interprets it, perhaps from a distinctive or idiosyncratic point of view. What matters is the play itself, not τὰ ἔξω τοῦ δράματος. If Sophokles had wanted us to think of Herakles' exaltation (the argument runs), he would have put something about it in the play.

This argument would be unimpeachable if we could really separate the play from the tradition cleanly and completely. In fact, the relationship between a Greek tragedy and the myth

¹ Space does not permit a full bibliography of the question. Important discussions in favor of assuming some form of exaltation include C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 159–60; C. Fuqua, *Traditio* xxxvi (1980) 1–81 at 59 n. 155; B. M. W. Knox, review of Ronnet (see below), *AJP* xcii (1971) 692–701 at 694–5; F. J. H. Letters, *The life and work of Sophocles* (London 1953) 192–8; H. Lloyd-Jones, *The justice of Zeus*² (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1983) 127–8; G. Méautis, *Sophocle: essai sur le héros tragique* (Paris 1957) 289–91; and C. Segal, *YCS* xxv (1977) 99–158 at 138–41 and *Tragedy and civilization: an interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, Mass. 1981) 99–101. Those opposed to assuming the exaltation (or at least to assigning it any significance) include V. Ehrenberg, in *Aspects of the ancient world* (New York 1946) 144–66 at 156–7; G. K. Galinsky, *The Herakles theme* (Totowa, N.J. 1972) 51–2; the commentaries of R. C. Jebb (Cambridge 1892) xxxi, xxxv and J. C. Kamerbeek (Leiden 1959) 26; I. M.

Linforth, *U. Cal. Publ. in Class. Philol.* xiv (1952) 255–67 at 265–6; G. Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Milan 1935) 485–6; G. Ronnet, *Sophocle, poète tragique* (Paris 1969) 48, 97–8; M. S. Silk, *G&R* xxxii (1985) 1–22 at 3, 11–12; T. C. W. Stinton, in M. Cropp, E. Fantham, and S. E. Scully (edd.), *Greek tragedy and its legacy: essays presented to D. J. Conacher* (Calgary 1986) 67–102 at 84–91; and C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles: a study of heroic humanism* (Cambridge, Mass. 1951) 119–20. For intermediate positions regarding the end as ambiguous, see G. W. Dickerson, 'The structure and interpretation of Sophocles' *Trachiniai*' (diss. Princeton 1972) 467–70 (close to the anti-apotheosis position); P. E. Easterling, *ICS* vi. 1 (1981) 56–74 and *Sophocles, Trachiniai* (Cambridge 1982) 9–11; T. F. Hoey, *Arethusa* x (1977) 269–94; and G. M. Kirkwood, *A study of Sophoclean drama* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1958) 67–8. All these works will be cited hereafter by author's name (and short title if necessary).

on which it is based is likely to be more complex. Since the tragedy did not present an original story, the audience—citizens of a fairly cohesive community with some strong common traditions—must have brought certain impressions about the story into the theatre with them. They did not watch the play in a vacuum, certainly not if the myth was well known. The playwright could use the audience's impressions in various ways. He might assume them and build upon them for dramatic effect: much of the tension and irony of the *Oidipous Tyrannos* and the *Agamemnon* depend on having the audience know how the story will turn out. Or he might revise them or reinterpret them or deny them altogether. He could not ignore them—perhaps not with any myth, certainly not with a figure as well known as Herakles. The play *responds* to the tradition, and we must understand what the tradition says if we are to understand the response which the play makes.

The tradition about Herakles has been studied extensively, but two features of it need to be extracted from the mass of material and examined here: Herakles' fate after his life of labors, and the connection of that fate with the pyre on Mt. Oita.² I will concentrate on evidence for the picture of Herakles in Athens at the time of the play, although this entails considering some earlier material important for shaping the tradition and some later material useful for illustrating the fifth-century tradition or certain trends growing out of it. The complicated question of the date of the *Trachiniai* need not be settled here: in what follows, developments that are mentioned as being before or after the play are before 450 or after 420, and most efforts to date the play put it somewhere within those broad limits.

As for Herakles' fate, our sources are practically unanimous that he achieved exalted status, either as a god or as a hero, after his death. This point is given lip-service by *Trachiniai* scholars, but it is often undervalued and is still worth emphasizing. From the later stages of the epic tradition into the fifth century, the poets tell us uniformly that after his life of labors Herakles became a god living on Olympos, married to Hebe, and (less often mentioned) reconciled with his old enemy, Hera.³ Two brief allusions to Herakles' apotheosis in tragedy—too brief and allusive for an obscure story—show that the tradition was still strong in fifth-century Athens.⁴ In art as in literature, the divine Herakles was a popular and enduring subject. His introduction to Olympos appears in official Athenian art at an early date in the form of a sculpture group from the archaic acropolis.⁵ He appears as a god or hero on a number of fifth-century monuments as well: with other heroes at the battle of Marathon in a mural in the Stoa Poikile, perhaps among the gods on the east pediment of the Parthenon, in the Garden of the Hesperides (a scene

² In addition to certain works cited above (n. 1), the most important studies and collections of material on which I have drawn, cited hereafter by author's name (and short title if necessary), are J. D. Beazley, *Etruscan vase-painting* (Oxford 1947) (hereafter *EVP*) and *Attic red-figure vase-painters*² (Oxford 1963) (hereafter *ARV*²); J. Boardman, in E. Böhr and W. Martini (edd.), *Studien zur Mythologie und Vasenmalerei* (Mainz 1986) 127–32; A. Brelich, *Gli eroi greci* (Rome 1958); F. Brommer, *Denkmälerlisten zur griechischen Heldensage i Herakles* (Marburg 1971) and *Vasenlisten zur griechischen Heldensage*³ (Marburg 1973); H. Metzger, *Les représentations dans la céramique attique du IV^e siècle* (Paris 1951); P. Mingazzini, *Atti della Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Memorie della classe di scienze morali, storiche, e filologiche* ser. 6 vol. i (1925) 413–90; M. P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean origin of Greek mythology* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1932); C. Robert, *Die griechische Heldensage* ii 2 (Berlin 1921); H. A. Shapiro, *CW* lxxvii (1983) 7–18; T. C. W. Stinton, in L. Rodley (ed.), *Papers given at a colloquium on Greek drama in honour of R. P. Winnington-Ingram*, Soc. Prom. Hell. St. Suppl. Paper xv (London 1987) 1–16; F. Stoessl, *Der Tod des Herakles* (Zürich

1945); U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Euripides Herakles*² ii (Berlin 1895); S. Woodford, 'Exemplum virtutis: a study of Heracles in Athens in the second half of the fifth century B.C.' (diss. Columbia 1966) (hereafter Woodford) and 'Cults of Heracles in Attica', in D. G. Mitten, J. G. Pedley, and J. A. Scott (edd.), *Studies presented to George M. A. Hanfmann* (Mainz 1971) 211–25 (hereafter Woodford, 'Cults').

³ Hom. *Od.* xi 601–4; Hom. *Hymn* 15 (Allen); Hes. *Th.* 950–5, fr. 25.26–33, fr. 229 (Merkelbach-West); Pi. *N.* 1.69–72, *N.* 10.17–18, *I.* 4.61–6. In the *Odyssey* passage and Hes. fr. 25, mention of the apotheosis is awkward and possibly interpolated, but no matter. The interpolation probably came well before Sophokles' time, and the awkwardness only shows that the story was established well enough to force its way into places where it appears ill at home.

⁴ Eur. *Hcl.* 910–18, *Soph. Phil.* 727–9.

⁵ Reconstructions vary, but the subject is clear. Bibliography in Brommer, *Denkmälerlisten* 125 and E. Lapalus, *Le fronton sculpté en Grèce* (Paris 1947) 432–3; add I. Beyer, *AA* lxxxix (1974) 639–51.

suggesting his immortality) from the Altar of the Twelve Gods, in a number of votive reliefs, both fifth- and fourth-century.⁶ Scenes of him attaining superhuman status or enjoying it—coming to Olympos or resting at a banquet table or in the Garden of the Hesperides or before a hero-shrine—are extremely popular in Attic vase-painting, as the catalogues of Brommer and Mingazzini (n. 2) attest.

Herakles was also known to Sophokles' audience as a popular cult-figure in their own religion. Twenty-four cults to him in Attika, ranging from large public temples to small private shrines, have been catalogued, and since many of these are small and known only by chance, the actual total was probably much higher.⁷ Herakles' prominence in cult left its mark on Athenian myth. The people of Attika (more precisely, of Marathon) boasted that they were the first of the Greeks to worship Herakles as a god and that they spread his worship throughout Greece and the world.⁸ We should doubt the boast, but it is significant that they thought the distinction worth boasting about. The large number of cults in Attika supported the boast and quite likely inspired it. It also gave rise to an odd story that Theseus brought Herakles to Athens and handed over to him most of the precincts that were already dedicated to Theseus.⁹ This myth reflects (and seeks to explain) the fact that Athens had temples of Herakles where one might expect temples of Theseus. Theseus might be the national hero of Athens in myth, but in cult that distinction went to Herakles.

Herakles appears in the tradition variously as an Olympian god and as a hero. The poets regularly make him an Olympian, but art and cult are far less precise. I must say flatly that for our purposes the distinction between god and hero, however clear-cut logically and however important to scholars, does not much matter. It plays little part in the debate on the *Trachiniai*, whose contestants tend to see the issue simply as one between glorification and annihilation; and this should not be charged to scholarly oversight, for it made little difference to the Greeks themselves. They worshiped Herakles as both god and hero indiscriminately.¹⁰ We know of some exceptions. Herodotos approved of 'those of the Greeks who have established διζῶ 'Ηράκλεια', twofold festivals honoring a divine and a heroic Herakles separately,¹¹ but we should be wary of adopting the common assumption that such festivals were a standard practice. We know of very few examples,¹² and this may not be due entirely to gaps in the record. When Herodotos speaks of 'those of the Greeks who have established διζῶ 'Ηράκλεια', he is contrasting them, perhaps as a knowledgeable minority, with other Greeks who have not, and the attitude of the latter group is not hard to imagine. Like other forms of practical piety in ancient Greece and since, theirs demanded little reflection, did not take cult acts as theological statements, and could tolerate a good deal of inconsistency. Such people may well have been in the majority and inclined to regard Herodotos as a bit of a pedant.

Moreover, such people had the poets on their side. Homer (or his interpolator, which amounted to the same thing) told them that Herakles' shade (εἶδωλον) lived in the underworld with the heroes, but Herakles himself (αὐτός) lived on Olympos among the gods. Hesiod (or his

⁶ Stoa Poikile, Paus. i 15.3; Parthenon, E. B. Harrison, *AJA* lxxi (1967) 27-58 at 43-5; Altar of the Twelve Gods (after the *Trachiniai*), Woodford 248-60, with bibliography; votive reliefs, Woodford 197-210.

⁷ Woodford, 'Cults' and Woodford 11-12.

⁸ Diod. Sic. iv 39.1; Paus. i 15.3, 32.4; Ael. Arist. i 35, 50-2, 360 and xl 11 (= xiii 105, 109, 188 and v 33); Isoc. v 33.

⁹ Eur. *H.F.* 1328-33, Plut. *Thes.* 35.2 (citing Philochoros), Ael. Arist. xl 11 (= v 33); discussion in Galinsky 40-1 and Woodford, 'Cults' 211-12.

¹⁰ W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* (Stuttgart 1977) 319-20; L. R. Farnell, *Greek hero cults and ideas of immortality* (Oxford 1921) 96-7; Nilsson (n. 2) 204-5. The distinction between god and hero could be blurred for lesser figures

too: see Brelich 193 and (on ritual matters) A. D. Nock, *HTR* xxxvii (1944) 141-74.

¹¹ Hdt. ii 44.5—of doubtful relevance to our question since Herodotos' divine Herakles is a born Olympian, not the deified son of Alkmene (Hdt. ii 43-4). In regarding the διζῶ 'Ηράκλεια as twofold festivals, not double shrines, I follow B. Bergquist, *Herakles on Thasos* (Uppsala 1973) 28 n. 45, 38-9.

¹² Twofold festivals are attested at Sikyon (Paus. ii 10.1) and Kos (M. P. Nilsson, *Griechische Feste von religiöser Bedeutung* [Leipzig 1906] 452-3 and Farnell [n. 10] 122) and perhaps at Thebes (Robert 633). A double cult is commonly claimed for Thasos, but Bergquist (n. 11) 19-39 raises some forceful objections. Shapiro 14-15 considers double cults exceptional.

interpolator) told them that Herakles ‘died and went to the mournful house of Hades’ and then added immediately, ‘But now he is a god and has emerged from all his sufferings, and he lives with the others who have their abodes in Olympos’. Euripides’ Theseus could speak of Herakles as dying and going to Hades (θανόντα δ’, εὔτ’ ἄν εἰς Ἄϊδου μόλης) and then as being honored with θυσίαισι, strictly speaking the word for sacrifices to Olympian gods. Pindar called Herakles the ἥρωσ θεός.¹³ How little the difference between god and hero mattered in Herakles’ case can be seen in Diodoros’ account of his end (iv 38.4–39.1)—an account which, by the way, is generally attentive to cult matters and the distinction between divine and heroic worship. Herakles disappeared from the pyre in a clap of thunder, and his companions concluded that he ‘had been translated from men to the gods’ (ἐξ ἀνθρώπων εἰς θεοὺς μεθεστάσθαι). Faced with this extraordinary event, they decided, no doubt reasonably enough, to ‘make sacrifices to him as a hero’ (ὡς ἥρωι ποιήσαντες ἄγισμούςς).

In short, we have ample evidence that the tradition about Herakles’ exaltation (to use a more general term than apotheosis or heroization) was well established, especially at Athens. We can add that the evidence for a counter-tradition in which Herakles died an ordinary death is extremely weak. I present it here in full, but mainly to show that it is questionable on many details and slight cumulatively. If Sophokles wanted to show his audience a different version of Herakles’ end, he would have had to make it up almost completely on his own.

At *Il.* xviii 117–19, Achilles muses, ‘Not even mighty Herakles escaped death’. Scholars sometimes try to elevate this passage into a full-fledged alternative version of Herakles’ end, or at least a somber way of looking at it which could well serve as an epigraph to the *Trachiniai*.¹⁴ We should see it rather as a distinctive poetic touch made to fit its context, not as an unreflecting echo of tradition. It is in keeping with the particularly grim view of life after death which pervades the *Iliad*, and it is further colored by Achilles’ rhetorical purpose of facing his own impending death.¹⁵ The tradition about Herakles, as we have seen (above, n. 3), stood apart from the *Iliad*’s world-view early and consistently. On Herakles’ fate, Homer’s was an isolated voice, and there are few things in Greek mythology on which his considerable authority counted for less.

Bakkhylides twice refers to Herakles’ death without bringing in his exaltation. Ode 16 offers little help in our discussion of the *Trachiniai*, quite apart from the problem of dates. It concentrates on Deianeira and her sad mistake; Herakles and his fate are of secondary interest. Those determined to eliminate Herakles’ exaltation from the *Trachiniai* might draw more comfort (although none to my knowledge has tried) from Ode 5, which tells how Herakles met Meleagros in the underworld, heard the story of his death, and agreed to marry his sister—Deianeira. It is an unsettling moment in a disquieting ode, and it encourages us to look ahead to Herakles’ death in the fatal robe but no further. Bakkhylides does not go so far as to deny the standard tradition, but he does narrow his focus considerably (even omitting the pyre, which is important in Sophokles) to concentrate on the darker aspects of the story.

The Chorus at Eur. *Hclid.* 910–14 speaks of Herakles’ apotheosis and says φεύγει λόγον ὡς τὸν Ἄϊδα δόμον κατέβη, πυρὸς / δεινᾶ φλογὶ σῶμα δαισθεῖς, a difficult passage meaning that Herakles ‘escapes the story (λόγος)’ that he went to Hades when he was cremated (or perhaps that he was cremated and went to Hades). Was this rejected story current on the streets of Athens? We can find it closer at hand, barely forty lines earlier. Alkmene admits that she had her

¹³ Hom. *Od.* xi 601–4, Hes. *fr.* 25.25–7 (Merkelbach–West), Eur. *H.F.* 1331–3, Pi. *N.* 3.22.

¹⁴ Alternative version: Jebb xxxv, Perrotta 485–6, Ronnet 48 n. 2, Stinton (n. 1) 74, 91. Epigraph: Easterling, *Trachiniai* 7.

¹⁵ The *Iliad*, unlike other early epics, has no translations to the Islands of the Blessed, gifts of immortality, and the like: see J. Griffin, *JHS* xcvi (1977) 39–53 at 42–3. It would naturally have to kill Herakles off. The *Iliad*’s treatment of Herakles on this point

resembles its treatment of the Dioskouroi, who lie dead and buried at *Il.* iii 243–4 but who enjoy a kind of immortality from an early date: *Od.* xi 298–304, the *Kypria* (T. W. Allen [ed.], *Homeri opera* v [Oxford 1912] 103, 120), Pi. *N.* 10.55–90, and (on black-figure vases) A. Hermay, *BCH* cii (1978) 51–76. Achilles’ rhetorical purpose is discussed by Nilsson (n. 2) 200–1; also, note that Homeric characters often bend their mythological exempla to fit the situation: see M. M. Willcock, *CQ* xiv (1964) 141–54.

doubts about Herakles' divinity, but victory over Eurystheus has removed them: καὶ παῖδα τὸν ἔμὸν πρόσθεν οὐ δοκοῦσ' ἐγὼ / θεοῖς ὀμιλεῖν νῦν ἐπίσταμαι σαφῶς (871–2). It is not clear that Alkmene's doubts, born of her own experience, were shared by the audience.

In another Euripidean play, Theseus tells Herakles that he will enjoy worship at Athens after his death, θανόντα δ', εὔτ' ἂν εἰς Ἀίδου μόλῃς (H.F. 1331), which means that Herakles will die. Still, the emphasis of the passage is on the extraordinary honors which Herakles will enjoy, including divine sacrifices (θυσίασι, 1332). Herakles' exaltation is assured; Theseus only speaks of Herakles as a mortal, in keeping with the vulnerable, human qualities which Herakles shows in this play.

Three Attic vases from before 450 (hence before the *Trachiniai*) show Herakles on the pyre, not (as happens in later pyre scenes, to be discussed below) soaring above it in a chariot to Olympos. It seems reasonable, however, to take these scenes as showing an earlier stage of the story—a somber moment at the pyre before the apotheosis.¹⁶ Vase-paintings (especially in this period) are better suited for particular scenes in stories than for continuous narratives. They can tell us more about what a myth included than about what it left out. So much for the counter-tradition.

It remains to consider the pyre on Mt. Oita and its connection with Herakles' exaltation. We know that from geometric times until the Roman period, Mt. Oita was the scene of a festival in honor of Herakles at which animals, effigies, and other objects were burnt in a bonfire. Thus the myth of Herakles' cremation may well have been created to explain the cult.¹⁷ This was not simply an obscure local cult. The story of the pyre was known elsewhere in Greece, and we sometimes find it linked to cult in one way or another.¹⁸ More important, we find it in classical Athens, usually linked to Herakles' exaltation. Most of the evidence comes from after the *Trachiniai*, but not so long after that it can be lightly dismissed. The allusions to the pyre in tragedy (above, n. 4) link it to Herakles' exaltation. So do three vase-paintings from about 420 to 380 in which Herakles soars through the sky in a chariot while the pyre, empty but for his breastplate, burns below.¹⁹ The artists even borrow a bit of local color for these scenes, implying that they knew the Oitaian story in some detail: nymphs with water-jars come up to extinguish the pyre, evidently an Athenian adaptation of a legend from around Mt. Oita in which the river Dyras sprang up to extinguish the flames.²⁰

The Attic scenes of Herakles' chariot soaring to Olympos above the pyre are variations of a more common type of apotheosis scene showing the soaring chariot only. The pyre was an

¹⁶ The vases are: (1) Villa Giulia 11688, a fragmentary krater published by C. Clairmont, *AJA* lvii (1953) 85–94; (2) a fragmentary krater in Leningrad, not published as far as I know; and (3) a privately owned psykter published by J. R. Guy in F. Lissarrague and F. Thelamon (edd.), *Image et céramique grecque* (Rouen 1983) 151–2. For discussion, see Beazley, *EVP* 103–4 and Boardman 128. Clairmont and Guy see no reason to take their respective vases as denials of the apotheosis, and Boardman considers the two-tier compositions showing pyre and apotheosis together, found in vase-paintings a few decades later (below, n. 19), 'impossible' at this period.

¹⁷ Excavations are reported by N. G. Pappadakis, *AD* v (1919) Παράρτημα 25–33, with short notices in *BCH* xlv (1920) through xlvi (1923) and *JHS* xli (1921) 272; see also Y. Béquignon, *La vallée du Spercheios des origines au IV^e siècle* (Paris 1937) 204–30. The cult is discussed by M. P. Nilsson, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* xxi (1922) 310–16 and xxii (1923–4) 200 and *JHS* xliii (1923) 144–8; J. H. Croon, *Mnemosyne* ser. 4 vol. ix (1956) 193–220; W. Burkert, *GRBS* vii (1966) 87–121 at 117; and Boardman. Nilsson's explanation of the myth of Herakles' crema-

tion as an *aition* for the cult is widely accepted, although Shapiro 15–17 and Stinton (n. 2) 2–6 disagree. For this study, the original meaning of the cremation story is less important than the connection of the pyre with the apotheosis in classical times.

¹⁸ Diod. Sic. iv 38–9, [Luc.] *Amores* 54, both admittedly late. Closer to home, a brief allusion at Hdt. vii 198.2 assumes that the historian's audience knew about the pyre, although it does not mention the cult.

¹⁹ See Beazley, *EVP* 103–4; Boardman 128; and Brommer, *Vasenlisten* 187–8. The vases are: (1) Munich 2360 (Jahn 384) (*ARV*² 1186.30, Metzger 210.25 and pl. 28.1, Mingazzini no. 108); (2) S. Agata de' Goti, Mustilli collection (*ARV*² 1420.5, Metzger 211.26 and pl. 22.1, Mingazzini no. 106); (3) New York 52.11.18 (M. J. Milne, *AJA* lxvi [1962] 305–6). The earliest of these, Munich 2360, shows satyrs stealing Herakles' weapons from the pyre—a humorous variation implying that the theme was already known.

²⁰ For the identification of the women as spring-nymphs, see Beazley, *EVP* 104–5 (but cf. Boardman 130); on the river Dyras, see Hdt. vii 198.2, Strabo ix 4.14.

optional feature which an artist could add or (more often) leave out at will. For example, the painter of London F 64 left five scenes of Herakles and Nike in the chariot, practically identical except that one included the pyre and three omitted it (the fifth is too fragmentary for us to tell).²¹ If we ask why the pyre was not more common in such scenes, we might be tempted by mythological explanations (that Herakles' exaltation was well known but its connection with the pyre was not), but artistic ones deserve consideration. The artist who included the pyre had to add to his picture a lower tier centered on a cumbersome pile of wood: best, perhaps, to leave it out.²² However we explain the absence of the pyre from most apotheosis scenes, its presence in these three confirms the connection between the pyre and Herakles' exaltation.

It is instructive to consider not only how well known the pyre was but how closely it was connected in the tradition with other events. It is connected closely indeed with Herakles' exaltation. We often find the apotheosis without the pyre, but we seldom find the pyre without the apotheosis.²³ Nor should we expect to, if the story of the pyre is a cult-myth which assumed Herakles' exalted status and sought to explain how it came about. If a tragic poet wanted to show how Herakles became a god or hero and not simply state the fact, then he would have strong reason to include the pyre in his story. More important, an audience that saw Herakles on stage preparing for his cremation would find it very easy to think ahead to his exaltation. That was the regular sequence of events in the myth.

There is more. If the pyre is closely tied to Herakles' exaltation, it is rather more loosely connected to the story of Deianeira, the sack of Oichalia, and Nessos' poison—that is, to the plot of the *Trachiniai* up to the exodos. Poets can tell the story of the *Trachiniai* very nicely without including the pyre, and some of them do.²⁴ Indeed, scholars have long suspected that the story of Nessos and Deianeira, which comes from Aitolia and involves Herakles' death by poison, and the cremation story, which is set near the Malian Gulf and involves Herakles' death by fire, arose independently in different parts of Greece and were joined at a relatively late date.²⁵ Suspicion is strengthened by some uncertainty in the tradition over where Eurytos' Oichalia was. Most authors put it in Euboeia, close to Trachis, but we also hear of it in Thessaly, Arkadia, and Messenia.²⁶ One suspects that there would be more agreement if the sack of Oichalia was more closely connected to the pyre on Mt. Oita. What matters for our purposes is not that these stories may have been joined late (for a 'late' development in a myth could still be well before Sophokles), but that the joints remained rather loose and easily broken. The story which Sophokles adapted in the *Trachiniai* did not have to include the pyre.

III. THE ARGUMENT FROM SILENCE

So much, at last, for the tradition about Herakles' exaltation. That tradition was strong, it

²¹ With pyre: the S. Agata krater noted above (n. 19). Without pyre: London F 64 (*ARV*² 1419.1, Metzger 211.28, Mingazzini no. 97 and pl. 3.1); Cabinet de Médailles 430 (*ARV*² 1420.3, Metzger 211.27 and pl. 28.2); Ruvo, Jatta 422 (*ARV*² 1420.4, Metzger 211.29, Mingazzini no. 98). Fragmentary: Oxford 1954.263 (*ARV*² 1420.2, Metzger 211.30). Mingazzini 441 considers his type V (soaring chariot with pyre) to be a slight variant of type VI (soaring chariot only); see also Beazley, *EVP* 105 and Boardman 128.

²² A suggestion by L. M. Burn noted in Easterling, *ICS* 74 n. 30.

²³ Neglect of this distinction leads Easterling to say, 'We simply do not know whether the story of the pyre was necessarily associated with the widespread and popular story of Heracles' apotheosis at the time when the play was written' (*ICS* 65; so also Easterling, *Trachiniai* 10, 17–18 and Stinton [n. 1] 85–6). This is

correct if we look at the association from one end, from the apotheosis. If we look at it from the other end, from the pyre (which is, after all, what the *Trachiniai* gives us), the association appears considerably stronger. The only relevant counter-examples are the brief allusion to the pyre at Hdt. vii 198.2 and the three vase-paintings showing the pyre without the apotheosis (above, n. 16), which cannot possibly be expected to tell the whole story, and Eur. *Held.* 912–14, discussed above.

²⁴ Hes. *fr.* 25 and (almost certainly) *fr.* 229; Bakkhyl. 5 and quite likely 16.

²⁵ Ehrenberg 145, Jebb xxiii–xxiv, Linforth 261–2, Nilsson (n. 2) 205, Robert 568–9 and 597–8, Wilamowitz 78–81.

²⁶ Paus. iv 2.2–3; Strabo viii 3.6, 3.25, 4.5, ix 5.17, x 1.10; in addition, Argos claimed Deianeira's grave (Paus. ii 23.5).

was particularly strong in classical Athens, and it was all the stronger given the negligible counter-tradition. This finding puts a heavy burden of proof on those who want to rule Herakles' exaltation out of the *Trachiniai*; the argument from silence is not enough. If Sophokles wanted to show Herakles dying an ordinary death, then he was changing the traditional story radically and contradicting one of the best-known 'facts' in all Greek mythology. We may grant him the freedom to do so, but freedom has its price, and the price here is that Sophokles would have to take considerable pains to show his audience what he was about. It would not be enough for him to omit Herakles' exaltation. He would have to make strenuous efforts to deny it. The sharp break with the tradition should be advertised, even flaunted; connections with, and reminders of, the story of Herakles' exaltation should be thoroughly weeded out.

What we find in the play is rather different. To begin with small matters, there are a number of hints of Herakles' coming glory. They might mean little in isolation, but they gain a measure of significance if we approach the play with the tradition suitably kept in mind. Even small hints are likely to bring up in the minds of the audience ideas which Sophokles (if he meant to deny the exaltation) should have worked hard to keep out. References to Mt. Oita as a sacred place, as it was in Sophokles' day (*Trach.* 200, 436–7, 635, 1191–2), would bring up such ideas. So would Herakles' decision to excuse Hyllos from lighting the pyre (1211). This complication only reminds us of the standard version of the myth, in which Philoktetes (or his father Poias) lit the pyre and Herakles was taken up to Olympos.²⁷ A less subtle reminder, in my opinion, is Hyllos' much-debated remark (interrupting his complaint against the gods) that 'no man sees what is to come' (1270). Qualifying the bitter tone of Hyllos' speech here is pointless unless the exaltation is to be hinted at, a blunder if it is to be altogether denied. Other passages have been identified as hints, but these are far less likely.²⁸ The hints are slight, but there should be no hints at all if Sophokles is really trying to keep Herakles' exaltation out of the picture.²⁹

Against these hints, we should note that Herakles is convinced that he will die an ordinary death and go beneath the earth (*Trach.* 1143–6, 1172–3, 1201–2, 1222, 1256). The issue before us, however, is not what Herakles makes of his end but what we, the audience, are to make of it, and for that the tradition—things which the audience knows even if the characters do not—is important. Moreover, we must remember that death is no bar to heroic status. Heroes, after all, are generally people who have died but who exercise power and demand worship from beyond the grave. Herakles even claims such power for himself when he threatens Hyllos with his curse from beneath the earth if Hyllos disobeys him: εἰ δὲ μή, μενῶ σ' ἐγὼ / καὶ νέρθην ὦν ἀραῖος εἰσαεῖ βαρῦς (1201–2). Sophokles sometimes emphasizes the heroic aspect of Herakles' nature and plays down the divine, but that is by no means the same as denying the exaltation altogether.

Far more important than the small hints of Herakles' exaltation is the scene beginning at line 1140 in which Herakles learns of Nessos' trick, realizes that his death fulfills the old oracles about him, and gives orders for his cremation on Mt. Oita. This scene takes the *Trachiniai* in a new direction, one not demanded by the action so far. The tragedy of Deianeira (that is, the play which many critics take the *Trachiniai* to be) could easily have been given a simpler denouement. Taking Herakles into the house to die of Nessos' poison, or even having him die at Kenaion without coming on stage at all, would have done nicely, and incidentally would have been enough to scotch all speculation about his exaltation. The pyre scene has been regarded as a

²⁷ Lloyd-Jones 128.

²⁸ I do not count as hints a supposed reference to Hera at *Trach.* 1105 (J. Bollack, *RPh* xliv [1970] 37–47 at 46–7); mention of healing at 1206–10 (Kirkwood 67 n. 32 and Segal, *Tragedy and civilization* 100—the bitter paradox of death as healing dampens any sense of Herakles' glorification here); references to Herakles' kinship with Zeus (Segal, *loc. cit.*); or the title, with its reference to the site of Herakles' pyre (Dickerson 103–8).

²⁹ Dickerson 467–70, 497–500 argues that the hints of the coming apotheosis are meant to raise hopes that are deliberately left unfulfilled, and Stinton (n. 2) 13 n. 49 suggests something similar. This is a provocative twist to the argument from silence but still not convincing. Given the strength of the tradition, Sophokles' build-up to Herakles' glorification demands a bigger let-down.

cumbersome ‘afterpiece’ to the play, added on simply to make it conform to the myth.³⁰ But the myth, as we have seen, does not demand it either: the story of Deianeira and the fatal robe could have been told without the pyre. The scene is so obtrusive that it calls for careful consideration. Indeed, what really needs explaining about the *Trachiniai* is not the much-noted absence of the apotheosis but the presence of the pyre.

The most obvious effect of the pyre scene is that it reminds the audience of Herakles’ exaltation far more forcefully than the small hints noted earlier. We would expect Sophokles to omit it if he meant to keep the exaltation out of the audience’s minds. Instead, he takes the hero right to the threshold of exaltation. We do not go beyond the threshold; the play emphasizes Herakles’ sufferings and strength of will, not his eventual repose, and so it ends with its ‘tragic’ tone intact. Still, it is significant that the preparations for the exaltation are included at all. Those preparations serve two important functions. They show the inauguration of a religious rite, and they mark a change in Herakles.

The religious rite first shows itself when Mt. Oita is mentioned as a place of sacrifice. ‘Do you know Oita, the hill of most high Zeus?’ asks Herakles as he prepares to give solemn instructions to his son (*Trach.* 1191). ‘I know it, since I have often stood there as a sacrificer (ὡς θυτήρ)’, Hyllos replies. The question and the reference to sacrificing seem gratuitous. Sophokles is not the sort of playwright to bring in geography lessons or local color, least of all at a juncture like this. But this detail encourages us to think of Mt. Oita as a place of sacrifice—just as it was in classical times. Herakles’ other directions are basically ritual prescriptions.³¹ He specifies the types of wood to be used in the rite—oak (sacred to Herakles’ father Zeus) and olive (sacred to Herakles’ traditional protectress Athena) for the pyre, pine for the torch (1195–9). He enjoins a ritual silence on his companions (1199–1201). Silence here means no mourning: despite Herakles’ mortal agony, this ritual is not a funeral. In keeping with this fact, it is worth noting that Herakles’ detailed demands and instructions include no provision for the disposal of his remains.³² The ritual takes shape before our eyes. Herakles’ will brings religious order out of the disorder of his pain and rage.

As the ritual takes shape, we also see a change in Herakles. When he awakens from his sleep, he is helpless in his agony. Once he hears the name of Nessos and realizes that the oracles are being fulfilled in his death, however, he is transformed. He is still grim, violent, self-centered, and threatening, but he is also purposeful, resolute, and determined to take command of the situation as far as possible. The fact of his death may be the will of fate or Zeus, but the place and manner of it and the accompanying ritual are the will of Herakles. Indeed, what happens from here on is wholly his will, as if he took charge of the end of the play and rewrote it to suit himself. In doing so, he shows himself quite arbitrary, for his ritual prescriptions make remarkably little sense within the play and gain meaning only when we recall their connection with cult, and he is quite harsh in compelling obedience to his will. But then, Greek heroes are often arbitrary and harsh. The exodos of the *Trachiniai* shows the heroic will asserting itself powerfully and arbitrarily, but in such a way as to produce the cult of Herakles. We see a hero, perhaps even a god, in the making.

³⁰ So Linforth, who rightly saw that the pyre scene was abrupt but wrongly counted its abruptness as a fault. Rebuttals include Hoey 292 n. 11 and Segal, *YCS* 140. A further objection is that Linforth considered Sophokles somehow bound by tradition to include the pyre but free to omit the better-known story of Herakles’ exaltation. If tradition demanded the former, then *a fortiori* it demanded the latter.

³¹ Some of what follows is noted by Dickerson 450–2; Easterling, *Trachiniai* 9–10; and Segal, *Tragedy and civilization* 100–1.

³² In later accounts he left no remains to dispose of (*Diod. Sic.* iv 38.5, *Apollod.* ii 7.7). I will not argue that Sophokles implies Herakles’ disappearance, but he makes room for it, much as he makes room for having Philoktetes light the pyre.

IV. THE MORAL ARGUMENT

This picture of heroism needs to confront the moral argument.³³ If Herakles is to be exalted, the argument asks, why does Sophokles make him so selfish, proud, violent, and cruel? The evidence against Herakles is considerable. He got drunk in Eurytos' house, quarreled with his family, and later killed Iphitos by trickery (*Trach.* 262–80). Worse, he sacked the whole city of Oichalia so that he could have Iole as his concubine (351–68). Within the play, Herakles callously sends his concubine home to share the house with his wife, kills the innocent Lichas without a hearing (772–84), and demands that Hyllos risk his own life to help him in his agony (797–8). He would kill the innocent, gentle Deianeira with his bare hands if he could (1064–9). Once convinced of her innocence, he ignores her altogether, preferring to rave about his own sufferings. His insistence that Hyllos marry Iole (1216–51) is likewise selfish and unfeeling.

This is a serious indictment, but some of the charges should be dismissed. Zeus punishes Herakles for killing Iphitos, but only because he did it by guile (*Trach.* 275–9); the justice of Zeus (at least in this play) would allow straightforward violence. Herakles' killing of Lichas and his willingness to put Hyllos at risk are extenuated by his extreme pain. These and similar enormities are surely included in the play to make his agony seem all the greater: great suffering produces great passion. Herakles' disregard for Deianeira once he hears the fatal name of Nessos has more to do with plot construction than with character. Sophokles needs to move on to the pyre scene, the quicker the better, and further talk of Deianeira at this point would only slow things up. Had Sophokles wanted to call attention to Herakles' callousness, he could easily have done it by having Hyllos or the Chorus express shock and demand that he show more respect for his poor wife's memory. But the remonstrance never comes; Herakles' silence is passed over in silence. If we are to charge Herakles with neglect of Deianeira here, we must charge the rest of the cast and the playwright with it as well.

The moral argument should be further qualified on another point. Herakles is not wholly unworthy of admiration or sympathy. His great labors that rid the earth of beasts and monsters, although not a major theme of the play, are allowed a measure of attention. Some of his feats are catalogued (*Trach.* 1089–1102), and we are reminded that these labors purged the earth (1012, 1061). It is Herakles who reminds us (such things being allowed in Greek heroes), but we have other witnesses. To Hyllos, Herakles is still the 'best of men', even after the enormities of his agonies at Kenaion (810–12; Deianeira used the same expression at 177). The Chorus pities Greece for losing him (1112–13), and his sufferings elicit sympathy from those around him.³⁴ Deianeira loves him. If Sophokles had wanted to debunk Herakles, he could have made his picture of the hero considerably more one-sided. As it is, his past accomplishments, like the courage and resolution which he shows within the play, must be considered along with his selfishness and violence.

Indeed, Herakles' good side needs to be shown in the play if the exodos is to hold the audience's attention. If Herakles is brought on stage simply to have his faults displayed, then the whole scene collapses: why should we watch in detail the sufferings of a man with whom we have no reason to sympathize? If the exodos succeeds dramatically (as I think it does), then it must be partly because the playwright gives us a Herakles whom we can care about, perhaps even respect and admire. The references to his great labors and the pity of Hyllos and the Chorus for his sufferings encourage this necessary sympathy in the audience.

³³ For the most forceful presentation of the moral argument, see G. Murray, in *Greek studies* (Oxford 1946) 106–26; also Galinsky 46–52; H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1966) 157–78; Ronnet 94–8; and Whitman 119–20. For objections more extensive than mine, see A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the dramatist* (Cambridge 1951) 84–90.

³⁴ Lines 1112–13 are sometimes taken as sarcastic, but see Waldock (n. 33) 85–6. On pity for Herakles from Hyllos and the Chorus, see M. McCall, *AJP* xciii (1972) 142–63 at 156–7. Perrotta 482–3 acutely notes that the bystanders at Kenaion grieve for the suffering Herakles as well as for his victim Lichas (*Trach.* 783–4).

All of this, however, is said only to qualify the moral argument, not to overturn it. We are still faced with a Herakles who is proud, violent, self-centered, and bent on imposing his will on others. He shocks us, and we would do well to let ourselves be shocked rather than dig for mitigating circumstances or plead that his heroic status places him beyond ordinary human standards of conduct. The problem before us is how to take the moral argument (suitably qualified) into account along with Herakles' impending exaltation in forming a balanced interpretation of the play.

To do full justice to the play, we should see Herakles' strengths and weaknesses as different but inseparable aspects of the same sort of character—the proud, rough-hewn, repellent yet fascinating character which has been delineated as the heroic temper.³⁵ In this I agree with a number of other scholars who, despite the widespread condemnation of Herakles, have seen him as morally ambiguous with traits of greatness and are mindful that Greek heroes are not necessarily kind or virtuous.³⁶ Since the foundations for my argument have been well laid, I shall concentrate on some matters where the edifice needs additions: the role of moral considerations in the audience's probable reaction to Herakles; the link between Herakles' character and his exaltation, about which critics are often silent or hesitant; and some similarities between Herakles and Sophokles' other heroes.

Herakles' virtues and his vices are all of a piece. It is not simply that Sophokles, untroubled by Christian or Platonic moral reflection, could accept certain vices in his heroes; he practically demanded them, and his play would be the poorer without them. Herakles' vices are those of a hero, not of an ordinary man. His courage and resolution cannot be separated from the man's appalling selfishness and pride. For Sophokles, flawed people can still be great, and great people have the flaws that suit their nature. If Herakles were more moderate, chaste, or considerate, he would be more civilized and certainly more likeable, but the rugged grandeur would be gone.

Sophokles holds up Herakles before us (as he holds up some of his other heroes) not for our approval or disapproval, but to confront us with the full power of the moral ambiguity which Herakles represents. We are missing something if we ignore those splendid faults or explain them away. The values of civilized society and the claims of decency and compassion as represented by Deianeira are held up too insistently and violated too flagrantly for that. But we miss more if we read the play as though we were judges in a virtue contest between Herakles and his wife or jurors charged with finding him guilty or not guilty of something. The judging voice in us should not be silenced, but the play (if we read or watch it attentively) evokes other, more complex, reactions as well: admiration for a brave man facing his end; fascination with a powerful figure who appeals to us in plays however much he would repel us in real life; and perhaps (this being the festival of Dionysos) a willingness to be moved by values less refined than decency and compassion. The play needs both the heroic virtues and the heroic vices if it is to evoke a suitably rich response of horror blended with wonder.

This view of Herakles' character is in keeping with the fact that his exaltation is not shown in the play, even though Sophokles lays the groundwork for it by showing the preparations for the pyre and the emergence of Herakles' heroic temper. The play acknowledges Herakles' greatness, but it focuses our attention on the harsh aspects of his nature, not on his rewards. By admitting Herakles' exaltation but not showing it, Sophokles affirms Herakles' heroism but reminds us of the great suffering which it involves, both for the hero himself and for those around him. He presents a sober vision of life with much grandeur but little comfort. That is tragic by most definitions of the word, but it is still different from the uncompromising pessimism or the debunking of the hero which anti-exaltation criticism often imputes to the play.

³⁵ B. M. W. Knox, *The heroic temper: studies in Sophoclean tragedy* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1966). Knox recognizes some heroic traits in Herakles but does not count him as a true specimen of the type (172 n. 48).

³⁶ Easterling, *ICS* 60–1; Fuqua 67–71, 77–9; McCall (n. 34) 161; Perrotta 480–5; Segal, *YCS* 130–41; Silk 5–12. Brelich 225–83 finds similar ambiguities and 'monstrous' qualities in a large number of Greek heroes.

Herakles has much in common with Sophokles' other heroes.³⁷ Indeed, one of the advantages of the interpretation of the *Trachiniai* presented here is that it helps remove the play from its position as Sophokles' oddest and least Sophoklean work, the runt of the playwright's litter. Like Herakles, Ajax is undeniably a great warrior and an impressive, if often unsympathetic, figure, but his prowess is kept largely off stage. Within the play we see mostly his violence, intemperance, and self-centeredness. Still, we are left with no doubt that he is great in his way and that Odysseus is right to call him the best of the Greeks at Troy except for Achilles (*Ai.* 1339–41)—much as Herakles is the 'best of men' (*Trach.* 177, 810–12). There is something of Ajax's and Herakles' pride and self-absorption in King Oidipous, whose energy and quick wit serve his groundless suspicions of Kreon as ably as they have served the city of Thebes. There is a lot of Herakles in Philoktetes, the great warrior afflicted with incurable disease and hostile passions alike. Such pictures of extraordinary strength coupled with extraordinary passions and dangerous faults run all through Sophokles' work. Herakles, the greatest and the grossest of the heroes, is the most striking embodiment of the heroic paradox but is not unique.

There is a further similarity between the *Trachiniai* and the other plays. The strength of Sophokles' heroes lies almost entirely in the heart and will. It is often overlooked that their impressive resolution, courage, and tenacity are rarely backed by any corresponding physical strength or political power. Hence the folly and imprudence with which they are often charged by their foils. The contrasts between outer weakness and inner strength are greatest in Sophokles' last plays, in the figures of the crippled Philoktetes and the lame, blind old Oidipous, but the contrasts appear elsewhere too. Antigone and Elektra are politically and socially powerless (particularly since they are women), but they ignore their weaker sisters' advice and defy authority all the same. Ajax was a mighty warrior once, but that is all over before the play begins; we see him on stage, as we see Herakles, only after the fall. King Oidipous, the Sophoklean (and tragic) hero *par excellence*, is also the great exception to the rule since he enjoys wealth, power, and success through most of the play. But even he appears on stage after he loses all these things, and there is a certain fascination in seeing how he asserts himself after his downfall.³⁸

Thus the themes of the *Trachiniai* are thoroughly Sophoklean. The shape of the play is peculiar since it shows so little of the hero and so much of those who depend on him and react to him. Even this is not unique in Sophokles, although it is especially pronounced in the *Trachiniai*. Like Herakles, Antigone and Ajax are off stage for much of the time as the action revolves around them, and we see Ajax, as we see Herakles, largely through the eyes of his family and retainers. Elektra, Philoktetes, and the old Oidipous spend more time on stage, but even their plays are taken up in large measure by what goes on around them, not what they do.

In closing, it would be interesting to consider the position of the *Trachiniai* in the development of the Herakles myth. Generally speaking, the second half of the fifth century sees Herakles losing much of his old ruggedness and becoming more refined and moral, more a man of the polis. The vase-painters concentrate more on showing his cult or his repose in the afterlife; they pay less attention to the labors by which that repose was won.³⁹ Philosophers begin to transfer his greatness from the physical to the moral plane, following Prodikos' Sunday-school allegory about the choice which the young Herakles makes between Virtue and Vice (*Xen. Mem.* ii 1.21–34). It is impossible to say how far this trend had advanced by the date of the *Trachiniai*, especially in view of the difficulties of dating the *Trachiniai* itself. Certain things about the play, however, encourage the speculation that Sophokles saw the trend coming and did not like it. The play examines the old, rude, self-assertive brand of heroism, criticizes it in the light of

³⁷ His nearest relations seem to be Oidipous at Kolonos, also bound for exaltation (Segal, *YCS* 133 and Waldock [n. 33] 88), and Ajax (Knox, review of Ronnet 696).

³⁸ B. M. W. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven 1957) 185–96.

³⁹ Metzger 191–230, mainly with reference to the fourth century; Woodford 131–96.

civilized values and the cooperative virtues, yet in some ways upholds it. Sophokles senses the spell of the old and exposes his audience to it, being unwilling to see heroic greatness submerged completely beneath civilized refinement.⁴⁰

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