

The Anxiety of Emplotment in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

Sophocles' *Trachiniae* foregrounds its characters' anxieties about what will happen next. Throughout the play Heracles' wife Deianeira and epebe son Hyllus attempt to identify from oracles, hearsay, and their own deductions the conclusion (*telos*) of Heracles' labours and life course (*aiôn*). In other words, they want to identify the 'plot' (*mythos*) of his story, of which theirs is a subsidiary part, before it is complete. In attempting this, both characters undergo a reiterated process of uncertainty, investigation, and frustration. Deianeira experiences the first instance of this process in the play's *prologos* (1-93) which sets the template for its five repetitions throughout the play.

This process, which I label the 'anxiety of emplotment,' reflects that experienced by a tragedy's audience. Ancient audiences came to the play with certain expectation about the total shape of the plot based on their knowledge of mythology and dramatic conventions. But particular features of tragedy thwart those expectations: absence of extra-diegetic narration, lack of autopsy, gaps in knowledge, and hints of an uncertain future. While scholars have for decades noticed the heightened use of these features in *Trachiniae* (Lawrence 1978; Davies 1984; Roberts 1988; Heiden 1989; Kraus 1991; Bowman 1999; Budelmann 1999; Goward 1999; Goldhill 2012) no one has yet considered them all together as a deliberate exposition of a core tension innate to all tragic plotting. Nor have they systematically observed the patterned way by which the characters in *Trachiniae* metabolize this tension and what this implies about Sophocles' conception of tragedy. Whereas Aristotle will argue that tragic plots represent action arranged into a coherent whole, *Trachiniae* shows how, even though audiences and characters alike might desire coherence and wholeness, tragic action is designed to resist concrete

delimitation and frustrate simple intelligibility. As such, the *Trachiniae* enacts Sophocles' own theory of tragic plotting.

Works Cited

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