

From Dragon-Slayer to Dragon: The Transformation of Herakles in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

In *Trachiniae*, Sophocles connects Deianeira's fears in her husband's absence to serpents as a metaphor for her anxiety. Over the course of the tragedy, Sophocles transforms Herakles from dragon-slayer to dragon, a reversal of fortunes through which Sophocles laments the declining influence of the Athenian elite in the late 5th century BCE.

Sophocles uses the verb ἔρπω and its associations with the creeping, slithering movement of serpents to transfer Deianeira's fears throughout the tragedy, first at line 160 as she recounts the departure of Herakles and his wishes in the event of his death. This word is repeated again by Lichas at line 394, immediately preceding Deianeira's interrogation concerning the identity of Iole. Deianeira. Sophocles uses this verb nine times in total throughout the tragedy. In its usage at lines 816, 819, and 1108, the metaphorical dragon of her anxiety and past trauma that has plagued Deianeira since the beginning of the tragedy is transferred to Deianeira herself, as in her attempts to reclaim her position in the household, she has accomplished the very thing which she feared, the death of Herakles (Weiberg 2018).

Herakles is often portrayed as both hero and beast, and like the dragons he slays, Herakles' downfall is accomplished through his own appetites (Ogden 2013). In presenting the death of Herakles as a reversal of roles, and by extension fortunes, Sophocles also leans upon the heroic tradition of Herakles and uses him as a model for the Athenian aristocracy (Fuqua 1980). This interpretation resonates with the exodos of the tragedy, during which Hyllus and the chorus lament the state of affairs and curse the gods for their lack of involvement in the affairs of their mortal children (Easterling 1981).

Works Cited

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