

Distortions of Dejanira: Visions of Female Virtue in Handel's *Hercules* (1745)

Throughout the centuries, interpretations of the Hercules myth directly reflected ancient Greek societal values and expectations of male and female archetypal roles. When depicted in the theatre throughout the centuries, the interpretations of these characters also provided philosophical insights to the culture's audience and their respective eras. In the theatre, rigid expectations for gender roles are unspoken, yet deliberate vehicles for moralizing male and female virtue in general, and specifically, the virtues of Dejanira and Hercules. Numerous studies examine the varying interpretations of this myth; few, if any, address the ways female Greek virtues are depicted operatically within the confines of the myth.

In the music of George Frideric Handel's *Hercules* (1745), Dejanira contradicts the ideal Greek woman, as well as the woman of eighteenth-century England by being shown in stark contrast to Iole, the ideal virtuous female. Brief overviews of ancient Greek societal expectations and the constraints of eighteenth-century *opera seria* in England, and an examination of Handel's music highlights the absence and presence of female Greek virtue. *Hercules* illustrates how Handel molded the Hercules myth to adhere to audience expectations of his era and transformed the myth to appeal to the "contemporary" religious and societal expectations of eighteenth-century England, while vividly depicting Dejanira's lack of virtue in his music. The use of Handel's depiction of the Eryines in Dejanira's music highlights the wrathful and monstrous female, and the distorted use of musical form in her aria "Where Shall I Fly" depicts her twisted mind and lack of virtue.

Bibliography

Cohen, David. "Seclusion, Separation, and the Status of Women in Classical Athens." *Greece &*

Rome 36, no. 1 (Apr. 1989): 3-15. Accessed 17 October 2011.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/643180>.

Fantham, Elaine, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H.A.

Shapiro. "Women in Classical Athens: Heroines and Housewives." In *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*, 68-124. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Foley, Helene. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Sophoclean Tragedy." In *Sophocles; a Collection of Critical*

Essays, compiled and edited by Thomas Marion Woodard, 16-19. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996.

Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New

York: Schocken Books, 1975. Accessed 17 October 2011.

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu>.

Pomeroy, Sarah B. "The Study of Women in Antiquity: Past, Present, and Future." *American*

Journal of Philology 112, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 263-268. Accessed 17 October 2011.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/294724>.

Seaford, Richard. "The Imprisonment of Women in Greek Tragedy." *Journal of Hellenic Studies*

110 (1990): 76-90. Accessed 9 October 2011.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/631733>.

Shaw, Michael. "The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-Century Drama." *Classical Philology* 70

(Oct. 1975): 255-66. Accessed 9 October 2011.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/268229>.

Walcott, P. "Greek Attitudes Towards Women: the Mythological Evidence." *Greece & Rome* 31

(1984): 37-47. Accessed 17 October 2011.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/642368>.