The Presence of Absence: The Persistence of the *polis* in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is conspicuous by the absence of the *polis* as a recognizable social, cultural, and political institution in which the characters participate. The eponymous chorus is comprised of apolitical country women, while Deianira is described with nature metaphors (91-111) and, like her children, is in exile (40) (Easterling, 2005). Nessus, whose prior gift of the love-potion unleashes disaster, is a centaur. The nurse, although speaking a true account (63 ἐλεύθερον λόγον), is a slave. Heracles, ironically, is Omphale's slave (70 λάτριν πονεῖν; cf. 248-253). The name of his son Hyllos is reminiscent of "wood," ὕλη.

Admittedly, exchanges between Deianira and the chorus and the messenger's cross-examination of Lichas and bystanders are a community interaction. The *Trachiniae*, despite its probable early date (Kamerbeek, 1970, Easterling, 1982), also shows a sophisticated approach to the nature-culture debate of fifth-century Athens. The *stichomythia* between the messenger and Lichas represents a kind of *elenchus* (cf. Guthrie, 1969). This is consistent with λόγος as the first word in the play, offering a test-case of Solon's belief (Herodotus 1.32) that no one is happy until he is dead. It coheres with the numerous discussions of law and custom, truth and falsehood (e.g., the deceitful Lichas's obfuscation at 435 insanity [νοσοῦντι ληρεῖν] and being prudent [σώφρων]). It extends to the importance of oaths, especially of the messenger to Lichas and Heracles to Hyllus (Fletcher, 2012), as well as to the trustworthiness of the oracle to Heracles (77 μαντεῖα πιστά) and his bequests to his family (161-163).

However, this discernment does not begin in earnest until the messenger reveals Lichas's lies about Heracles' destruction of Oechalia. This violation of the norms of the *polis* stems not only from the sacking itself but from Heracle's motivations. The maiden Iole, portrayed by Lichas as one of a group seized by Heracles while avenging his punishment for killing Iphitus

(249-290), becomes a different kind of victim once we learn that Heracles destroyed the city to capture her (351-374).

In Sophocles' *Trachiniae,* even entities derived from the natural world shift shape or become unpredictable. The three forms (μορφαί) of the river Achelous (9-14), from whom Heracles rescued Deianira, are frightening and surreal, especially the man with "ox-like face" (13 βούπρῳρος, a near-*hapax*). They resemble the chorus's image of night as parent and victim of the day, which is in turn destroyed by night (94-95, Easterling, 1982). Most surreal is the love-potion of the centaur Nessus, whose home in the *polis* is via folk-tale; it causes anything and anyone to burn unnaturally. Not surprisingly, once Heracles realizes how Lichas's lies relate to his torment, he smashes Lichas's brains without pretense of law (777-782).

Sophocles harbors no illusions that the *polis* is perfect. Heracles condemns those around him, "men most unjust of all Greeks," for whom he toiled in sea and forest, when they do not help him die; he displays distance from the *polis* and implies that no Greeks are just (1010-11) (cf. Zakin, 2009, re Aeschylus' *Eumenides*). The limitations of civic norms also apply to the oracle and the religious requirements of the final scene. The oracle from Dodona, promising relief from Heracles' labors and death or painless life (162-173), does not function like historical examples, as he ultimately understands (1164-79); compare the "wooden walls" oracle at Herodotus 7.140-144 and, later, Heracles' interpretation of the bow prophecy in *Philoctetes* (1434-5) (Fontenrose, 1978, and Evans, 1982). Heracles' final requests to Hyllus here are even more problematical. Invoking Zeus, Heracles, wanting to teach his son the "best custom" (1178 νόμον/ κάλλιστον ἐξευρόντα, πειθαρχεῖν πατρί), extracts a pledge (1182 πίστιν) and oath (1181-1188); but for Hyllus, lighting the pyre and marrying Iole violates Greek conventions. They compromise about the pyre (1214-15). However, marrying Iole is not disrespecting the gods if it

delights his father (1246 δυσσέβεια; cf. 1245 δυσσεβεῖν). This is evasive, but Heracles is but Zeus's offspring at the threshold of death. If Heracles is now "beyond the *polis*" (Parker's response in Easterling, 2005), it is one more ruptured boundary. Heracles has traveled so far that a nod to his traditional apotheosis, implied by allowing Hyllus not to light the pyre, becomes obligatory.

Bibliography

Easterling, P.E. (2005). "The Image of the *Polis* in Greek Tragedy." *The Imaginary Polis*. Mogens Herman Hansen, ed. Copenhagen. pp.49-72.

Evans, J.A.S. (1982). "The Oracle of the 'Wooden Wall.'" *CJ* 78. pp. 24-29.

Fletcher, Judith. (2012). *Performing Oaths in Classical Greek Drama*. Cambridge, Cambs.

Fontenrose, Joseph. (1978). *The Delphic Oracle.* Berkeley.

Guthrie, W.K.C. (1969). *A History of Greek Philosophy* III. Cambridge, Cambs.

Sophocles, *Trachiniae*. (1982). P.E. Easterling, ed. Cambridge, Cambs.

----------. (1970) J.C. Kamerbeek, ed. Leiden.

Zakin, Emily. (2009). "Marrying the City." *Bound by the City*. Denise Eileen McCoskey and Emily Zakin, eds. Albany. pp.177-196.