

Nessus and Knowledge in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

Deianeira's tragic mistake is her deliberate miseducation by Nessus. In Nessus, Sophocles creates an inverted Cheiron, who uses his knowledge of *pharmaka* to mislead Deianeira for his own benefit. Through this comparison to Cheiron, the audience considers the ambiguity of knowledge and learns to question its purveyors. In doing so, Sophocles uses the *Trachiniae* to reflect on the motivations of the Sophists.

In Deianeira's recollection in lines 556-578, Nessus has provided her with a *philtion* to ensure that she never loses the affections of Herakles. In this case, Nessus misinforms Deianeira deliberately through his promise that she will benefit by his instruction. Deianeira discovers this deception beginning at line 680. Deianeira claims "of the things which the centaur taught me before, I failed in none of these." It is only too late that Deianeira learns that she has been deceived. The theme of learning and misinformation reappears when Deianeira says she has "achieved understanding, when it is no longer sufficient." The repetition of teaching and learning in the passage from 680 to 713 emphasizes the misinformation. Deianeira even claims Nessus deceived her. Sophocles' use of ἔθελγέ should be construed as cheated, implying that Nessus misrepresented his instruction.

The Nessus episode in the *Trachiniae* is almost a parody of Cheiron. Deianeira states that at this time she was still a child, being carried across the river on the shoulders of Nessus. The river serves as a boundary between the maiden Deianeira who departed with Herakles as a bride and the adult Deianeira recalling the events. Nessus provides an education to Deianeira that resembles the education provided by Cheiron, in that Nessus teaches Deianeira about *pharmaka*. Sophocles plays on this parallelism as Nessus performed the lesson at Deianeira's expense.

Nessus profits from the encounter by conveying passengers for hire. He intends to benefit sexually by raping Deianeira, and, when that fails, he intends to profit through incorrect teaching. Through his use of ring composition, Sophocles demonstrates his premise, which echoes the first line. Iole's arrival upsets the *oikos*. Sophocles' *prooimion* also echoes Protagoras in *Theaetetus* 152A, that "man is the measure of all things". By proposing that Nessus has deceived Deianeira, Sophocles questions the purveyors of knowledge.

Sophocles uses the interplay of light and dark as a metaphor for knowledge and ignorance. Sophocles advances the metaphorical contrast between light and dark by associating the light with sight and knowledge. (Lawrence 1978) Sophocles demonstrates that the only true knowledge is what one can see and understand from one's own experiences. Sophocles connects the interior of the house with the unseen to show the consequences of Deianeira's misplaced trust in the centaur. In addition, her position in the *oikos* is secure until Lichas reveals Iole's identity. Deianeira's choice to enter the house to commit suicide brings full circle the relationship between darkness and ignorance. (Lawrence 1978) This connection is further supported through Sophocles' distinction between sight and report. Deianeira assumes the worst when no one knows Herakles' location. Hyllus does not reveal factual knowledge but reports of his father's actions. Hyllus himself is unsure of the credibility of his reports. In lines 68 through 74, Sophocles uses the word *κλύω* three times, *φασί* twice, and *ἀγγέλλεται* once. The repetition *κλύω* and *φασί* emphasize the ambiguity of Hyllus' report. The prophecy Deianeira relates to Hyllus echoes this. Sophocles intentionally obscures the meaning of the prophecy and its accuracy by using *λόγον* in Hyllus' response to his mother's mention of the "trustworthy prophecy". Sophocles also contradicts the word *πιστὰ* here. The prophecy was perhaps trustworthy and credible when first delivered, but Deianeira's repetition to Hyllus becomes less credible.

Deianeira reasserts her interpretation of her life, having attempted to calculate before her time based on her previous experiences. Deianeira chooses to trust in Nessus' deceptions, despite never having seen the effects of his *philtion* herself. In doing so, Sophocles recalls the Protagorean doctrine "man is the measure of all things". As Plato preserves this doctrine in the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras uses *χρημάτων*. Protagoras means that man is the measure of all things which may be of benefit to himself. Sophocles' use of *χρηστός* in line 2 of the play echoes this sentiment. As Gagarin shows, the representation of Protagoras preserved in Plato reaches an agreement with Socrates that all things depend on knowledge. (Gagarin 1969) Socrates and Protagoras decide *arete* is a *metrike techne* which evaluates benefit and harm. By using Nessus as an inverted Cheiron Sophocles examines the benefit of education.

Bibliography

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