

## Prophecy and Gender in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

This paper takes a critical look at the gendered nature of prophecy in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. In particular, it analyzes the ways in which failed prophecies are closely connected with the characterization of Deianeira and her appropriation of a masculine sphere – namely, the interpretation of prophecies.

Deianeira positions herself as a prophet in the opening lines of the play (1-5), in which she challenges the revealed *archaios logos* that one cannot know the fortune of a man's life until he is dead. Her own she knows full well to be an unfortunate and sorrowful one, she declares; she then proceeds to narrate its unhappy course. And yet resignation is accompanied by hope. She strives for a happy outcome for Herakles, with whose fate she sees her own inextricably bound (85), sending their son Hyllus to search for his father after relating the ambiguous prophecy that Herakles received from the oracle at Dodona.

At the arrival of the messenger, she assumes the role of sign interpreter. At first she is wary of the messenger's report of Herakles' victory and impending arrival, cross-questioning him and expressing skepticism, but then she declares the news as a joyful and unexpected outcome long in coming (201). Her words represent a positive reading of the ambiguous prophecy, according to which Herakles' life would either come to an end or he would survive the trial (*ἄθλον*, 80) and live happily thereafter (79-81; cf. 166-8). And yet Deianeira undermines her own mantic pronouncement by striking a discordant tone, for the sight of Herakles' war captives, and in particular Iole, fills her with pity and fear, since she herself experienced similar violence when she was taken by Herakles as a war-bride. She notes that "those who consider things with care fear for the man who is fortunate, in case he may one day come to grief," (Lloyd-Jones 1994, 296-7). Thus she problematizes her earlier positive reading of the oracle, for her past experience tempers her optimism.

Deianaira's prophetic voice stands in stark contrast with that of male prophets in Sophocles, who exhibit supreme confidence in their pronouncements. These even include the prophecies of Aegisthus (*El.* 1466-99) and Oedipus (*O.T.* 1076-85), for both of whom their confidence proves tragically misplaced. The pronouncements of male prophets have perlocutionary intent: they represent bids to predict, amid uncertainty, a positive future.

Deianeira's relation to prophecy is heavily gendered. Just as she serves as custodian and mouthpiece of prophecies delivered by Zeus to Herakles, so she strictly observes the instructions given to her by Nessus (her description of these draws on oracular imagery, 683, cf. 47 and Bowman 1999: 344-6 and Segal 2000: 160), and thereby unwittingly brings about Herakles' demise. Even at the height of her agency in the plot, her actions are involuntary and serve to fulfill the wishes and mantic utterances of male actors (843-4, see Hamstead 2012: 218). Like other tragic characters, she correctly interprets the signs of the suffering that is to come, observing the deleterious effect of the ointment and judging it an unspeakable oracle (φάτιν ἄφραστον, 693-4), but she does so too late (710-11). When her premonitions are confirmed by Hyllus' report, she leaves without uttering a word, falling a victim of her own self-harm. In the end, her second-hand report of the oracle given to Herakles at Dodona proves misleading. We learn from Herakles, in a *vaticinium post eventum* (see Hose 2006: 93), that the oracle was not in fact truly an either-or proposition (1169-70), but that the release that was prophesied was in fact his death. The paper explores the peculiar role of women in prophecy: they are often the medium or mouthpiece but rarely the subject, solicitor, or interpreter of prophetic utterances. When they assume male mantic roles (see Bowman 1999), their fulfilment of these roles is presented as confused and unreliable.

## Bibliography

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