Women of Trachis: Trachiniae Study Guide

Women of Trachis: Trachiniae by Sophocles

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

One of the greatest tragedians of ancient Greece, Sophocles has remained the standard by which other playwrights are judged since his works were rediscovered during the western European Renaissance. He is the author of one of the most famous plays of all time, *Oedipus the King*, and a monumental figure from the so-called golden age of drama in classical Athens. Of the small fraction of his works that have survived the ages, however, not all are focused exclusively on male tragic heroes. In fact, Sophocles was able to probe sensitively and thoughtfully into the women's world that awaited these figures at home and was closely and complexly bound together with a hero's fate. *Women of Trachis* is one of these plays, focusing for the first two-thirds of its action not on the epic hero Heracles but on the suffering of his wife Deianira.

Also translated as *Trachiniae* or *Trachinian Women*, the play is commonly supposed to have been written and performed during Sophocles's early period, between approximately 440 and 430 b.c.e. The work has long startled audiences because of its unsympathetic portrayal of the mighty son of Zeus, Heracles, known as Hercules in ancient Rome and often called by that name in modern times. It has also puzzled critics who assume that Greek tragedy should have a single tragic hero because it places Deianira in this role only to kill her off with much of the play left to run. *Women of Trachis* has been widely published in various editions, but an able rendering of the drama in verse is available in *Sophocles, 1*, translated by Brendan Galvin and published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1998.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Greek

Sophocles was probably born in either 497 or 496 b.c.e., in Colonus, a rural community just northwest of Athens. Because ancient biographies are often unreliable, there is little surety about the details of his life, but scholars believe that his father Sophillus was a businessman and a slaveholder. Sophocles was likely trained as a musician, since he led the paean, or choral ode, in celebration of a military victory over the Persians in 480 b.c.e. He was active in the Athenian political and social world throughout his life; he served as a treasurer in 443 or 442, and in 441, he was elected a general. While in the military, Sophocles may have helped to crush a revolt in Samos, and there is evidence that he was appointed a commissioner to impose order in Athens after the disastrous failure of the Sicilian expedition of 413. There is also some indication that he was a priest of a god of healing.

Highly acclaimed as a preeminent dramatist in his time, Sophocles wrote some one hundred and twenty-three plays. Sources suggest that he won the principal Athenian dramatic festival, called the Greater Dionysia, at least eighteen times, and never achieved less than second place. Of his prodigious output, only seven full plays and some fragments survive, and of those only two can be dated with accuracy. Nevertheless, scholars have surmised that *Women of Trachis* was an early play because its style does not seem mature. According to this supposition, Sophocles would have written the play between 440 and 430 b.c.e. This play is available in *Sophocles, 1: Ajax, Women of Trachis, Electra, Philoctetes*, which was published by University of Pennsylvania Press in 1998.

Some scholars believe that *Ajax* is also among Sophocles's early, less well-balanced plays, since as in *Women of Trachis*, the person who seems at first to be the tragic hero commits suicide well before the end. Ajax kills himself because he regrets having tried (and failed) to kill the Greek military leaders Menelaus and Agamemnon. In *Antigone* and *Electra*, Sophocles conjures deep sympathy for women caught in a murderous and tyrannical world. *Oedipus the King*, which focuses on the tragic hero who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother, has been Sophocles's most influential play since Aristotle declared it the greatest tragedy in existence. *Oedipus at Colunus*, staged in 401 b.c.e. after Sophocles's death, follows Oedipus's fortunes after he blinds himself, while *Philoctetes* (409 b.c.e.) focuses on the recluse warrior whom Odysseus must convince to fight against Troy. The causes of Sophocles's death in 406 or 405 are unknown, although the comic poet Phrynichus claimed that he died without suffering, a happy man.

Plot Summary

Women of Trachis begins with Deianira's lament about her difficult life. She tells of Heracles rescuing her from the river god Achelous and marrying her, only to subject her to further suffering because Heracles is frequently away from home. Deianira's nurse advises her to send her son Hyllus to look for Heracles, and Hyllus tells her that he has heard that his father is at war with the city of Oechalia, which is on the island of Euboea. Deianira tells her son of a prophecy proclaiming that Heracles would either die on the island of Euboea or enjoy happiness for the rest of his days, and Hyllus vows to find his father.

The Chorus intercedes to lament that Heracles is gone and advice Deianira to have hope for the future. Deianira tells the Chorus that Heracles left her a will, as though he had foreseen his death, and that this has left her deeply fearful. Immediately afterwards, the messenger arrives bringing word that Heracles is in fact alive and on his way home. Deianira disbelieves him at first, then she and the Chorus express their joy, and Lichas arrives to confirm the news. Lichas proclaims that Heracles is making sacrifices to Zeus as he vowed he would while conquering Oechalia. He says that Eurytus made Heracles angry, so Heracles killed Eurytus's son, and then in retribution, Heracles was caught and sold as a slave to Omphale. This made Heracles angry with Eurytus's city of Oechalia, so Heracles formed an army to destroy it and then abducted some of its surviving women as slaves.

Deianira says that she has reason to be joyful but feels pity for the female slaves and worries that her own fortunes will decline. She asks Iole who she is, but Iole refuses to speak, and Lichas suggests that they leave her alone. The messenger then approaches Deianira to tell her that Lichas is lying and that Heracles destroyed Oechalia and abducted Iole because he is in love with her. The Chorus advises Deianira to confront Lichas with the truth. Lichas dodges the messenger's questions about Iole, but Deianira implores him to tell the truth, stressing that she will not harm Iole or hold it against Heracles that he fell in love with her. Lichas confirms that Heracles destroyed Oechalia because he desired Iole, and Deianira tells Lichas to come inside.

The Chorus performs a meditation on the power of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who inspired the brutal fight between Heracles and Achelous for Deianira's hand in marriage. Deianira then comes outside to tell the Chorus that she is jealous of Iole, who may usurp her place in Heracles's heart, but not angry at Heracles. Her plan to win her husband back is to follow the instructions of the centaur Nessus, whom Heracles killed with an arrow because he tried to rape Deianira. Nessus told Deianira to collect the clots of his blood that were poisoned by the Lernean Hydra and use them to charm Heracles into fidelity, and Deianira tells the Chorus that she has smeared the blood on Heracles's robe. Deianira gives the robe to Lichas, who agrees to follow her specific instructions about how to handle it.

The Chorus sings a prayer of longing for Heracles's return, and Deianira comes out to tell them that the ointment has dissolved the wool she used to apply it, and she worries

that it is poison. She realizes that Nessus tricked her into murdering her husband and vows to die with him if it works. The Chorus implores her to retain hope, but Hyllus arrives and blames Deianira for killing Heracles. He says that Heracles wore the poisoned robe while he burned a sacrifice to the gods, and it began to devour his flesh. Heracles became furious at Lichas for delivering the robe and smashed his head to pieces on a rock. Heracles told his son to come to him and take him away from Euboea, and Hyllus helped transport him to a ship. Deianira goes into the house without defending herself while Hyllus curses and abuses her.

The Chorus declares that the prophecy of an end to Heracles's labors has come true, exonerates Deianira, and blames Aphrodite for the tragic events. The nurse then comes out to say that Deianira killed herself and that Hyllus grieved over driving his mother to this end. The Chorus laments Deianira's death and returns its attention to the dying Heracles, who is carried onstage, sleeping, by a group of grim and silent men. Hyllus tries to speak to his father, but an Old Man tells him to let Heracles sleep. Heracles wakes and bemoans his torment, blaming his wife for plotting against him. He tells Hyllus to bring Deianira to him, threatening to murder her and lamenting his former power to □punish evil,□ which is now eclipsed.

Hyllus tells his father that Deianira killed herself, and Heracles continues to curse his wife. Hyllus then tells his father of the centaur's trick, and Heracles explains that this fulfills the prophecies of his death. Heracles makes his son swear an oath to obey him and then commands Hyllus to burn him on a pyre. Hyllus refuses to do it himself but consents to have it done and then Heracles asks him to promise to marry Iole. Hyllus protests that this is impious but agrees to marry her. He then prepares to burn his father, blaming the gods for causing human suffering.

Characters

Achelous

Achelous is the river god who desires to marry Deianira. He appears as a bull, as a snake, and as a bull-faced man trying to court his would-be bride until Heracles conquers him in a violent fight.

Chorus

The play's Chorus consists of a group of women from the town of Trachis. These women are the commentators and advisors to whom the title of the play refers. According to the conventions of ancient Greek tragedy, they speak directly to the audience and help to explain the context of the plot, although they also become emotionally involved in the action and do not speak with complete objectivity. They are close to Deianira and attempt to advise her, and Deianira confides in them as friends even though she chides them for being young and □innocent,□ uninitiated into the tragedy of life. They criticize Deianira for losing hope in her husband and in the future, but they stress that she acted in good faith in preparing the supposed love charm.

The women continually praise Heracles and lament his suffering without blaming him for his bigamy or his violent behavior. They justify his actions as the results of the power of Aphrodite and stress their admiration for the famous Greek hero. Their failure to see anything wrong with Heracles's behavior may be an indication that they are not wise or discriminating. As Deianira points out, they come to see others suffer and are thus like a group of unreliable gossipers. Nevertheless, they display profound pity for the suffering family.

Deianira

Heracles's wife and debatably the tragic hero of the play, Deianira is a fearful woman with a trying life. She is the daughter of the Calydonian king Oenus, and when she was a beautiful young woman she was courted by the river god Achelous until Heracles came to destroy Achelous and take her as his bride. She loves Heracles and is devoted to him, but she has suffered as a consequence of his desertion of her in order to engage in various quests and pursue other lovers. Although he is the source of her fear and distress, Deianira never blames her husband for her problems.

Sophocles gives a subtle and compassionate portrayal of Deianira, and she is the central character for the majority of the play. Her fears seem excessive at first, but they are justified by the tragic course of her family's life and are not necessarily signs of a cowardly person. Deianira does not know where to direct her fear and unhappiness, but she proves the generosity of her character by indulging Heracles regarding his treatment of her and showing kindness to Iole. Even when she discovers that Heracles

is in love with Iole, Deianira does not contemplate hurting or sabotaging the younger woman. She blames herself for inviting trouble under her roof, worrying that her womanly charms are □waning.□ Her failure to bring others (such as her husband) to account for her troubles might also be construed as a character weakness, and her failure to spot the centaur's trick soon enough might indicate a lack of intelligence or shrewdness. Because Deianira shares her doubts and insecurities in such an open and compelling manner, however, the audience is likely to forgive her frailties and sympathize with her plight.

Eurytus

Iole's father and Heracles's enemy, Eurytus is the king of Oechalia. Lichas and the Messenger relate conflicting stories about why he angers Heracles, but Lichas admits that Heracles destroys Eurytus and his city in order to capture Iole.

Heracles

Deianira's husband Heracles is a powerful and violent warrior who is half god and half man. The son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene, Heracles possesses divine strength and is one of the most famous heroes of the classical world. He undertakes continual quests and labors, and according to most accounts this is due to the jealousy of Zeus's wife Hera, who wishes to subject her husband's illegitimate son to trials that are seemingly impossible. Although *Women of Trachis* stresses that Heracles suffers at the cruel whim of the gods, it does not mention Hera and dwells on Heracles's own initiatives as an angry conqueror. Heracles attacks Oechalia not because the gods require that he do so, but because he wishes to abduct the princess Iole. At this and other points, such as Heracles's brutal murder of his herald Lichas or his devious murder of Iole's brother Iphitus, the play implicitly criticizes Heracles's dangerous recklessness.

Heracles is fearless and boastful, citing the glory of his past adventures even as he cries out in his awful pain. He is quick to blame his wife for poisoning him, immediately threatens to murder her, and does not respond to Hyllus's defense of Deianira except to meditate on his own death and the truth of prophecies about him. He never approaches anything resembling penitence or sympathy towards Deianira or anyone else. Nevertheless, the Chorus and all of the characters are consistently uncritical of Heracles, praising him as a destroyer of evil and a magnificent warrior. Instead, the Chorus and characters, including Hyllus, blame the gods for causing human suffering and tragedy. They seem to expect that Heracles has the right to be brutal and impetuous, since he is such a monumental hero.

Heracles seems pious and dutiful toward his father Zeus, at least in the sense that he makes due tribute to the gods with great sacrifices. However, Hyllus gives voice to the potential impiety of Heracles's demand that his son marry Iole. Such contradictions about the famous warrior remain unresolved at the end of the play, when Hyllus

stresses that the gods have worked out their struggles on the unfortunate Heracles and that the blame for the tragedy does not fall on Heracles's shoulders.

Hyllus

The son of Deianira and Heracles, Hyllus is a dutiful young man torn between his mother and his father. He admires his father greatly and his accomplishments, and he readily agrees to go to his father when he discovers that he may be in trouble. Hyllus is also devoted to his mother, although his loyalty is in doubt until after her death. When Hyllus blames Deianira for contriving his father's death and curses her viciously, he appears to have inherited Heracles's impatient tendency to break into a violent rage before hearing all relevant evidence. After his mother's suicide, however, Hyllus is overcome with grief and shame, blaming himself for driving her to this end.

The tragic events of the play test Hyllus's character further when he must decide whether to keep his promise and acquiesce to his father's dying wishes. In ancient Greek culture, it was not necessarily immoral to assist someone in killing him/herself, but it was doubtlessly traumatic, especially if the person was one's close relative. Hyllus proves his loyalty by agreeing to help Heracles to this end, but he has more difficulty accepting his father's request that he marry Iole. Not only is Iole his father's lover; Hyllus sees her as the cause of his mother's death. The question remains open at the end of the play whether Heracles has driven his son to act immorally and whether the gods will forgive him since he does so under a vow of obedience to his father.

Iole

Iole is the beautiful daughter of Eurytus and the princess of Oechalia. After he falls in love with her, Heracles destroys her town, enslaves its people, and abducts her. Iole refuses to speak, and Deianira notices that she has the bearing of someone with noble blood who has endured a tragic fall in fortune.

Iphitus

Eurytus's son and Iole's brother, Iphitus is the victim of Heracles's wrath. According to Lichas, Heracles threw Iphitus over a cliff after he let down his guard because Heracles was angry with Eurytus.

Lichas

Lichas is Heracles's herald, or bearer of important news. He lies to Deianira about Heracles's motives for going to war with Oechalia and his plans for the captive Iole. When the messenger tips off Deianira to Lichas's deceit and Deianira confronts him about it, Lichas admits that he was lying and stresses that it was his own initiative. The

Chorus damns him as a □scheming liar,□ and he certainly seems damned, since Heracles blames him for bringing the poisoned robe and smashes his head on a rock.

Messenger

Deianira describes the messenger who brings news that her husband is alive as an □Old man.□ He intercedes on Deianira's behalf to tell her the truth about Iole, seemingly because he wishes to be loyal to her and possibly because he expects a reward. He is a member of the town's male public and may represent public knowledge or rumor to some degree, since he discovers Heracles's plans for bigamy in the crowded Trachis marketplace.

Nurse

Deianira's nurse is a loyal servant who attempts to give her mistress prudent advice and mourns her when she dies.

Old Man

The old man who helps to conduct Heracles to Trachis pleads with Hyllus to let the hero sleep in peace. When the old man tries to help ease Heracles's suffering, Heracles tells him to stay away.

Omphale

Omphale is the □barbarian queen□ who holds Heracles as a slave.

Themes

Fidelity to the Family

A chief concern throughout *Women of Trachis* is in terms of loyalty and responsibility to one's family. Each of the main characters grapples with issues of duty and obedience, and none of them performs perfectly. Heracles displays what is perhaps the most extreme lack of family responsibility in the play, since he neglects his wife and abducts another lover, in a sense instigating the tragic plot. Heracles has duties to the gods as well; his father Zeus seems responsible for his enslavement, while gods such as Aphrodite (and, implicitly, Hera) are perhaps to blame for his fall in fortune. Nevertheless, Heracles's own lack of respect for his wife is a prominent point of stress in the play, as is his demand that his son obey orders which may be impious or unjust.

Deianira's faith in her husband is under trial from the beginning, and the Chorus stresses that she must maintain hope for Heracles's safety and her family's well-being. This is no easy task, however, since Heracles is very rarely home to show her any affection, and Heracles's love for Iole and his plans to live with two wives deeply shakes Deianira's confidence. Deianira's plan to win back her husband's affections, although it is understandable and has no ill motives, may be interpreted as a failure to be entirely obedient to her husband.

Hyllus's character serves as another important example of the struggle that results from an obligation to be obedient to one's family. At first he finds it easy to obey his mother and go looking for his father, but his desire to act according to his parents' wishes rapidly becomes difficult. He laments his own failure to be just and respectful to his mother only when it is too late, and he fears that his improper and angry behavior led to her suicide. Then, when confronted with his father's imposing and perhaps immoral demands, Hyllus wonders to whom his highest allegiance is owed: to the gods or to his father. Indeed, he notes that □We call [the gods] our fathers□ in his final monologue, emphasizing that familial demands have the potential to conflict and leave the correct moral choice difficult or impossible to determine. The play seems to seek to raise such questions rather than to resolve them definitively; fidelity to one's family remains a privileged ethical responsibility, but it is unclear whether it takes precedence over other moral responsibilities.

Women in Ancient Greek Society

Related to Sophocles's analysis of the family unit is his meditation on the role that women play in the male-dominated culture of ancient Greece. As Deianira stresses, women are often at the mercy of their husbands' whims and frequently have little power to shape their own destinies. Deianira's attempts to assert her authority and reestablish her position in Heracles's favor result in failure and tragedy. Perhaps the greater problem, however, is Heracles's refusal to allow his wife any influence and power and to

neglect her. Heracles shows little regard for his wife and acts brutally towards women in general, and Sophocles may be criticizing such behavior.

Divine Control over Human Affairs

There is frequent mention is Sophocles's play of the influence that the classical gods have over mortal life. The notion of divine intervention takes a number of forms, however, beginning with the general trope of inevitable fate and cyclical fortune. As Deianira stresses, □he who rises / so high can also be brought low,□ and indeed this is a widespread formula in tragic drama. Plays such as *Women of Trachis* tend to contradict the notion that one is secure in one's prosperity or in control of one's destiny, stressing instead that humans rise and fall in fortune according to a divinely ordained cycle. The Fates, three goddesses traditionally associated with the variable nature of human prosperity, and other deities ensure that a prosperous family like that of Heracles endures their due allotment of suffering and heartache.

Sophocles also stresses the influence of the desires and loyalties of individual gods, however, as they impact human life. As the son of Zeus, Heracles is bound for strength and glory, but his father also is prone to punish him for misdeeds, such as killing Iphitus. The Chorus also draws attention to the cruel whims of the powerful goddess Aphrodite, who enjoys causing humans to fall in love even if she has nothing in particular against them. More often than not, gods enjoy torturing humans rather than aiding them, and it does not always seem that their punishments are deserved. Even when Hyllus stresses at the end of the play that the gods are unforgiving, however, it may be that they are justified in refusing to forgive humans for being impious or unfaithful. Whatever their motivations, the gods clearly seem to act harshly and cruelly towards their inferiors.

Style

Golden Age Dramatic Conventions

Sophocles wrote in a theatrical environment that had a specific and nuanced set of conventions which have inspired centuries of influence, admiration, and critical theory. Because commentary about ancient Greek drama survives only in often unreliable fragments, however, many of the rules which scholars associate with Sophoclean drama are based on supposition.

One formal convention common to all tragedians of the golden age is the use of poetic verse with strictly metered syllables. Sophocles achieves a sense of musical and rhythmical beauty with his poetry. Also, Aristotle and other sources have indicated that golden age dramatists such as Sophocles observed what are known as the unities. Using Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* as a model of perfection, Aristotle pointed out that tragedy should have unity of action and follow one main drama without complex subplots, and unity of time, which means that the events of the play should occur within approximately the same time that it takes to watch it. Later scholars added the third unity of place, which stressed that a dramatic plot should occur within a single physical space. *Women of Trachis* does follow these rules, a practice which arguably contributes to its aesthetic beauty and its ability to touch and affect its audience.

The Chorus

The Chorus, consisting of young women from Trachis, is a prominent example of a tradition that dates to the origins of ancient Greek drama. A group of commentators and onlookers that help to relate the plot and its context to the audience, the chorus developed from the ancient practice of singing lyrical odes to Dionysus, the god of wine, revelry, and fertility. Musical exchanges between a large group of singers and a leader developed into an entity with a storytelling function and a relationship with dramatic characters. Sophocles increased the size of Aeschylus's twelve-member chorus to fifteen and made the group more expressive and independent of the events of the drama. This tendency is particularly clear in the song-like interludes during which the Chorus of *Women of Trachis* meditates on deities or forces such as Aphrodite or the sun, relating detailed and exquisite imagery in brief, rhythmic lines. The Chorus also continues the tradition of giving advice to various characters and expressing their horror as tragic events unfold.

The Tragic Hero

Women of Trachis has long frustrated scholars because it does not seem to follow the rules that commentators since Aristotle have assigned to ancient Greek tragedy. These critics have claimed that tragic drama follows the rise and subsequent fall of a hero who has an important and characteristic fault or liability. The audience is meant to identify

with this hero and feel catharsis, a sense of having been cleansed and refreshed, when he/she dies. The problem that *Women of Trachis* poses for this formula is that the play does not seem to have a single tragic hero, but two or even three characters that are tragic and heroic. Deianira is perhaps the main candidate for the tragic hero, but she dies with one third of the play left to run.

Historical Context

Ancient Athens and the Golden Age

The ancient civilizations that existed in what is approximately present-day Greece flourished during Sophocles's lifetime to become the most culturally and economically advanced societies in the world. In the sixth century b.c.e., power and influence were concentrated in the urban centers of Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, and Athens, whose powerful landowning aristocrats controlled the surrounding areas. As these cities grew wealthier, however, a mercantile class became increasingly influential and eventually contributed to the founding of the world's first major democracy (though only male citizens could vote), erected around 500 b.c.e. in Athens. At this time, Athens and the other Greek cities were united in war with Persia, and after the conflict abated Athens emerged unchallenged as the dominant power of the region.

Athenian dominance ushered in a period of cultural and economic prosperity marked by extraordinary advances in philosophy, literature, history, and the arts. Pericles, the leading politician of Athens, used taxes levied on Athenian allies to build the Parthenon, the famous temple to the goddess Athena, and other architectural marvels. It was this period, in the fifth century b.c.e., that became known as the golden age of drama. The three great tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedic dramatist Aristophanes all lived and worked at this time, contributing to the famous and elaborate Dionysia festival each year. The philosophers Socrates and Plato, and the historians Herodotus and Thucydides, lived during this period. Though the epic poet Homer lived much earlier, possibly in the eighth century b.c.e., and the philosopher Aristotle lived in the fourth century, scholars consider Sophocles's life to have spanned the greatest single generation of cultural output in Athenian history.

Except for a brief war in 458 b.c.e., peace lasted between Athens, Sparta, and their allies, but growing resentment and Athenian disputes with Corinth led to the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 431. Inconclusive fighting continued until 421, when the moderate Athenian politician Nicias signed a peace treaty, but war resumed three years later, and the Athenian war party led by Alcibiades was elected. After convincing the Athenians to attack the island colony of Syracuse, which was allied to Sparta, Alcibiades fled to Sparta and sabotaged the operation. The Spartan general Lysander defeated the Athenian navy after cutting off their supply of grain, and Athens lost the war. This defeat marked the end of the golden age and of Athenian supremacy in Greece.

Greek Mythology

The immortal gods of Greek mythology remained influential in Greek culture throughout the fifth century b.c.e. Accounts of the gods' lives and their role in human affairs frequently varied and conflicted, but Greeks generally believed that divine creatures who had human attributes controlled and created the world. The most powerful of

deities was Zeus, god of the sky and of thunder, who overthrew his parents to become the king of the gods and ruler of Mount Olympus, home to the twelve principle gods. Zeus married his sister Hera, but frequently had affairs with other gods and mortals, often by disguising himself in other forms since gods were able to appear however they wished. When Zeus became infatuated with the mortal woman Alcmene, for example, he took the form of Alcmene's husband Amphitryon and fathered Heracles.

Hera was angry and jealous when she discovered that Zeus had fathered Heracles, and she frequently tried to trouble and kill her husband's offspring. Zeus protected his son, however, who was a mighty demigod (or, half god, half man), and he helped him win fame and glory. Heracles's adventures included twelve seemingly impossible labors, numerous love affairs with women and men, and the conquest of Troy as an Argonaut. Variations on the tale that Sophocles relates in *Women of Trachis* include the idea that Heracles was a best friend and perhaps lover of Iphitus before he killed him and that Eurytus broke a promise to award Iole's hand to Heracles. Other gods of importance to Sophocles's play include Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who sprung from the foam when Cronus cut off Uranus's genitals and threw them into the sea.

Performance Practices in Ancient Greece

Sophoclean drama was a grand spectacle performed in a large outdoor theater. Evidence suggests that dancing and music were typically incorporated into the plays. Actors wore masks and costumes indicating their roles, and the same actor often played multiple parts. Aeschylus used only one or two actors on stage at once, and Sophocles increased the number to, at most, three or four. Productions occasionally made use of various stage equipment, including a wheeled platform and a tall crane that could raise, for example, an actor. A background was frequently designed on a revolving triangular piece at the back of the stage which could indicate a change in scene. The exact manner in which actors would recite their poetic lines is unknown, but the verse itself is carefully ordered, and actors may have recited their lines in a musical and rhythmic fashion.

Critical Overview

Centuries of critical neglect have left scholars unsure of the original reception of *Women of Trachis*. Sophocles was the preeminent dramatist of the period in which the play was likely written, however, so the play may have been received well in the Dionysia festival. It is possible that the play was salvaged because it deals with the popular hero Heracles. After the decline of Athens, there is little or no extant critical commentary on the play until it was rediscovered and translated during the humanist movement of the Renaissance period in Western Europe (approximately 1400-1600). Criticism in English did not abound until the eighteenth century, when the play had been printed in English. At this time, literary figures, including John Dryden and Joseph Addison, appraised Sophocles and compared him to contemporary English dramatists in the so-called battle between the ancients and the moderns. *Women of Trachis* was infrequently singled out during this period, and it has generally not been among Sophocles's most admired plays.

August Wilhelm von Schlegel, a poet, translator, and critic of the German romantic movement, maintained that *Women of Trachis* was the least compelling of the surviving Sophoclean drama in his highly influential *Lectures*, published in 1815. The view that the play is an immature effort which fails to conform to the rules of tragedy largely continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The sensitive and important classicist Richard Jebb does not dwell on the play as a good example of Sophocles's genius for proportion and aesthetic subtlety, writing instead in *Essays and Addresses* (1907) that it □may be taken as [one of] those in which the dramatic irony is simplest.□ Cedric H. Whitman persists in the idea that play is simple or unsophisticated, contending in *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (1951) that it was □assuredly□ composed earlier than *King Oedipus* because it □reads like the poem of a young man who has just realized the full cruelty of the world.□ Thus, critics like Whitman have concluded that *Women of Trachis* is one of Sophocles's earliest works on stylistic grounds.

Later critical approaches to the play have ranged from historical analyses of fifth-century Athens through the lens of *Women of Trachis* and other Sophoclean drama to formalist analysis of rhetorical structure. In *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* (1982), David Seale analyzes the nature of virtual versus experiential knowledge in the play. Seale asserts:

For the audience, in fact, there is, in the narrowest sense, no development of knowledge at all; the maxim is both the germ and the lesson of the drama. And yet the play is so designed that the audience too vacillates between this prepossession of the real situation and its engagement with the illusion and suspense of the moment.

Despite the cool praise, Sophocles's play has endured the millennia, and for that, it signifies an accomplishment and influence many writers could only dream about.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a doctoral student of English literature at Rutgers University. In the following essay, he analyzes the role of the tragic Chorus in order to demonstrate a key method by which Sophocles develops frustration and dissatisfaction with the violent hero Heracles.

Women of Trachis is the only one of Sophocles's surviving plays whose title does not refer to a main character or tragic hero but instead to the group of onlookers who comment upon and explain the action. In much of Greek tragedy, the Chorus is generalized and even indistinct, circumscribed by a traditional role that does not leave much room for individuation or characterization. Often it resembles a collection of voices one might hear in the town square. It is frequently a reflection of the audience, liable to fade into the scenery except during its outbursts of tragic emotion intended to cultivate and intensify the feelings of the playgoers. In *Women of Trachis*, however, the title immediately directs the audience's attention to the Chorus, which then remains an intriguing and distinctive group of women until it drops into near-silence with Heracles's arrival. Their major and important failing, however, is their blind and unjustified idolization of Heracles, an attitude which Sophocles subtly and implicitly criticizes through the course of the drama.

Sophocles begins his sharply drawn portrait of the Chorus by carefully emphasizing its allegiances and biases. From its opening song it is clear that the Chorus is close to Deianira; it begins by echoing her desperation and frustration, imploring the sun for news of Heracles and characterizing Deianira as a □fearful bird□ who deserves to be pitied. In the same breath, however, the Chorus's language suggests that it is at great pains to exonerate Heracles from blame: □But her husband, of the line / of Cadmus, is pulled this way / and that, like waves moved / endlessly over the ocean.□ This passive construction, or grammatical format, in which Heracles is not the subject of the sentence, suggests that Heracles has no control over his situation. The Chorus stresses this point further when it says that □some god always rescues his descent / to the house of Death,□ emphasizing that the gods and not Heracles control his destiny.

In fact, Sophocles's frequent enjambment, or division of a phrase across a line of verse, such as □this way / and that□ or □moved / endlessly,□ creates the sense that it is not only Heracles who is floating on waves, but the Chorus itself. Indeed, the Chorus is given over to the idea that gods control one's fate so fully that they seem to deny any human agency whatsoever. When, for example, Heracles sends Iole back to his house in chains, planning to use her as a concubine, the Chorus responds by blaming the goddess of love: □The power of Goddess Aphrodite / always wins.□ Again the Chorus blames Aphrodite when Deianira discovers that she has poisoned her husband: □But we know whose hand stirs / these events: it is the work / of Cyprian Aphrodite, the silent one.□ It would seem that the Chorus agrees with Hyllus's assessment at the end of the play that every tragic event in the drama is not due to human error or immorality, but results rather because Zeus and the other gods enjoy inflicting suffering on their mortal inferiors.

Even in Hyllus's speech, however, it is unclear that his family's suffering at the hands of Zeus is either random or unjustified. When he tells the Chorus, □You have seen / how little forgiveness the Gods show / in everything that's happened here,□ Hyllus implies that there was a reason for the punishment; otherwise there would be nothing for the gods to forgive. The gods certainly have the power to torture humans, but they do not necessarily do so without provocation. Zeus has always protected his son in the past, as the Chorus suggests (rather ominously) when it asks Deianira, □When has Zeus / ever neglected his children?□ The riddle of *Women of Trachis* is over what parties are responsible and to what degree, for the gods' displeasure is at this point in the lives of Heracles and his family members.

The Chorus provides some clue to the answer to this riddle during its lapses from the conviction that fate is outside human control. In its first speech, while it is lamenting Heracles's submission to a divinely ordered destiny, the Chorus implies that, on the contrary, Deianira has some control over her situation. The language of this speech suggests not so much that the gods force her to cry and despair, but rather that she causes or creates her own suffering: □She nurses her fear with / the memory of Heracles's rovings / even as she lies in misery / on their bed empty of him, / expecting bad news.□ The Chorus then precedes to scold Deianira for this attitude and encourages her to hope for the best, as though this will make a difference.

Thereafter, the Chorus encourages Deianira along her path of tragedy. Its damnation of Lichas as a □scheming liar□ and command that he tell the truth about Iole does not convey an attitude of stoic resignation to the will of the gods, but an incitement to act with personal agency. Their blessing of Deianira's attempt to charm Heracles with a centaur's trick is more subtle, but nevertheless a validation of the attempt to determine one's own destiny. They begin with a careful and somewhat ambiguous avowal that Deianira is acting in a proper fashion: □If you believe in what you've done / we cannot say you have acted rashly.□ They then confirm, however, that she is justified in acting on her convictions: □What happens must be your proof. You have / no way of knowing, otherwise.□ The Chorus seems suspicious of the accuracy of Deianira's beliefs, but it fails to warn her of the obvious possibility that the centaur was lying, and it endorses her decision to intervene in affairs it previously claimed were completely under the control of Aphrodite.

This poor advice arouses suspicion about the Chorus's wisdom and reliability. Deianira has already claimed that they are □like the innocent girl who grows / in a safe place□ until later in life, when □the young thing would feel / my burdens. She'd understand them from her own.□ This comment turns out to be prophetic if the Chorus is accurate when it says, □O Greece, if this man dies / your mourning will be endless.□ It suffers along with and on behalf of Heracles and his family and perhaps grows more mature in the process. Since the Chorus becomes silent when Heracles arrives, however, and fails to comment explicitly on how it has changed or matured, its newfound wisdom on human morality and free will must be gathered from earlier and more subtle indications of where it is mistaken or naive.

It may have seemed less obvious to a fifth-century Athenian audience than it does to a contemporary reader that the Chorus's major error is its failure to attribute any blame to Heracles for the tragic events. Even those accustomed to revering the mythical hero, however, would have recognized that the group of young women holds Heracles to a different set of standards than it does any other character. While the Chorus scolds and blames Deianira explicitly for her weakness and despair, even as it encourages her down the path to doom, it criticizes Heracles only unintentionally. For example, its prayer that he come home swiftly and □wild with desire□ is implicitly critical, since wildness and excessive desire is precisely Heracles's problem, the source for Deianira's suffering, and perhaps the true source of the tragic events. Yet this criticism is accidental (it is Sophocles's commentary expressed between the lines), and the Chorus blames everyone but Heracles for the tragedy. It even attacks Iole, the innocent victim of Heracles's rampage, for having □given birth / to a huge wrath in this house.□

Sophocles is careful, therefore, that his notoriously unsympathetic portrait of Heracles is not apparent to the Chorus. Even Lichas proves that his is more attune to Heracles's failures than the young women of Trachis when he suggests that Zeus has punished his son for immoral behavior in the past. According to Lichas, who has no reason to lie on this point, Heracles's □act of murderous deceit□ in killing Iphitus while his back is turned displeases Zeus and motivates him to enslave his son to a □barbarian queen.□ If Zeus is prone to punishing his son for such behavior, it seems plausible that he would allow him to be poisoned based on his betrayal and neglect of his wife and his destruction of a city to satisfy his personal desire. Insofar as any human action is to blame for the fall of his household, it is surely that of Heracles himself.

The fact that Chorus never comes to any breakthrough in wisdom or insightfulness and fails to recognize Heracles as a brute and a tyrant has the interesting effect that it may sometimes inspire the opposite reaction in the audience. A tragic Chorus often echoes and solidifies the sentiments of its audience, and it may be the case that many ancient Athenian theatergoers would have failed to see anything wrong with Heracles's behavior. The Chorus's unreliability, however, its innocent and naive nature, and its failure to judge Heracles according to the moral rules by which it judges other characters encourage the audience to move beyond its judgment. During the final section of the play, when the Chorus has only four lines, the audience is likely to find out of its shadow a wiser and more mature frustration with the wailing, raging Heracles.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *Women of Trachis*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Ancient Athens was a prosperous environment for many intellectual activities in addition to drama, including the writing of history and philosophy. Choose an intellectual or cultural figure of the period, such as the philosopher Socrates or the politician Pericles, and prepare a class report about him. In your presentation, assess your subject's contributions to the era, place in Athenian culture and politics, and potential influence upon or relation to Sophocles and the tragic theater.

With a group of classmates, perform a section of *Women of Trachis* that you feel expresses an important theme or a vital emotion in the drama. Make careful choices about issues such as whether the characters Deianira or Heracles should be painted as more or less sympathetic, and how to portray them as such with costuming, posturing, blocking (location and movement on the stage), and acting. Consider also whether to pronounce the lines rhythmically, render them closer to natural speech, or attempt some form of musical or dance accompaniment. Afterwards, discuss the performance with your classmates, answering their questions and explaining your choices and techniques.

Critics have long debated the question of who is the tragic hero in Sophocles's play. Write an essay in which you argue that a particular character should be considered the tragic hero, justifying your contention by explaining what qualities and events make a character fit this role. Use examples of other tragic heroes to support your case. You may also choose to discuss whether the question over the tragic hero is important or useful in the first place, or you may wish to argue that there is no tragic hero at all.

Write a short drama continuing the fortunes of Hyllus after the deaths of his parents. As you write, observe to the best of your ability Sophocles's rules of tragic drama, including the unities of place and time, the limit to the number of actors on stage at once, and the use of a Chorus. Consider how Hyllus copes with the loss of his parents, whether he marries Iole and under what circumstances, how Iole reacts to this situation, and how the gods view the morality of Hyllus's consent to obey his father's wishes.

Compare and Contrast

430 b.c.e.: Athens is a powerful and democratic city-state with a flourishing cultural and intellectual environment.

Today: Athens is the capital of the Hellenic Republic, commonly known as Greece, a democratic, developed nation and a member of the European Union.

430 b.c.e.: Greek city-states are primarily occupied with fighting amongst themselves, but tensions remain between Athens and Persia. Persia holds the island of Cyprus despite various Greek attempts to invade.

Today: The island of Cyprus is a sore point in Greek and Turkish relations. Although the island is technically a European Union member state, this status is effectively limited to its Greek residents and excludes its Turkish population.

430 b.c.e.: International multi-sport games are held every four years in Olympia, Greece. They are important for building diplomatic ties and for honoring the gods.

Today: The Olympic Games are a worldwide tradition. In 2004, they are held in Athens, Greece, for the first time since the modern Olympic Games began in 1896.

What Do I Read Next?

Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (c. 425 b.c.e.), also translated as *Oedipus the King*, follows the doomed Oedipus as he unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother, then realizes his fate and tears out his own eyes and banishes himself.

Aristotle's brilliant work of aesthetic philosophy, *The Poetics*, was probably written between 335 and 322 b.c.e.. Setting out to account for the poetic arts, it uses Sophoclean tragedy as a model, arguing that tragedy is the highest form of poetic representation. The rules and conventions by which Aristotle defined tragedy have remained extremely influential since they were rediscovered during the Renaissance.

Lysistrata (411 b.c.e.) is Aristophanes's witty play that voices opposition to the Peloponnesian War. In an insightful attack on male politicians who neglect the advice of wiser women, its female characters refuse to have sex with their husbands in order to force them to end the war.

Eugene O'Neill's masterpiece *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941) is a deeply affecting work of American realism which uses many of the classical conventions of Sophoclean tragedy. Its intimate portrait of the severe troubles of a family from New London, Connecticut, in 1912 demonstrates the devastating failures in communication and support inside the home.

Further Study

Blundell, Sue, *Women in Ancient Greece*, Harvard University Press, 1995.

This work provides an account of the female experience in male-dominated ancient Greek society. Carefully analyzing literary and historical sources, including golden age drama that seems to concentrate mainly on men, Blundell reconstructs the daily life, legal status, and social position of women of the era.

Bowman, Laurel, □Prophecy and Authority in *The Trachiniai*,□ in *American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 120, No. 3, Fall 1999, pp. 335-50.

Bowman analyzes the powerful force of prophecy in *Women of Trachai*, arguing that it diminishes mortal free will, particularly on the part of women, and institutes social order.

Buxton, R. G. A., *Sophocles*, Oxford University Press, 1984.

Buxton's broad overview of Sophocles and his works provides an introduction to twentieth-century scholarship on the poet, biographical information, explication of the performance conventions of the era, and interpretive analysis.

Easterling, P. E., ed., *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

This useful overview of tragic drama in ancient Greece includes twelve essays of explication regarding historical context, structural analysis, and twentieth-century critical reception of the genre.

Ehrenberg, Victor, *Sophocles and Pericles*, Blackwell, 1954.

This discussion of Sophocles and his political era includes the playwright's reaction to fifth-century rationalism.

Bibliography

Jebb, Richard, "The Genius of Sophocles," in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, Vol. 2, Gale Research, 1988, originally published in *Essays and Addresses*, Cambridge University Press, 1907, pp. 1-40.

Schlegel, August Wilhelm von, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, translated by John Black, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1815.

Seale, David, "The *Women of Trachis*: The Verge of Knowledge," in *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 182.

Sophocles, *Women of Trachis*, translated by Brendan Galvin, in *Sophocles, 1*, edited by David R. Slavitt and Palmer Bovie, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp. 71-126.

Whitman, Cedric H., "Late Learning: *The Trachiniae*," in *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, Harvard University Press, 1951, p. 104.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
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- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
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- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
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"Night." Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

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Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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