ARTICLES • ARTIKELS

THE CHARACTER OF DEIANEIRA IN SOPHOCLES' TRACHINIAE

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1. Her Attitude to her Marriage

The Trachiniae is a play about the destructive marriage of Deianeira and Herakles that ends in the painful ruin of the male partner. It is a marriage where the husband is predominantly absent, toiling as mankind’s representative to defeat the forces of savagery and barbarity. This is reflected in the fact that the play appears to be divided into two separate halves, with the marriage partners never encountering each other throughout the period of the play’s action and for a long period before. Yet, in the first half, Herakles is seldom absent from the mind of his wife: in the second half, apart from an expression of unforgiving fury at her for being responsible for his end, Herakles has no concern at all for her. The pattern, in fact, accurately reflects what Sophocles portrays as the condition of their marriage. One might have assumed that Deianeira’s marriage to the Superman of the ancient world, the τὸν τήνων ἀρσενός φᾶς (177) as she calls him, would be a happy one: but Sophocles already in line 5 causes her to refer to her life as δορυφορή καὶ βασίλει. Clearly, his picture of their marriage in this unexpected way is central to his play.

I presented a paper on my theories concerning the Trachiniae to the CASA conference in 1993. Since then, I have published a description of the methodology I have used in studying Sophocles’ tragedies. An article, which sets out my theories for psychoanalysts will shortly be published. I wish to use this opportunity to set out my conclusions, focusing closely on the text of Sophocles.

The traditional interpretation of the Trachiniae sees the play as a portrayal of a loving wife who sends to her errant husband a cloak, smeared with a love-charm designed to win back his love. I, however, see a ‘second play’ being presented here. Steiner (1985) sees Oedipus in Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannos as turning a blind eye in order to protect himself from
awareness of what he is doing, even while he is courageously searching for the truth; so too I see Deianeira, in the 'second play', as ignoring the obvious in connection with the 'love-charm' she is using on her husband, so that she is driving towards the destruction of Herakles, even while consciously she sees herself as pursuing his love.

Sophocles, in writing a tragedy about a mythic story, intuitively sees the kind of character that might perform the actions involved in the story. Even while he writes of the events of the myth at one level, he is at the same time giving us a word picture of a keenly and sympathetically observed personality, operating with a complexity that goes far beyond the superficialities of conscious functioning. I see Sophocles' portrayal of Deianeira as that of a woman unable to handle ambivalence, anger and her own destructive urges. In this play underlying the play, she is characterised by the defences of splitting off and projecting (or, in Freudian terms, denial and projection—unconsciously separating oneself off from the contents of one's own emotional make-up and locating them in others instead); her use of these defences prevents her from coming to terms with and therefore consciously controlling her aggression.

The first point that led me to look beyond the obvious interpretation of Sophocles' play was Deianeira's silent exit and suicide when accused by her son Hyllus of murdering her husband. Why does she not protest her innocence, or try to make amends for her mistake by caring for Herakles? Her actions do not seem like those of an innocent person. We are prevented from arguing that Sophocles was unaware of this because he makes the chorus comment on her behaviour.

The words are specific: her silence gives assent to the accusation, even without the suicide. Sophocles says that she is acting like a guilty person. If someone who has made a fatal mistake feels that she is guilty, the most likely explanations are either that in fact aggressive impulses have been acted out, or that there is a fear that these impulses have been acted upon, without any conscious choice necessarily being involved. The next obvious step, then, is to look at Sophocles' portrayal, firstly, of Deianeira's attitude to her husband and her marriage and, secondly, at what evidence he gives us of her handling of anger. The present article will deal with the first of these two topics.

We should note that, although the chorus places the blame for the events of this play on Aphrodite, Sophocles gives us a counter-explanation. The chorus says:

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This judgement states that Deianeira’s love for Herakles is the sole reason for his accidental destruction. But Sophocles concludes his play:

\[ \text{κοινὸν τούτου ὁ ὁ μὴ Ζεὺς.} \]

Whatever else may be implied by this line, it surely warns us that the chorus’ judgement is an over-simplification and we must look beyond the workings of a happy marriage for the interpretation of the play.

Deianeira’s ambivalence about marriage is given to us very early in the play. She says,

\[ \text{ητες πατρὸς μὲν ἐν δόμοισιν Οἰνέως καὶ ἄνὴρ ἐν Πλευρῶι νυμφεῖον ὄχλον ἔλαχιστον ἐπετύχων, ἐν τις Αἰτωλίς γυνῆ.} \]

Her shrinking from marriage in her early years is described as something very distressful. ὄχλος is a powerful word for Sophocles to have chosen but he is also careful to emphasise that it is not the normal reaction of a young girl, happy in her father’s house. It is said to exceed that of the other young girls around.

Deianeira is, as all Sophocles’ audience would be aware, married to a great hero. One might expect, therefore, that her marriage to him might have overcome her earlier shrinking. At first, it does seem so. After telling of her first, repellent suitor, Acheloos, she speaks of the coming of Herakles and describes the terror with which she watched the battle for her hand,

\[ \text{ἐκπεπλημμενὴ ῥόμπῳ μὴ μοι τὸ κάλλος ἄλγος ἔξεωρα ποτέ.} \]

We should note that the chorus, which is generally sympathetic to Deianeira and her troubles, sings of the outcome of this battle for Deianeira’s hand in interesting terms. They describe Deianeira’s sitting, awaiting the result, to see who will be her husband.

\[ \text{τὸ δ' ἄμφενεκτον ὁμα τὸς νόμας ἐλευθορὰς ἀμένει ();} \]  
\[ \text{καὶ δ' ματρὸς ἄρα περὶ βεβαιεῖν ὅπερτε πόρτες ἐρήμας.} \]

They portray vividly the girl’s powerlessness as she waits for the verdict that is to determine her life, and her then being led away to marriage, not in triumphant happiness but like a young heifer, taken from its mother, most likely to slaughter or sacrifice. One of Deianeira’s complaints about her marriage is that the family, because of Herakles’s killing of Iphitus, have been driven into exile and forced to live in a foreign land (39–40).

Thus the chorus cannot be seen as childhood friends of hers. They have therefore received this picture of her wooing from Deianeira herself. Hence, we are justified in taking this as a statement of Deianeira’s own feelings.
at the time. We see a young girl in grief at separation from her mother, and clearly feeling unready for marriage and departure from the parental home.

Noteworthy also is the fact that, when reminiscing about girlhood, Deianeira idealises those times. She says,

\[
\text{o} \ \gamma \text{ϕ} \ \nu \epsilon \cdot \zeta \cdot \nu \ \epsilon \text{n} \ \tau \nu \\alpha \iota \sigma \iota \delta \ \beta \delta \sigma \kappa \eta \tau \alpha \mu \iota \nu \ \iota, \ \chi \iota \sigma \rho \iota \sigma \iota \iota \nu \ \alpha \nu \ \theta \lambda \pi \alpha \zeta \ \theta \varepsilon \iota \iota, \\
\ \omega \lambda \iota \ \delta \mu \beta \rho \omicron \sigma, \ \omega \lambda \iota \ \nu \iota \mu \nu \iota \mu \tau \mu \sigma \tau \nu \ \omega \nu \delta \epsilon \chi \omicron \nu \ \iota \lambda \lambda \iota, \\
\ \alpha \lambda \lambda \iota \ \iota \delta \omicron \omicron \nu \ \zeta \omicron \sigma \chi \eta \omicron \nu \ \varepsilon \xi \alpha \rho \iota \iota \iota, \ \varepsilon \zeta \tau \omicron \omicron \omicron, \ \varepsilon \ \omega \varsigma \ \tau \iota \ i \ \nu \ \nu \chi \pi \iota \iota \nu \ \tau \omb \omicron \iota \nu \ \mu \omicron \nu \nu \nu \nu, \ \xi \lambda \nu \ i \ \iota \ \nu \ \nu \chi \iota \iota \iota \nu \ \nu \chi \iota \iota \iota, \\
\ \kappa \lambda \tau \omicron \omicron, \ \lambda \omicron \nu \ i \ \iota \ \nu \ \nu \chi \iota \iota \iota \nu \ \mu \omicron \nu \nu \nu \nu, \ \iota \pi \omicron \ \pi \omicron \ \varsigma \omicron \ \pi \omicron \ \varsigma \omicron, \ \eta \ \pi \omicron \ \varsigma \omicron \ \pi \omicron \ \varsigma \omicron \ \pi \omicron \ \varsigma \omicron. \ \text{144–50}
\]

Girlhood is a time when the sun forever shines and there is never a cloud in the sky. All this changes completely the moment the girl is married.

We are presented, then, with a perceptive portrait here of a realistic character. No period of human life is in fact so Utopian. This kind of idealisation psychoanalysis recognises as resulting from ambivalency, the inability to accept this ambivalence and the consequent splitting off (denial) and projection of the negative aspects. Therefore Deianeira is being shown as someone ambivalent and her ambivalence is focused on marriage and adult femininity. She finds girlhood preferable to womanhood, to an adult, sexual relationship. A girl for whom this is an ambivalent or even negative situation, could have had strong feelings for her father; ambivalence would be experienced because, in the child’s mind, her closeness to her father is a challenge to his relationship with her mother: the little girl may feel that she is launching devastating attacks on her mother. The closer she came to her father the more she might see herself as having destroyed her mother and as therefore having lost forever the mother’s intimacy and caring. Deianeira’s picture, in the mouths of the chorus (529–30), of her leaving her mother, ‘like an abandoned heiffer’, to go with her husband, could accurately portray a girl who is leaving issues unresolved between her and her mother. Now, if this were her background, she might well split off and project her own aggression and introject the ‘good’ mother whom she fears she has destroyed; thereby, she might become herself nothing but a caring, nurturing individual, without any conscious awareness of any aggressive impulses within herself. This would also involve idealisation of the past since the negative aspects are being denied. At the same time, her own sexuality could be split off and projected, perhaps on to men. If so, men become representative of pure sexuality, lacking all ability for simple caring. This need not apply to the father figure who might be seen as gentle, loving, caring and asexual, in order to protect the idealisation of the child’s relationship with him and, thus, simultaneously, to deny the
attacks on the mother. This picture is consistent with the character that Sophocles, one of the world’s greatest ‘intuitive psychologists’ (as Freud termed the great poets⁸) has, with extraordinary accuracy and insight, portrayed in Deianeira.

Relevant here is Deianeira’s reaction to the captive women who have been sent to Trachis from Euboea by Herakles and one of whom she knows is to replace her in Herakles’s bed. A major constituent of this reaction is an identification and it is the features with which she identifies that are of interest. The captive women’s land is ravaged (lit. uprooted) by the sword (ἀνάστατον δομή 240): Deianeira and her family are ἀνάστατοι in Trachis (39). The captive women and Deianeira are specially chosen by Herakles (κριτῶν 245 and 27). They have come from a foreign land (ἕως ξένης χώρας 299-300): Deianeira is living with a stranger (ξένον παρ’ άνδρι 40) in Trachis. They are without their fathers (σπάτορας 300): she has been sent by her father (562) away from her father’s home (6) to go with her husband. Her life is unfortunate (δυστυχία τε καὶ βαφών 5): the captive maid she particularly pities is wretched (δυστάλανα 307). They can both be described as τάλανα (320, 375). Deianeira is clearly something a lot more complex than the loving wife, longing to preserve her marriage which the traditional interpretation of the play demands.

As we have seen, her attitude to marriage is negative. Her view of her marriage to Herakles is ambivalent. At first she speaks of the coming of Herakles to do battle for her hand as

\[ \text{ἀσιμένη δὲ μου} \]

...and, in speaking of the outcome of that battle, she says:

\[ \text{τέλος δ’ ἔθηκε ζέες ἄγανος καλὸς} \]

...but immediately adds the rider

\[ \text{εἰ δὴ καλὸς} \]

She goes straight on to explain her reservation.

\[ \text{λέγοι γὰρ Ἡρακλῆι κριτῶν} \]
\[ \text{ξυστάσι’ ἕι τιν’ ἐχ φόβου φόβον τρέφω,} \]
\[ \text{κείνου προσπραίνουσα νοὺς γάρ εἰσάγει} \]
\[ \text{καὶ νός ἀπωθεὶ διαδεδεγμένη πόνον.} \]

This has been treated as if the fears and distress of her nights refer simply to her anxieties over her absent husband. If so, it has not been clearly expressed. No mention has been made of Herakles’s absences as yet. We have encountered by this stage only the battle for Deianeira’s hand. This is proceeded immediately by the reference to herself as his λέγος, bed(-mate), and her fears in this connection are said to be ‘nursed’⁹ by her. It is a fact that we often reveal our unconscious preoccupations by the way that

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we express our conscious concerns: it seems to me that Sophocles is here showing his ability to reflect this in his dialogue. It is sexual relations that are not a pleasant experience for Deianeira and that provoke a good deal of anxiety. Such anxiety is not something that we easily reveal, either to ourselves or to others: we tend rather to project it on to some other more acceptable cause. We can recognise, too, that these anxieties would make Deianeira ambivalent about her husband’s presence. She would experience antipathy for him as well as for the sexual contact. It is well known that such ambivalence, through splitting and projecting, is often experienced as an anxiety for another’s safety rather than a recognition of one’s own unconscious destructive urges towards the other. Deianeira speaks of herself as ἱππό-παραξένωσα. The latter word is unique in extant literature but can be regarded as analogous to ἀρετήνοιο̣ and as meaning ‘harassed in mind’ about him. It is not noted that this harassed state of mind has specifically been stated to pertain when she is ‘standing beside him’, rather than in his absence. She goes on now to specify night-time as the time of her πόνος, and we cannot miss her preoccupations because she goes on to refer to the children that have arisen from their union.

κἀρφύσαμεν δὴ παιὰς, οὖς κείνος ποτε
γάτης ὁποις ἀποθαν̄ ἔκτοπον λαβάν,
σπείρων μόνον προσείδε καξάμων ὁπαξ;
τοιοῦτος αὐλον εἰς ὅμοιον τε κὰς δόμων
ἀεὶ τὸν ἄνδρ’ ἔπεμπε λατρεύοντά τιν.

This is a woman who feels used sexually and depersonalised. Though the metaphor of ploughing a field and sowing seed occurs elsewhere to refer to sexual relations between man and woman, one cannot ignore the embittered effect of it, when the words are uttered by the female partner.

Only in these lines does she begin to speak of her sufferings as due to Heracles’ absence, in service to others. And now that he is approaching the end of his toils, she is especially afraid. For since he killed mighty Iphitus, she and her family have lived with a stranger in exile in Trachis:

κείνος δ’ ὁποιον
ζήσχεν αὐτὲς αὐτές· τλῆν ἐμὸι πικρᾶς
ἀδίνας αὐτοῦ προσβαλῶν ἀποίχεται.

I have already stated that Sophocles’ language shows that Deianeira’s night-time anxieties involve much more than just worries about the fate of an absent husband. If we link these words with lines 31ff., ἀδίνας, which normally means pangs of childbirth, is an interesting word for her to use, especially when we consider the attacking vocabulary of προσβαλῶν ἐμὸι. In addition, why, after stating what one would have imagined to be the main cause of her anxiety—that no-one knows where Heracles is, does she
go on with ελαία, 'except that'? It makes more sense if we understand that she again giving expression unconsciously to her anger at Herakles' abandoning her to produce and bring up the children he has engendered on her. Her anger about this is the real cause of her anxiety—so much so that she does not have much room for worry about her husband’s whereabouts.

Deianeira explains that her anxieties are because Herakles has been away for fifteen months and no-one knows where he is. He has left with her a tablet, inscribed with a prophecy that after fifteen months his labours will come to an end. Certainly, he is not a considerate husband. Now Deianeira is urged to send her son Hyllus to find out where his father is. When she does suggest this to Hyllus, he responds:

\[ \text{ὁλ' οἴδα, μοθῶς εἴ τι πιστεύειν χρεόν.} \]

It is certainly strange to state that no-one knows where he is when Hyllus and, obviously, others have heard rumours. How could Deianeira not have heard the same stories?

When Hyllus mentions Euboea, Deianeira responds,

\[ \text{ἄρ' οὐδὲν δήτ', ὦ τέκνων, ὡς ἐλειπέ μοι} \]

\[ \text{μαντεία πιστὰ τῷδε τῆς χώρας περι'.} \]

Kamerbeek (1970: ad loc.) here quotes Denniston’s Greek Particles (p.269). δήτα ‘denotes that the question springs out of something which another person has just said.’ Deianeira does not say: ‘Oh! Is that what the rumours say? γάρ I happen to have a prophecy ...’ She says, ‘Oh! Then you know about the prophecy ...’ Kamerbeek notes ‘the economy with which the constituents of the story are brought in when needed and with dramatic aptness. In my opinion it is highly improbable that we should assume Deianeira to infer from Hyllus’ words that the war against Oechalia—Eurytus’ city in Euboea—will be Heracles’ last πόλος. The words τῷδε τῆς χώρας are only natural if we suppose her to be reminded, by Hyllus’ words, of the name of the country mentioned by the oracle. The poet could of course have made her mention or remember the name for herself (for instance after 45) but he did not do so for obvious reasons of dramatic technique. If the spectator had heard at 1.45 that Heracles must by now be on Euboea, he would inevitably have asked: ‘why did she not send someone there?’”

It is clearly true that we should assume Deianeira to be reminded that, on the basis of the prophecy she is holding and which she describes as ποτά (77), she actually knows where Herakles is. However, it seems to me that Sophocles introduces this knowledge in this way not because he is aiming blindly at dramatic effect but because he is using the dramatic demands simultaneously to illuminate the character of Deianeira. She is using the device of ‘forgetting’ (another form of splitting) so that her miseries may
be deeper.\textsuperscript{14} and she has been caught out in her pretence. It would have been appropriate at least to mention that the tablet stated where he was.

In fact, Deianeira, even without her tendency to hold on to fears (see note 8), is shown as someone who is a pessimist, expecting the worst even when this is not the natural expectation in the circumstances. The chorus speaks of her as:

\begin{quote}
\textit{xακάν}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
dύσανον ἐπιζουσαν αἰσαν.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{110–111}

She unhappily expects the worst.\textsuperscript{15} They say, too:

\begin{quote}
φαμι γὰρ οὐκ ἀποτρέπειν
ἔλπιδα τὰν ἀγαθὰν
χρῆαι σε.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{124–6}

The sense of \textit{ἀποτρέπειν} is to 'rub away', that is actively to get rid of expectations of good. When Deianeira informs us that Herakles is approaching the end of his period of labours (line 36), we see that this end could be interpreted in two possible ways: but Deianeira is not full of anticipatory joy or wavering between hope and nervousness. She expects only the worst. She says:

\begin{quote}
ἐνταύθ' δὴ μάλιστα ταρβήσασι' ἔχω.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37}

A messenger enters and the chorus says:

\begin{quote}
eὐφημίζαν νῶν ἵππῃ ἐπὶ καταστεφῇ
στείχονθ᾽ ὄρῳ τιν᾽ ἄνδρα πρὸς χάριν λόγον.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{177–8}

Theirs is the natural reaction to the garlands he wears—an anticipation of pleasure. His first words to Deianeira are that he intends to free her from her shrinking fear (ὅκενοι 181\textsuperscript{16}) and he says that her husband is on his way home in triumph. But Deianeira, even though the messenger has already explained this, starts by asking why Herakles’ messenger, Lichas, is not there himself,

\begin{quote}
ἔπερ εὔτυχεί;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{192}

Also, when she feels compelled to accept that it is good news, her thanks to Zeus are grudging:

\begin{quote}
ἐδώκας ἡμῖν ἄλλη σὺν χρόνῳ χαράν.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{201}

and her greeting to Lichas, when he does appear, is:

\begin{quote}
χαίρειν δὲ τὸν κῆρυξα προούνετο, χρόνῳ
πολλῷ φιλένται, χαρτόν εἰ τι καὶ φέρεις.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{226–7}

She receives Lichas’ confirmation of the good news by saying:

\begin{quote}
πῶς δ᾽ οὐκ ἑτῷ χαίρουμεν ἄν, ἄνδρος εὔτυχεί
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24}
The joy is not spontaneous but forced out of her by a 'necessity' and her habitual pessimism is justified by associating it with the views of those who perceive life aright. Since she is splitting off her own aggression, she must find other ways to explain her constantly expecting the worst: the identification made between her way of thought and that of sensible, right-thinking people\(^1\) would be a very useful one, forming part of the armour designed to protect her from awareness of her own destructive impulses. Whereas this is useful in the short term, it also prevents her from examining these impulses and deciding whether she is in fact acting on them or not. She cannot, firstly, assess the true purpose of the 'love-charm' or, secondly, analyse her own motives in accepting it at face value. The first point will be discussed in a future article on Deianeira's attitude to anger and the consequences this has in regard to her choices and actions. The second feature means that, however innocent her conscious motives, she cannot look at the split off parts of herself. Thus when her actions result in disaster for Herakles, she cannot bear even to look at the degree of her responsibility for his pain. Instead, she takes the ultimate step of avoidance and commits suicide.

Notes

2. In *Psycho-analytic Psychotherapy in South Africa*.
3. For the term, see Vellacott (1971) in his discussion of the *Oedipus Tyrannos*.
4. Her conduct makes sense if we see Deianeira as having had difficulties with what Kleinian theory calls the paranoid-schizoid position which Klein postulates as applying to the first six months of infancy. The task of this position is to accept that the good, nurturing mother and the bad, frustrating mother are one and the same person and to integrate the loving self with the attacking, rending self. The degree to which this is successfully negotiated will determine the extent to which, in later life, one can tolerate ambivalence and complexity in life as opposed to demanding that everything be in shades of black and white. If the integration of the good and bad mother and the good and bad self occurs, it brings with it feelings of guilt for the attacks launched at the mother, and a need to make reparation. (If no integration occurred, no guilt would be experienced.) Associated events in later life cause reversion to this stage and we deal with them in accordance with the way we dealt with this stage's developmental task. Deianeira, who splits off all aggression, cannot face and assess her guilt feelings nor is she able, therefore, to experience the need for reparation.
5. This is edited out by Davies (1991) in his text in favour of δύσος (suffering, distress), with some manuscript support.
6. We note his portrayal as the embodiment of Freudian male symbols: bull, dragon and man with the brow of an ox (11–13).

7. For indications of their sympathetic role as Deianeira’s confidantes, see too lines 102–11 with their references to πολυμένος, δίδυος, δύοδον, εὐμνωστον ἄνδρος δὲ μὲ, εὐμάκεις ἀναιδροτοσι τριγάζομαι and καθὼς δύστανον ... ἀπέω in connection with Deianeira.


9. An interesting choice of words! The vocabulary is suited to nurturing a beloved child and gives the impression that, because her fears serve an important function for her (avoiding knowledge of the real source of the attacks on Heracles), she is hugging them to her, as a mother does her child.

10. Indications of the sympathetic role as Deianeira’s confidantes, see too lines 102–11 with their references to πολυμένος, δίδυος, δύοδον, εὐμνωστον ἄνδρος δὲ μὲ, εὐμάκεις ἀναιδροτοσι τριγάζομαι and καθὼς δύστανον ... ἀπέω in connection with Deianeira.


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If an individual uses defences to split off and project her/his aggressive impulses, these defences will never be complete since the impulses are still within. The more powerful the original split off impulses, the more the individual fears that at any moment they may break out and find expression. Thus the fears are accompanied by agonising feelings of anxiety in case s/he is by her/his very thoughts bringing disasters into being. If disasters do occur, the person may be overwhelmed by guilt, even when there is no rational connection between her/him and the disastrous events. The splitting does not allow the person to assess realistically whether or not s/he is acting out her/his aggression.

It should be noted that this usage of τρέφω occurs almost exclusively in Sophocles and always, I believe, with more implied than is conveyed by the dictionary translation which makes it a simple equivalent to ἔχω. For example: Teiresias says τάλαθες γὰρ ἵσχον τρέφω. (O. T. 356) Since he is a prophet the whole focus of whose life is the pronouncing of god’s truth, surely he means something more than simply ‘I have truth as strength.’ In just the same way, Antigone means something beyond ‘I have in my hopes’ when she expresses a view that she will pursue even if it means her death:

\[
	ext{δώσασα μέντοι κάρτ' έν έλπίσιν τρέψω}
\]

φίλη μὲν ἔξεν πατρί, προσφυγής δὲ σοι,
μήπερ, φίλη δέ σοι, καστίνητον κάρα.

When Philoctetes cries out:

παπαί μάλ' άδυθς, ὃ δὲκλοι στατηλάται, Ἀγαμέμνον, ὃ Μενέκας, πό τ' ἀνθ' ἔμοι

τόν ἴσον χρόνον τρέφοντε τήδε τήν νόσον. (Phil. 793–5)

As Webster points out in his edition, the implication is that the disease is a snake that feeds on his flesh. Within the Trachiniae itself, Hyllus, when his mother is exiting in silent guilt, says: 'Let her go:


gηχον γάρ ἄλλως ἁνόματος τι δει τρέφειν
μητρόν, δης μηθέν ἃ τεκνοῦσα δρίς;

817–8

Just as in the Ajax, τρέφειν can be seen as something of a theme: Deianeira often prides herself in her function as a mother, despite her neglectful husband. It is indeed psychologically accurate that this can be perceived as a burden and a demand by the objects of that maternal love. It is felt to be another mother. ‘Why,’ he asks, ‘should I feed the maternal conceit of the (maternal) title, when she in no way behaves like the one who gave me birth?’

10. Easterling (1989) ad loc. referring to Eur. Hipp. 223. Note, however, that the basic sense of this word is linked to κρέας and means ‘causing ruin’.
12. cf. Powell (1990:3). Oedipus’ sexual relations with his mother are described in these terms (OT 458 and 1498) and Creon uses this image in contemptuously dismissing his son’s love for Antigone (Soph. Ant. 569), when sending her to her death.
13. In fact, so disturbing is this line and its consequences for understanding Deianeira’s character that editors have chosen to disregard the evidence of all the codices and suggest emendations. Dronke suggests ὡρας and Hense χρειας. This latter is accepted by Davies (1991) in his edition.
14. see note 9 on Deianeira’s ‘nursing’ of her fears.
15. We note that Latin spero and Greek ὑπόθεσις have the sense both of ‘expect’ and ‘hope for’, since these concepts are closely linked psychologically.
16. Clearly a case of Sophoclean irony since he is announcing the triumphal return of Deianeira’s husband whereas Deianeira has said that she experienced δοκεῖ (7) with respect to marriage.
17. We note that she especially pities (identifies with) Iole out of all the captive women: ἐπεὶ γὰρ τούτων ἀληθῶς ἡμῖν ἡμῖν

Thus this will be a characteristic she sees as essentially hers. She ἐποβελµ, patiently and unostentatiously endures her griefs out of right-thinking.

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