THE CHARACTER OF DEIANEIRA IN SOPHOCLES’
TRACHINIAE

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2. Where is the Anger?¹

This is the second of a pair of articles² on Sophocles’ play, the Trachiniae. In the first article on the marriage of Heracles and Deianeira I argue that this is no straightforward love match. Deianeira is very ambivalent about her marriage and her own sexuality and this fact adds a further dimension to the apparent storyline of the play. I show, then, that there are many more complications visible than are consistent with the traditional interpretation of the play. By the commonest interpretation, Deianeira responds to Heracles’ sending his mistress home to live with them by sending him a robe, smeared with a “love charm” designed to win his love back to herself. She is a loving wife, innocently deceived by the guile of the Centaur, Nessus. There has been much debate on this point. Hester’s (1980: 1ff.) article, Deianeira’s ‘Deception Speech’,³ summarises the division between the majority of scholars who see Deianeira as an innocent victim of the Centaur’s deception and those who argue for her guilty collusion with the Centaur’s murderous intent. Both these interpretations, as Hester argues, prove difficult to maintain at some point in Sophocles’ plot and text. My two articles are aimed at showing that these interpretations considerably underestimate the complexities of Sophocles’ writing and his character portrayal.

I argue that the perspective missing from these interpretations is Sophocles’ awareness of the functioning of the unconscious mind. In the Trachiniae, I argue that Deianeira herself is unaware of her own motives. She is aware only of her loving motives and has repressed all awareness of her murderous fury at Heracles’ behaviour. She is ‘turning the blind eye’: this is the term used by the psychoanalyst, Steiner (1985: 161–72), in discussing Oedipus in the Oedipus Tyrannus. Steiner says: “In recent years it has

¹. My thanks are due to Acta Classica’s referee, Prof. Kevin Lee of the University of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, for several helpful suggestions.
². For the first of this pair of articles, see Acta Classica vol. 38, 1995 pp. 17–27.
³. pp. 3–4, notes 4 and 7.
become evident that our contact with reality is not an all or nothing affair and psychoanalysts have become particularly interested in situations where reality is not simply evaded but is in addition distorted and misrepresented [...]. In this paper I want to consider one such situation, namely that in which we seem to have access to reality but chose [sic] to ignore it because it proves inconvenient to do so. I refer to this mechanism as turning a blind eye because I think this conveys the right degree of ambiguity as to how conscious or unconscious this knowledge is. 4 This last sentence sums up the reason for the debate we mentioned above and discussed by Hester (1980). Because people are unaware of the mechanism of denial and its relegation of emotions to the unconscious, they treat reality as “an all or nothing affair” and people as either aware or not aware of their motives. And things are not as simple as that. People can act while consciously or unconsciously ‘turning a blind eye’ to their reasons for behaving thus. They can thus with conviction claim complete innocence with regard to the results of their actions since the repression has prevented them from looking at the obvious consequences. Thus they are prevented (or they prevent themselves) from being able to censor their actions and consciously to choose whether in reality they desire what will result from these actions.

An obvious objection to this is that it is not conceivable that an ancient Greek poet should be able to perceive and portray these subtleties, these hidden levels in his characters. Not only is it inconceivable, the objection goes, that he was aware of the existence of the unconscious but it is also unimaginable that he would be able to portray characters whose words are so complex that they reveal that they are acting out emotional drives of which they themselves are unaware. How could Sophocles have been able to reveal the conflicts and distortions that this causes in the activities of the conscious mind? I argue in answer that, if by adopting this explanation we can answer some existing “problems” with the play’s interpretation, it is surely only reasonable to do so. 6

In this second article, I intend to look at the emotions of anger and jealousy in the play, especially the treatment of anger. These would seem to be the most obvious reactions for Deianeira to have experienced at her husband’s behaviour. But things turn out not to be so simple. Anger is an emotion that holds problems for Deianeira. Most notable in this regard is her speech in lines 531ff. Her identification with and, therefore, pity for the captive maiden Iole whom Heracles has sent to their home means that she cannot experience the most logical emotion at being

5. One has nothing but Sophocles’ text to work on (cf. Scott (1992: 58)).
superceded in her own home—anger. She speaks of “the two of us” waiting as a “ἐπαγχάλισμα under one blanket” 539-40. Clearly she and Iole are seen as suffering the same fate—they are both passive victims of Heracles:7 thus, Deianeira will be unable to feel anger at the new mistress. But the underlying anger is obvious. Her words are bitter, as they are in her reference to Heracles as the “so-called” (χαλούμενος 541) faithful, noble man. ἐπαγχάλισμα which translations render as “wife”, actually means “that which one embraces” i.e. it is something passive rather than active in the relationship.8 Andromache uses it of her toddler son Astyanax at Eur. Troiades 752.9 Meanwhile, however, the messenger has quoted Lichas as saying that he was bringing Iole to be διαμάρτω (428) to Heracles and the same word (406) is used of Deianeira’s position in relation to Heracles. Thus we can see that Iole is being brought as, in a sense, a replacement for Deianeira, and yet her identification with Iole prevents her from feeling anger towards her replacement. Surely, then, the anger would most logically be directed at Heracles. Such, Deianeira exclaims bitterly, are the rewards for keeping his house (οἰκούμα) sent to her in return for such a long period of service (540, 542). Her bitterness is clear: but immediately she adds:

εγώ δε θυμούσα μὲν οὐχ ἐπίσταμαι
νοσοῦντι κείνῳ κολλά τρēδε τῇ νόσῳ

543-410

The sickness she refers to is presumably that of love and she twice states this association between love and an disease. Labelling it thus gives her a pretext for not experiencing anger. After all, one does not get angry with someone whose behaviour is due to an illness. Deianeira has a picture of herself as an accepting, patient and kindly person and any feelings inconsistent with this would be hard, or even impossible, to express. Therefore, she quickly denies anger. But she does not say “I am not angry”, but “I do not know how to be angry…” 543. Yet we note that immediately she continues:

7. For a discussion of Deianeira’s identification with Iole and her situation see Scott (1995 p.21).
9. However, it occurs at Eur. Hel. 242 referring to Hera as the σεμῦν ὑπαγχάλισμα of Zeus—also a very ambivalent relationship. And at Eur. H ext. 42, the associated verb form ἑπαγχάλειμα occurs, referring to Alcmene, embracing her grandchil­dren, Heracles’ sons.
10. The text I have used is Easterling (1982, reprinted 1989) CUP, but I have used the iota subscript.
to δ' αὐ τοῖς τρεῖς ἀρμοτίς τις ἄν γυνή
dύνατο, κοινωνοῦσα τῶν αὐτῶν γάμων;
545-6

Her attempts at denying the anger as inconsistent with herself are simply not working under the pressure of this unacceptable situation—the sheer closeness of the forced association of the two women, alongside Deianeira’s identification with Iole.

Elsewhere, we have seen that one of the ways Deianeira deals with her anger is by being worldly wise and understanding. Earlier, she has spoken of herself as one who knows the ways of men (τὰνθρώπων 439) in that, by nature (πέρουσιν 440), men do not always take pleasure in the same things. One who thinks aright (χαλός φρονεῖ 442) would not fight against Eros, for he rules, as he wishes, over both the gods and her. Why should he not lord it over another women as over her? 442-4. This has regularly been taken as meaning that Deianeira sees Iole as being as overwhelmed by love for Heracles as she is herself. But in view of what Deianeira has revealed of her attitude to her marriage,11 this would hardly be the basis for her identification with Iole. There is no evidence that Iole feels love for Heracles either. As we saw in the first of this pair of articles, Deianeira does indeed feel that Eros has ruled her life with absolute tyranny; and of course she identifies with Iole, another object of Heracles’ sexual desires, brought into a foreign country, having lost her father and her home town. Granted that Iole is a slave: but since Deianeira, in denying herself the experience of aggression, has made herself a passive victim in life, the differences in their situations are minimalised.

Therefore, she goes on:

冬奥εν τῷ τούτῳ τ' ἀνδρὶ τῇ νόσῳ
ιηθέντι μεμπότος εἶμι, κάρτα μανόμαι,
η τῇ γυναικί, τῇ μετατίθη μηδέν
τοῦ μηδέν άλαχρος μηδ' ἐμοῖ κακοῦ τινος.
445-8

Her identification with Iole again makes it impossible for her to blame Iole as the seductress and feel anger towards her. Kamerbeek (1970: 111) with great perceptiveness wonders, “Do we delude ourselves if we hear a certain mental constraint in these disagreeable alliterations on τ? I see an admirable representation of gritted teeth in these words. Anger would indeed be the most natural reaction in her situation; yet it is being rigidly controlled and denied. We note too the vivid or real form of the conditional:

11. cf. Scott (1995: passim) where I argue that Deineira, married to the ‘superman’ of the ancient world, might have been expected to be blissfully happy, but, in fact, is shown as thoroughly dissatisfied with and ambivalent about her marriage.
“If I blame ... I am mad.” There is no potentiality or remoteness in the construction. She is saying that she does not blame them: but the vivid form of her language leaves us sensing that she does feel in the grip of some extremely powerful emotion. It even seems to her that she is completely out of her mind, she is mad, not if she “were to feel” thus, but if she “does feel” it.

In the Greek, what Deianeira actually says here is “if I am μεμπτός for this man ...”. Of μεμπτός, Easterling (1982: ad loc.) says that it “is active in sense; ‘apportioning blame’. Normally it means ‘deserving blame’.” She refers to Jebb’s note on OT 969 for other examples of adjectives with an active as well as a passive sense. Nowhere, however, is it asserted that the active meaning is the usual one. Thus, the normal meaning of these lines is “If I am deserving of blame for this man in the grip of this illness ...” Sophocles is too skilled a craftsman to have caused her to express herself in this way unless he were suggesting that this is the way that she unconsciously feels—to blame for what has happened. And, she feels, if she is to blame, she is utterly mad. We can see the desperation of her need for repression here, for splitting off the unacceptable feelings and projecting them away from herself. Some powerful emotions are threatening to burst into consciousness and she feels driven out of her mind. After all, it is the unacceptability of emotions, the powerful threat that they represent for the individual’s sense of who (s)he is that leads to their being split off and denied in the first place. It threatens disintegration of the self if those feelings return uncontrollably.

It seems therefore that Deianeira feels to blame in the situation: this may well be the answer to our initial question: “Where is the anger?” Deianeira mentions as something known to them all that Heracles “married” (ζύγμα) a lot of other women and none of them had received any insult or bad word from her (460-2). It seems probable that her ambivalence about her marriage was so great that she actually experienced no anger at having her sexual marital duties performed by someone else. If this was her reason for not feeling the need to reproach Heracles or his mistresses, she would not allow herself to be aware of it but would simply see her reaction and behaviour as another example of the nobility of her nature. However, at the same time a feeling of guilt at her collusion with Heracles’ affairs would constantly threaten to break through.

But why would this mechanism not be successfully operating in Iole’s case? It seems likely that it would be because of her identification with

12. Hester (1980:2) argues that Deianeira “does not seem to have yet realised that there is a difference between a number of mistresses who are out of sight and one present in her own house,” and speaks of editors who have also failed to note this difference. But I am wondering what evidence we have that this is the first mistress Heracles has brought into the house. It seems to me that lines 460-2 make a lot
Iole which is preventing her from splitting off her sexuality and projecting it on to Iole. The power of the threat to her self-image constituted by the immanence of these unacceptable emotions is so great that she feels in the grip of madness.

She goes on:

\[
\text{ἡδὲ τ᾽ οὐδὲ ἄν εἰ κάρτ’ ἐνταξεῖν τῷ φιλεῖν, ἐπεὶ σφ’ ἐγὼ ἕκτιμα δὴ μάλιστα προσβλέψασ’, ὅτι τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς τὸν βίον διώλεσεν, καὶ γὰρ πατρῶν τοῖς ἐκούσα δύσμορος ἐπεσε κάδούλωσεν.}
\]

462-7

Easterling (1982: ad loc.) notes that the subject of the verb “were melted away” would most naturally be Iole, “but many editors prefer to understand Heracles (with the schol.).” It is hard for modern readers to decide which formulation would be the most natural for D.: ‘I should not blame her even if she were quite absorbed in her passion for Heracles’ or ‘I should not blame her even if Heracles were quite absorbed in his passion for her’, i.e. even if she were a special case in Heracles’ love affairs. The evidence of 444 ... suggests that D. might be thinking of Iole’s feelings here; cf. Winnington-Ingram, Sophocles 81 n.27.” Earlier in this article, we have already noted the difficulties attendant on the interpretation of line 444 as meaning that Iole is in love with Heracles. It should also be noted that, if we see Heracles as the subject of the verb “were melted away”, the phrase, by a magnificent use of Sophoclean irony, foreshadows the actual torments that Deianeira will bring about for Heracles. Any psychoanalyst would argue that Deianeira’s use of the word—hardly the most usual to use in the context—could be seen as revealing an unconscious wish. In fact, it is

more sense if we visualise Deianeira as face to face with these mistresses too. Does it not also make more sense of τὰς ὀμοί in 545 (i.e. explain the use of ‘this woman’ here although Iole is not present) if we see it as contrasted with sharing her house with other women? It certainly could be accompanied by a gesture towards the house where Iole is, yet it still seems more pointed if contrasted with other women in the same position. At any event, I don’t think it can be proved that Iole is the first mistress sent to the house. It may be that this idea has prevailed precisely in order to explain Deianeira’s reaction here.

13. We note that the reasons Deianeira gives here for her pity of Iole cannot in fact be true since she felt pity long before she knew of Iole’s individual circumstances. The aspects that she pitied were Iole’s grief, helplessness and enslavement (298-302, 329-33). However, people would not naturally comprehend her identifying with Iole’s grief, helplessness and sense of having no control over her life, of being totally subject to Heracles. Thus the reasons she gives here have taken over in her mind because they are socially more acceptable as causes for her pity.

14. e.g. Kamerbeek (1946: ad loc.): “each. is Heracles subject.”
possible to speculate that Sophoclean irony often results from his intuitive observation of this kind of verbal slip in everyday life.

In view of what we have seen of Deianeira's attitude to Iole's arrival at her home, it is of interest that, after hearing from Lichas the truth of who Iole is, Deianeira invites the messenger into the house so that she can give him messages for Heracles and also

\[ \zeta \ relating \delta \sigma \omega \chi \rho \eta \ \prosaurhmosi. \]

The repetition of \( \delta \sigma \omega \) and the use of \( \zeta \ relating \) emphasize the reciprocity of the gifts and the \( \pi \rho \sigma \sigma \)-prefix of the verb ( = "besides") emphasises the importance of the correspondence that is aimed at. What kind of gift could be "very fitting" as "a return for" gifts from one's husband that include a young girl to be taken into one's house as his mistress? What kind of a person must we imagine Deianeira to be if these words herald the sending either of straight gifts or of a love charm to win Heracles back? Davies (1991: ad loc.) says of \( \prosaurhmosi \): "here merely 'bestow' (though some have detected a sinister irony foreshadowing the literal fastening of the shirt to Heracles.)" Kamerbeek (1970: ad loc. on \( \prosaurhmosi \)) says: "in my opinion the poet means us to understand that Deianeira has already conceived her fatal plan; the verb \( \prosaurhmosi \) makes us think of the peplos or of the philtrum (cf. 687) or of both; at the same time the verb, with \( \delta \sigma \omega \), can be understood as meaning: 'to make a suitable return-gift'." I do not see how one can deny the Sophoclean irony in the word "fitting closely to". I agree therefore that they indicate that Deianeira has already formulated her plan, though she is not allowing herself to be conscious of its implications. But the vocabulary used also reflects her unconscious wish to make her gift an appropriate return for his. I cannot understand how the double sense of this word could be perceived and it yet be seen as simply referring to the plan to use the love charm on Heracles. This would be neither an appropriate nor a closely fitting return. But as a reflection of an unconscious wish to send him a destructive gift, together with the Sophoclean irony in the literal sense of the word, it is entirely appropriate.

Lines 494-6, therefore, tell us that Deianeira goes into the house fully intending to plan an appropriate response to Heracles' action. There is a tone of great bitterness. Yet we know that Deianeira tends to deal with bitterness by splitting and projection and the re-establishing of her self-image as a patient, enduring wife. We know then that she will not burst

15. cf. Kamerbeek (1946: ad loc.): "\( \prosaurhmosi \): passend geven in ruil voor ... Ominous gezegd, voor het gewaad dat zich om Heracles zal voegen en vastkleven."
out into angry words or actions. We can only wait to see what effect the repression of any bitterness will have on her chosen actions.\textsuperscript{16}

When Deianeira emerges from the house again, she starts to tell the chorus secretly (λάθρα 533) what she has contrived (ἀπεχνήσαμεν 534). The need for secrecy and the air of cunning is clear. It seems to me that both of these are more appropriate to the unconscious aim of her gift than they are to the surface one.

The anger is very near the surface. It is at this point that Deianeira utters the words quoted at the beginning of our discussion of anger (539-40), with their picture of the two women, inextricably linked, awaiting together Heracles’ sexual attentions, and then struggles (543-4) with the resultant anger. Now she gives a reason (γάρ 547) that no woman could endure what is being forced upon her.

\begin{quote}
ορῶ γὰρ ἔβην τὴν μὲν ἔρπουσαν πρόσω, 
τὴν δὲ φθίνουσαν· ἄν ἀφαρπάζειν φιλεῖ

ορθαμὸς ἄνθρωπος, τὸν δ’ ὑπεκτρέπει κόσμα.

ταῦτ’ οὖν φροβώμαι, μὴ πόσις μὲν Ἡρακλῆς

ἐμὸς καλήτα, τῆς νεωτέρας δ’ ἀνήρ.

άλλ’ οὐ γὰρ, δισπέρ εἶπον, ὅργαίειν καλὸν

γυναῖκα νοῦν ἔχουσαν
\end{quote}

547-553

Now that, without being aware of it, Deianeira has, as we shall learn, allowed herself to act on her anger, it is very near the surface. She here gives expression to the intense feelings of jealousy which one would expect from a woman in her position. Youth in Iole is at its attractive best, while at Deianeira’s age, it is on the decline: her fear, then, is that Heracles will be called her husband but a younger woman’s man.\textsuperscript{17} It seems that this has been almost precisely the situation that she has connived at all these years. But her inability to split off and project her sexuality on to Iole has left her with the attendant jealousy and enforced awareness of the

\textsuperscript{16} We note that it is at this point in the play that the chorus sing their ode to Aphrodite’s mighty strength and describe the battle for Deianeira’s hand. Why does Sophocles assign this theme to the chorus right now? The battle has been described before by Deianeira; thus its repetition here must be significant. It seems to me that Sophocles is reminding us that Deianeira’s dissatisfaction with her marriage is not a new thing. It reminds us too that Deianeira is replaced not just as a sexual partner but also as the woman for whom Heracles did battle. She no longer has this uniqueness to cling to. Now another woman also deserves this description (351ff.). We see moreover that the chorus’ singing of this ode emphasises the extent of their sympathy with Deianeira. They even add details to her original story. We are thus prepared for the intimate role they will play as her confidantes in the coming scene.

\textsuperscript{17} cf. p. 35 where we noted that the same word (διαμάρτωμα) could refer both to Deianeira (406) and to Iole (428 and 429).
difference in their ages. Losing the image of herself as the patient enduring wife has exposed her to herself as one with sexual feelings, however difficult and ambivalent, and, therefore, as the rejected one of the pair of closely associated women. But again, though we see her develop the theme of her jealousy, we find that the anger, as something inconsistent with the woman of good sense with which she identifies herself, is rejected as unacceptable (552.3).

And it is now that she says that she will tell the chorus how she has found λυτήρον ἡλύσματι 554, a painful remedy, words often rejected as not making sense here.18 However, emendations suggested are not convincing. For example, Jebb's λύφημι, alleviation, is merely a repetition of λυτήρον. It is much more likely that Sophokles is using an oxymoron—a remedial pain. There is no doubt that, by Sophoclean irony, the words apply well to the actual effect of the gift she is sending to Heracles. The problem lies with what she could be intending as her conscious meaning. Why should Deianeira be referring to her planned remedy as a “pain” that she “possesses” (ἐχω 553)? I cannot accept, with G. Hermann and Ellendt,19 that the words refer to “a relief for herself and a pain for Iole”. Her identification with Iole makes this impossible. I agree with Stinton20 in accepting that the pain, at a conscious level, is that of Deianeira. But I argue that her pain arises from the fact that she is fighting to conceal from herself her knowledge of the true nature of the destructive charm she is using. In fact, her next words show clearly what an effort it must be demanding to turn a blind eye to the realities.

The first line of her description of the painful remedy uses the words παλαιόν and ἀρχίοι (555). Both emphasise that she has had a long time to reflect on the nature of the remedy. It is also noted that it came as a gift from a ἄρχει (556), which she had gathered at his suggestion from the blood of his wound as he lay dying (558) at Heracles' hands. She then explains that the centaur Nessus used to carry people across the river Euenos for a fee and that, when she was travelling with Heracles to his home after the contest for her hand, Nessus had, while carrying her on his shoulders, in mid-crossing, touched her with lewd (μυτάκως 565) hands. When she had screamed, Heracles had straightaway shot Nessus in the chest with an arrow. If nothing else, surely this emphasises repeatedly that she had no reason to think that Nessus' attitude to her and Heracles would be one of goodwill!


19. cited by Kamerbeek (1970 ad loc.).

And as Nessus lay dying from this wound, he suggests to Deianeira:

τοσόνδι’ ὄνηση τῶν ἐμῶν, ἐὰν πλὴν,
aprήμων, ὀθούνεχ’ ὅστάτην σ’ ἐπεμψ’ ἔγω.

570–1

This is hardly the best reason for him to be desiring to give her a friendly gift! He goes on:

ἐὰν γὰρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἷμα τῶν ἐμῶν
σφαγῶν ἐνέγχη χερσίν, ἡ μελαγχόλους
ἐξαφεν ὦν ὁ θρήκμα Λερναίας ὕδατις
ἐστι φρενός σοι τοῦτο κηρήθρειον
tῆς Ἡρακλείας, ὥστε μῆτιν εἰδεῖν
στέξα μεν γυναῖκα κείνος ἀντι σοῦ πλέον.

572–7

Surely this is a very disturbing speech if one accepts the traditional interpretation that nothing is operating here but Deianeira’s wish to win her husband back with a love-charm. The gift has not been sent yet. There is time for Deianeira to change her mind. And Sophocles is at pains to emphasise that she should have done so. Several phrases give warning of danger. Not only does the blood come from a fatal wound inflicted by Heracles, but his arrow too has been covered with poison from the Hydra—and this fact is known to the dying Nessus. Logic cries out that Deianeira could not, under those conditions, have trusted the centaur’s telling her that the blood would be beneficent.

We might note, too, that, when Deianeira instructs Lichas on delivering the robe to Heracles, she adds the details that he should ensure that no-one put it on before Heracles, and that no heat, no ray of sunlight or firelight should be allowed to touch it until Heracles “should stand publicly and display it conspicuously to the gods on a bull-slaying day” (608–9). Why should a love-philtre have to be administered publicly and at the sacrifice of a bull? Is this relevant only to the new robe which she has smeared with the charm and which she wants displayed publicly because of her pride in her workmanship, or because it is somehow sacred? Or does she, at some level, want Heracles’ punishment to have the extra dimension of its being witnessed by gods and men, symbolically at the time of the sacrifice of a bull, that symbol of crude masculine power? Both probably are true—the one reason operating wholly consciously and the other motivated by her unconscious desires.

Deianeira now continues:

21. For the secrecy, see p.41.
Here are two reminders (θανόντος 579 and, by implication, ζῶν 581) that the donor is now dead and Deianeira here uses the very word (ἐξάψα 580) that she has quoted Nessus as using to describe the poisoning of the arrows (Ἑξάψαν 574). Although it is only later when her misgivings have begun that Deianeira relates that Nessus had instructed her to keep the charm hidden from daylight and untouched by human hand (684–6), she does mention here and at line 556 that it had been kept “hidden away”. This makes a perfect image for something which must be kept away from consciousness, which must be hidden away even from oneself.

Why, if Sophocles were simply portraying for us a character who is deceived into believing this charm a well-meant one, does he not place this speech full of foreboding, packed with signals of ill omen, after Deianeira has already sent the gift to her husband? Would it not then make more sense as indicating the dawning of fears as to the real meaning of the centaur’s gift? This speech would most naturally occur after lines 663–4, where Deianeira re-enters and says to the chorus:

γυναῖκες, ὡς δέδοικα μὴ περαιτέρῳ
πεπραγμέν’ ἦ μοι πάνθ’ ὑπίρτίος ἔδραμον.

Deianeira’s earlier words would in fact give a most natural reason here for the beginning of her feelings of misgiving, if we are to see her earlier behaviour as simply misguided. I think the essential question is whether we are going to regard Sophocles as showing in lines 555 ff. a singular lack of subtlety and skill, or whether we should accept him as displaying a level of understanding in character portrayal almost unbelievable for his time—as, in other words, giving us a character that has an unconscious dimension, who, without being aware of it, inwardly knows the hostile nature of the charm but is “ignoring” it.

As it is, when asked why she is feeling misgivings, she answers:

οἷς οἰδ’ ἀθιμῷ δ’ εἰ φανήσαμαι τάχα
κακὸν μέγ’ ἐκπράξασ’ ἄπ’ ἐλπίδος καλῆς.

666–7

Her fear is of being revealed as having done a great evil. Once again, this is psychologically convincing—that the defences against awareness of what she has done should only break down after the action is performed. Until this time, all her energies are concentrated on preventing this awareness, on
preserving the picture of herself as a noble, accepting woman. It would be far too threatening to allow awareness of the other side to creep through, far too unacceptable to allow the realities of her bitter jealousy and furious anger to reach her consciousness.

Therefore her solution is to turn the blind eye.\(^{22}\) This mechanism, described by Steiner (1985), involves ignoring, obstinately remaining ignorant of uncomfortable facts in one's reality. Let us observe Deianeira doing this. She is aware—but ignores the fact that—Heracles and she, between them, ended Nessus' life because her husband killed him defending her from the centaur's lust. She ignores the fact that she is told by their victim, who is aware of the presence and the strength of the poison, to take the blood from the very point which is smeared with the poison. She has to ignore the fact that his promise that Heracles would never love another woman more than her would be fulfilled if Heracles died, just as much as if the substance acted as a love charm: however, she was quick enough, with her tendency to expect the worst,\(^ {23}\) to realise that Heracles' death would fulfil the prophecy on the tablet he has left behind that his labours will come to an end.\(^ {24}\) Now we see why Sophocles belabours the point as he does and loads us with reasons why Deianeira should not have been able to expect a happy outcome from her use of the charm. These reasons reveal not only the circumstances in which she obtained the charm but also her own characteristic tendencies. It is not poor artistry on Sophocles' part to which we must turn a blind eye because of his skill elsewhere: indeed it is precisely here that we truly see his greatness, his ability to portray characters operating at all the complexity of levels that people do in everyday life. We are being enabled to see how desperate was Deianeira's need at this time and how her circumstances combined with her personality required her to ignore the most obvious seeming clues in order to avoid the totally unacceptable feelings the situation is rousing in her.

We note too that, when she sees Lichas re-emerging from the house, Deianeira abandons any hesitations she might have been feeling and, reinforced by the chorus' reactions—which amount to encouragement when so many invitations to demur are ignored\(^ {25}\)—says to them:

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\(^{23}\) This is an important characteristic of those repressing aggression because they constantly fear that the aggression might have broken loose and been acted upon.

\(^{24}\) Cf. Scott (1995: 24) where this instance is discussed.

\(^{25}\) It is interesting to note that, just as Vellacott and Steiner see the chorus in the _OT_ as joining in a conspiracy of ignorance, of turning the blind eye to reality, so here the chorus—so consistently sympathetic with Deianeira—joins her in turning a blind eye to the nature of the love-charm.
Kamerbeek (1970:138) argues that it is hard to believe that Sophocles makes Deianeira say the words, “if you achieve shameful deeds” and urges that πράσατεν here means “to fare”. He goes on, “If this is right, the words here must refer to her being put to shame in the event of her attempt falling flat; then, if nobody discloses the means by which she tried to win back Heracles’ love, the shame will be for herself alone and she will not fall disgracefully.” Kamerbeek also gives a footnote reading, “We might also think that she means “even αἰσχρα (and this is not αἰσχρόν)”.” I do not see that we need to go to such lengths to see Sophocles’ meaning. He is describing with great accuracy the need for turning a blind eye in her present situation and is showing her inviting the chorus to collude. At a conscious level, all she would be aware of is a need for secrecy and a sense that she is involved in something shameful. But the very fact that she is splitting off the emotions involved here mean that she cannot examine and therefore censor them. The defence of splitting off and denying does serve to prevent the person’s having to acknowledge the feelings as his/hers, but equally it prevents him/her from being able to make conscious decisions about whether (s)he is going to act on or give expression to these same feelings.

Only now, after the deed has been done, do Deianeira’s defences against awareness of the real character of her gift collapse. Now she enters, expressing fears that she has acted to excess (περατέρω 663). Now, she suspects that she has done great harm, with the best of intentions (666–7). When the chorus asks whether this has anything to do with her gift to Heracles,26 she says:

\[
\text{μάλιστα γ', οίσε μήποτ' ἐν προθυμίαν ἄθροι έργον τῷ παρατίνεσαι λαβεῖν.}
\]

669–70

Her dread-filled thoughts are so fearful that she now expresses a wish that she had never conceived a readiness for action, while operating in the dark (ἄθροι). This is remarkably like a wish that she had not turned a blind eye to the realities! We note that, in the Greek, it is her desire (προθυμία), her drive for action, that she wishes had been out in the open, rather than the act itself.

She explains to the chorus that the flock of wool with which she had applied the “charm” to the robe has vanished:

26. We note the chorus jumping to a conclusion only natural if they have been colluding in turning a blind eye (see note 25) and now also have awareness forced upon them.
She recalls that she carried out exactly (παρῆκα ... οὐδὲν 682) the instructions of “the beast centaur whose ribs were pained by the bitter arrow” (680-1). Sophocles reminds us again of the degree of denial and repression that were necessary to believe that the effect of the charm could be good. There is also a ritualistic quality to the meticulous care she gave to meeting the centaur’s wishes precisely, and this smacks of the kind of “busyness” so often used in the ritualistic actions of unhappy or neurotic people in order to protect themselves from awareness of their fears and distress.

Let us note here the debate on line 684, excised by Wunder on the grounds that it adds nothing new and that, in fact, τοιχοῦ τὸπρὸν here is condemned by χάδρων τοιχα in line 688. Jebb (1908: ad loc.) argues: “The reiteration ... is unnecessary: but in her” (i.e. Deianeira’s) “actual state of mind, it is full of dramatic truth. The scholiast read this verse.”

We must note the whole context of her treatment of the Centaur’s instructions as though they were engraved in bronze:

\[
\text{παρῆκα πετάμων οὐδὲν, ἀλλ’ ἐσωτήριν}
\text{χαλικής ὑπὸς δύσοπτον ἐν δέλτου γραφῆν.}
\]

682-3

Clearly the repetitions is a deliberate attempt on Sophocles’ part to represent the rigidity and ritualistic quality Sophocles has observed in the actions of someone who is repressing their real involvement in these actions. One possible reason, then, for Deianeira’s excitement and agitation is that her own motives are tending to push into her consciousness and much more energy is required to prevent their getting loose! Like all those whose rationalisation for their actions is “I was just obeying orders”, Deianeira repetitively emphasises that she was following precisely the instructions of the Centaur.

It is at this point that we learn for the first time that the instruction to avoid light’s falling on the charm came from the Centaur. Deianeira was to keep it “in the inmost corners of the house” and away from all light and heat (685-6). It is interesting that she did not mention this to the chorus earlier in her detailed account of how she came by the charm. Since she


was following this instruction also as a defence mechanism—since she was not only literally storing the charm in the dark but also, by turning a blind eye, keeping herself from looking clearly at what she was doing—it was too risky to mention the instruction. It would have been too much like saying to the chorus, “And this is also how I have avoided thinking about its nature.” She goes on in lines 706–18 to state the reasons we have already mentioned that she should not have anticipated goodwill from the centaur and her fears that she has destroyed her husband. Now she is saying, “How could I have been so blind?”

This, in fact, is what this article has been examining—Deianeira’s reasons for not seeing the true nature of the gift she was sending, for her turning the blind eye. We see, too, why when her son, Hyllus, accuses her of having murdered his father, she offers no defence but exits in silence and commits suicide. Herein lies the rich fullness of Sophocles’ depiction of the tragedy of Deianeira. Here is a woman whose whole desire in life is to be a good woman. Because of this, she does not allow herself to look at her less desirable side. Therefore this side of her is not subject to conscious control. Thus her very desire to be a good woman prevents her from censoring her own actions. She cannot refuse to act on her destructive urges precisely because they are so unacceptable that she turns a blind eye to them. Thus her dream of goodness leads her into taking an action that she would never consciously have chosen for herself. Deianeira who tries to live life as if all within her was sweetness and light ends up, without deliberate decision, giving the ultimate expression to her anger in murder and suicide.

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