On the Tragic Tension of Actor and Spectator in the *Trachiniae*

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Immediately noticeable in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, a play marked by the psychological exploration, downfall, and death of Heracles and Deianeira, is the profound oppositeness of the two main characters. Deianeira is chaste, static, and apprehensive, while Heracles is promiscuous, itinerant, and confrontational. In addition to being counterparts in marriage, however, there is another major distinction between them in the play: the portrayal of Deianeira as a spectator and Heracles as an actor. Throughout the play, Deianeira draws associations with imagery of looking and watching from the chorus, yet often fails to meet qualifications of good spectatorship. Heracles, on the other hand, is treated as the center of attention, but possesses a self-consciousness unbefitting of an actor. In both characters there is an internal conflict between spectator and actor, prompting each, tragically, to act outside of their prescribed roles.

Through an ambiguous description of a woman watching a battle from a hill, the chorus tacitly compares Deianeira to a spectator watching a spectacle of the exploits of Heracles. On line 517, the chorus mentions some “εὐῶπις ἁβρὰ,” or “delicate, fair-eyed girl,” sitting on a hill that is “visible from afar,” or “far-shining” (τηλαυγεῖ). The female watching the scene is somewhat ambiguous, considering the mention of Aphrodite earlier in the chorus. While it is unlikely, since the fight in question is between Heracles and Achelous, that it refers to Iole, Heracles’ alleged concubine from Oechalia, she would be fresh in the mind of the audience after the announcement of her affair with Heracles. This mentioning of an unnamed spectator, while it most likely refers to Deianeira, invites the reader to consider the similarities between Deianeira, Iole, Aphrodite, or spectators in general. The adjective “τηλαυγεῖ,” according to the commentary of Easterling, provides emphasis “on Deianeira’s remoteness from the scene of the duel, rather than on her ability to watch it.” Deianeira’s distance from the spectacle in the poetic description of the fight from the chorus parallels Deianeira’s fear and emotional detachment from the fight in her own account of it at the beginning of the play.

The fight between Heracles and Achelous, as told by Deianeira herself, is an instance in which Deianeira fails to be a
spectator, overcome by fear at the sight. She says “I would not be able to explain fully the manner of their fighting, but whoever was watching, unshaken by the spectacle, could tell it.”2 There is no mention of a hill in this account of the story, as the site of the duel is not specified, but, considering Achelous’ status as a river god, was probably assumed to be at a river. Greek theaters, however, were often placed on hillsides, as the slopes would allow row upon row of seats to ascend above the stage. The effect of looking upon the stage from high up in the audience would most likely feel similar to looking down upon something from atop a hill.3 Taking place in a theater and being watched by spectators, Heracles’ duel with Achelous can be seen as a play within a play. With distance being an obvious handicap on one’s ability to watch a show, Deianeira’s refusal of a front-row seat for the duel is a self-handicap and rejection of her spectatorship. Taking James H. Butler’s interpretation of the purpose of the Greek dramatic chorus, that it “provides symbolic action that reinforces the relationship”4 between characters, etc. the Chorus elucidates through imagery of spectatorship Deianeira’s lack of mobility and inability to interfere with the actions of the actors. However, as the reader knows from Deianeira’s account, when given the opportunity, she shies away from up-close spectatorship.

Deianeira’s immobility and passivity further illustrate her role as a spectator, and cause her great frustration. Deianeira stays within the confines of the palace for the entire play, onstage until her death. Her motionlessness stands in contrast to the other characters, who go back and forth as messengers for her, and Heracles, who is offstage until after her death. While it would most likely be unexpected at the time for a matron to venture away from home and leave behind her domestic duties, Deianeira only begrudgingly accepts her domesticity, and expresses great apprehension over her ignorance of Heracles’ fate. “Nobody knows where he has gone, except that he departs from here delivering to me sharp fits of longing.”5 Her desire to know what she cannot know and intervene in Heracles’s affairs leads her to transgress her role as a spectator. When the procession of conquered women, which could be interpreted as a spectacle in itself, passes through, Deianeira’s perception of them calls to mind the duel scene. Filled with pity, she begs Zeus that she never look upon (ἐἰσίδοιμι) a child of her own suffering like the captured women do,6 and then remarks, “so much I am afraid, looking upon these girls.”7 Again surfacing is this language of fear and an unwillingness to look upon harsh sights,
further illustrating the tension between her desire for knowledge and her reluctance to watch. She singles out Iole and wishes to know her background, but Iole is silent. Deianeira, the spectator, is unable to speak to or interrupt the actions of the one putting on the spectacle, no matter how much she would like to.

Deianeira’s outlook on life expressed at the outset of the play is incompatible with the standards for good spectatorship, as understood through Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s emphasis on “suspension of disbelief” when reading and interpreting literature. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge explains that, in order to have “poetic faith,” we must “transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment,” when reading a work that involves “supernatural, or at least romantic,” characters, themes, and incidents. While these supernatural characters and events are not literally present, real, or even sometimes possible, they are intended to appeal to the emotions of the audience, so that the spectators relate to the characters’ experiences and feelings. At the beginning of the play however, Deianeira states, “I know my fate before I go to the House of Hades, living a harsh and oppressive life.” In being so tenacious in this assertion, one would expect that she hardly be emotionally affected by the events of the play. In holding that she knows how her life is and will end, she would probably doubt anything could alter the nature or course of her life. This attitude is comparable to that of one who is unmoved by a play, having learned its outcome beforehand. If good spectatorship presumes that the audience suspends its disbelief, an emotionally disinterested spectator such as Deianeira fails to visualize the play as it was intended by its author.

Despite Deianeira’s expectation that her life will end badly, her emotions hang on every piece of news she hears, while the concerns of the chorus likewise revolve around the well-being of Heracles. Taking again from James Butler’s description of the tragic chorus, he describes its function as that of an “ideal spectator,” which “focused the attention where it needed to be directed,” in this case, on the suffering of Heracles more than that of Deianeira. In the first choral passage, the chorus begs the all-seeing sun for the whereabouts of Heracles, but, in an almost reproachful tone, characterizes Deianeira as “expecting a bad fate.” The chorus is more explicit in its reproach with the following line, “Finding fault with these things, I will extend you due respect, but I will speak
on the contrary… pain and joy revolve around all.” The chorus’s attitude toward Heracles, however, is sympathetic and reverent. “The many waves buffet him here, exalt him there.” Translating “αὔξει” as “exalt” at Easterling’s suggestion, it is as if nature, oppressing him with endless labors, is simultaneously praising him. Heracles is the center of attention in the thoughts of Deianeira, the chorus, Hyllus, the messengers, and even nature itself. In the same way that he is the actor in the spectacle Deianeira watches from the hill, he is an actor with the rest of the world watching his play.

Judging by his frequent address of himself in the third person, it is almost as if Heracles, too, is a spectator unto himself. His final words are, “This is the final end of this man, Heracles.” He also refers to himself as “τόνδ᾽ ἄνδρα” on line 1073. While these lines do demonstrate the egotism he has acquired from being the most famous demigod, a son of Zeus, and the subject of myriad myths, poems, and plays, they suggest further that he has internalized the attention he receives. He considers himself the center of attention like an actor is in a play. Eulogizing himself for much of his time on stage, he incorporates several dramatic techniques, most notably his apostrophe to his shoulders, chest, and arms from lines 1090-1100, in which he recounts their glorious feats. Given that these body parts are attached to his body, this speech is simultaneously an apostrophe and a synecdochic self-congratulation, mourning himself as if he were a spectator at his own funeral.

Heracles’ self-centric, overly self-conscious way of thinking in this passage, however, is hardly characteristic of an exemplary actor. In his essay, “Understanding Acting,” Richard Hornby outlines the qualities of a good actor, first of which is reacting rather than thinking. “Acting, like all artistic creation, is a largely unconscious process; the outer results are not caused by conscious, rational choices, but by inner stimuli of which the artist is only dimly aware.” At the beginning of his address to Hyllus, Heracles confides in him his fear of being seen weeping, displaying a self-consciousness unfit for Hornby’s standards of good acting: “I who am crying just like a young woman… no one could say that he had ever seen this man doing this before.” Overcome by his concern for others’ perception of him, Heracles calculates his actions rather than simply reacting to his environment. While treated by himself and the rest of the world as an actor, Heracles’s fear of spectators prevents him from acting properly.
Having expatiated Deianeira and Heracles’ failure to act within the bounds of their prescribed roles, it must be explained what is tragic about the actor-spectator dynamic between the two. In sending the love charm and unwittingly killing her husband, Deianeira successfully intercedes in the life of Heracles, as if she were inserting herself, the spectator, into the play. In refusing her duties as a spectator several times and attempting to change the course of Heracles’s play, Deianeira reveals a desire to be an actor and not a spectator, despite the chorus’s diagnosis of her as a spectator. In an essay outlining several schools of thought on the essence of tragedy, especially regarding *hamartia*, Mark Morford summarizes John Crossett’s definition of *hamartia* as “double mindedness.”\(^\text{18}\) Taking from the LSJ definition of *ἁμαρτία* as a “failure,” “fault,” or “error of judgment,” often with the association of causing a hero’s downfall in a dramatic context, Crossett’s “double-mindedness” would be Deianeira’s conflicting mindsets of actor and spectator. Deianeira yields to the former, despite being expected to conform to the latter. Deianeira’s *hamartia*, then, is the action born from her internal conflict of actor and spectator: sending the robe that causes both her and Heracles’ death.

Heracles undergoes a similar conflict of double-mindedness in his simultaneous acting and self-spectatorship. Not wanting to be seen weeping so as to uphold his reputation for strength and virility, Heracles acts outside of his assigned role as actor, and the desire to be spectator conquers his inclination to act. In her essay contrasting Heracles and Deianeira, Kasey Hicks demonstrates the conflict between Heracles’ interior and exterior: “The super-masculine inscription of Heracles’ identity precludes the idea of an inner life or private self: such a level of interiority is antithetical to his essential, rugged *outwardness.*”\(^\text{19}\) While Hicks employs her analysis of Heracles to illustrate the influence of gender roles on Heracles and Deianeira’s relationship, I argue this point is applicable to the role of spectator and actor as well. Hick’s description of Heracles’ *outwardness*, constituted of his “victories in battle, sexual conquests, bouts of drunkenness and gluttony” coincide with Hornby’s description of a good actor, one who simply acts and reacts rather than overthinking.

This description of Heracles, however, only accurately characterizes himself before Deianeira’s love charm and his weeping at the end of the play. In admitting on line 1075 that he “has been discovered a wretched woman instead of this man,”\(^\text{20}\) Heracles acknowledges that he is no longer playing the part of
the “rugged” man he has always played, and has therefore stopped acting. Heracles and Deianeira’s assumptions of opposite roles serve as complements to each other: when Deianiera crosses into acting territory, Heracles ceases to be an actor.

The duality of Heracles and Deianeira’s actor-spectator dynamic is further illustrated by the manner in which the characters would have been staged: it is likely that the two characters were played by one actor. In her essay, Hicks notes that “in accordance with the conventions of Athenian tragedy, the male actor who played Deianeira subsequently reappeared as Heracles in the same production,” made possible by the fact that the two are never on stage at the same time. The presence of an actor who plays both Heracles and Deianeira adds another layer to the double-mindedness of both characters: the double identity of the actor who plays them. It is as if they are two parts to one, tragic entity. When Deianeira has committed her hamartia and paid the price for it, Heracles immediately resumes her double-mindedness. Overstepping her bounds as a spectator and taking the role of an actor by intervening in the affairs of Heracles, Deianeira actually becomes an actor; she becomes Heracles.

The practice of the double actor sheds some light upon the nurse’s account of Deianeira’s suicide. Before Deianeira plunges the sword into her side, she first “loosens her robe at the point which the gold-wrought pin extended from her breasts, and uncovered her whole left side at her elbow.” Stripping herself at her side would probably allow herself to better evaluate a point at which to stab her sword, but her action also takes on a metatheatrical purpose. Her removal of her garment is symbolic of the actor’s removal of Deianeira’s costume, in order to put on the Heracles costume. This change of costume would have also happened backstage, from whence the nurse comes running after witnessing Deianeira’s suicide. The nurse’s actor would have literally seen Deianeira’s actor removing the Deianeira costume for good, marking her death and the subsequent removal of the character Deianeira from the play. Another noteworthy piece of the passage is the description of her weapon on line 930. The nurse calls it the “ἀμφιπλῆγι φασγάνῳ,” meaning “double-edged sword.” The double-edged sword calls to mind the double-minded characters, played by the double-actor, and marks the double death of husband and wife. Deianeira’s suicide is not simply the checkpoint at which Deianeira leaves and Heracles takes over, it alerts the audience to
the intertwined relationship of Deianeira and Heracles and the physical process the actor undergoes in switching from the former to the latter.

The _Trachiniae_ is undoubtedly a play of dualities and opposites, but easily unnoticed is the double relationship of spectator and actor between Heracles and Deianeira. In his essay on the dramatic unity of the _Trachiniae_, Gordon M. Kirkwood notes that past scholarship has explained such contrasts as “between the stationary existence of Deianeira and the roving life of Heracles,” “between the constancy of Deianeira and the unfaithfulness of Heracles,” and “of the essential maleness of Heracles as contrasted with the femininity of Deianeira.”

However, in order to fully understand their relationship, it is essential to understand how Sophocles uses the medium of theater to express it. Through the symbolic intercessions of the chorus, the audience understands Deianeira’s role in the play as being comparable to that of a spectator watching a spectacle, and that of Heracles as the man in the middle. When invited to evaluate their prowess in spectating and acting, however, Deianeira’s fear and dogged expectation of a bad outcome prove her a poor spectator. Heracles, on the other hand, is merely a “poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage.”

The tragedy is that they are not both meant to be the actor; the beauty is that the actor is meant to be both of them.
Bibliography


Notes

1 From p. 524 of the Cambridge Green and Gold
2 καὶ τρόπον μὲν ἄν πόνον οὐκ ἄν διείποιμ’: οὐ γὰρ οἶδ’: ἀλλ’ ὅστις ἂν θακὸν ἄπαρβής τῆς θέας, ὅδ’ ἄν λέγοι (lines 21-23)
3 This is from a website at the following url: https://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/tragedy_theater.html
   “Ancient Greek theaters were very large, open-air structures that took advantage of sloping hillsides for their terraced seating.”
4 The Theater and Drama of Greece and Rome p. 59
5 κεῖνος δ’ ὅπου βέβηκεν οὐδεὶς οἶδε: πλὴν ἔμοι πικρὰς ὁδίνας αὐτοῦ προσβαλὼν ἀποίχεται (lines 40-42)
6 μὴ ποτ’ εἰσίδοιμι σε πρὸς τοῦμόν οὕτω σπέρμα χωρήσαντά ποι (lines 303-304)
7 οὔτως ἐγὼ δέδοικα τάσδ’ ὁρωμένη (line 306)
8 Chapter XIV of Biographia Literaria
9 ἐγὼ δὲ τὸν ἐμὸν, καὶ πρὶν εἰς Ἀιὸν μολεῖν, ἔξοι καὶ ἔχουσα δυστυχῆ τε καὶ βαρύν (lines 4-5)
10 Also on p. 59 of The Theatre and Drama of Greece and Rome
11 κακὰν δύστανον ἐλπίζουσαν αἴσαν (line 111)
12 ὧν ἐπιμεμφόμενα σ᾽ ἀἰδοῖα μέν, ἀντία δ᾽ ὀἴσω… ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ πήμα καὶ χαρὰ πᾶσι κυκλοῦσιν (lines 122-131)
13 πολλά… δὲ τὸν Καδμογενῆ στρέφει, τὸ δ’ αὐξεῖ (lines 112-117)
14 On p. 89 of the Cambridge Green and Gold
15 αὕτη τελευτὴ τοῦδε τἀνδρὸς ὑστάτη (line 1256)
16 Hornby’s essay, on p. 19 of The Journal of Aesthetic Education
17 ὅστις ὅστε παρθένος… καὶ τόδ’ οὐδ’ ἄν εἰς ποτε τόνδ’ ἄνδρα φαίνει πρόσθ’ ἰδεῖν δεδρακότα (lines 1071-1073)
18 The name of the essay is Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition, and it’s on p. 353 of The Classical World, volume 75 No. 5. I would cite the original Crossett rather than Morford’s summary of his argument, but I could not get access to Crossett’s writing, which Morford does not directly cite. However, there is a book of essays in honor of Crossett called Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition : Essays in Honor of John M. Crossett, so I assume his view on hamartia was highly-regarded and well-disseminated.
From the essay The Heraclean Absence: Gender Roles and Actors Roles in the "Trachiniae," on pp. 77-84 of Pacific Coast Philology Vol. 27, No. 1/2

νῦν δὲ ἐκ τοιούτου θῆλυς ηὗρημαι τάλας (line 1075)

This is because of the tendency in Sophoclean plays to use three actors, playing multiple parts.

λύει τὸν αὐτῆς πέπλον, ἣ χρυσῆλατος προὔκειτο μαστῶν περονίς, ἐκ δὲ ἐλώπισεν πλευράν ἁπασὰν ὀλένην τ᾽ εὐώνυμον (lines 924-926)

From essay The Dramatic Unity of Sophocles' Trachiniae on pp. 203-211 of Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, Volume 72

From Shakespeare's Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5, lines 2380-2381