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ΠΑΝΤ' ΑΡΙΣΤΕΥΩΝ ΧΕΡΟΙΝ
DEEDS OF THE HANDS IN SOPHOCLES' *TRACHINIAE*

JUDITH FLETCHER

for Greg Dickerson

Heracles is dying. As his body melts away, he demands an oath from his son whom he commands ἔμβαλλε χεῖρα δεξιὰν πρώτιστά μοι, "First of all give me your right hand" (1181).[1] Hyllus clasps his father's hand for several lines, possibly for the entire duration of the oath. This *dexiosis* is a striking gesture: both intimate and formal, it looks toward the future as well as the past. Not every oath requires a handclasp, although the tragedians frequently use it to signify an agreement reached or promise made. In this scene it would perhaps have a special poignancy in its evocation of the farewell handshake between family members as depicted on Attic grave steles.[2] The gesture signifies Hyllus' commitment to a future course of action, preparation of his father's pyre and marriage to Iole, but it is also the culmination of a series of references to hands made throughout the drama. The *Trachiniae* represents or refers to a range of manual actions—prayers, embraces, athletic feats, writing, and of course murder—and thus illustrates Martin Heidegger's dictum that a human being "acts through the hand."[3] Yet often the *Trachiniae's* characters use

[1] Greek quotations are from the text of H. Lloyd-Jones and N.G. Wilson, *Sophoclis Fabulae* (Oxford 1990); translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. I refer to the following texts and commentaries: R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments*, 5. *The* Trachiniae (Cambridge 1908); J.C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles*, 2. *The* Trachiniae (Leiden 1970); P.E. Easterling, *Sophocles:* Trachiniae (Cambridge 1982); M. Davies, *Sophocles*: Trachiniae (Oxford 1991).

[2] For a discussion of the handclasp in Greek tragedy see M. Kaimio, *Physical Contact in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Stage Conventions* (Helsinki 1988) 26–34. Compare the description of the oaths sworn by Jason to Medea (E. *Med.* 21–22). Oath scenes at E. *Med.* 745 and *IT* 735, for example, do not mention the handclasp, but Kaimio cites E. *Hcld.* 307 as one of several examples of a handclasp signifying agreement (between Demophon and the children of Heracles). An example of the *dexiosis* between an older and younger man depicted on an Athenian gravestone (ca. 410) can be found in J. Boardman, *Greek Sculpture of the Classical Period* (Oxford 1985), ill. 156 (Athens 2894.H.1.03).

[3] M. Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (New York 1968) 15. Of course Heidegger's phenomenological approach is not perfectly applicable to ancient con-

their hands to perform actions without fully understanding their significance; they commit violent deeds devised by others, or they are driven by forces beyond reason. Despite this rather grim depiction of human will and agency, the *Trachiniae* does in its final moments move towards a more salutary and rational use of the hands, a pledge symbolized and ratified by the *dexiosis*. This thematic evolution is the inverse of the hand's significance in the *Medea* where Medea's right hand, which has exchanged pledges with Jason and "represents trust and amity at at the beginning of the play, becomes the instrument of bloody revenge by the end."[4] By examining the motif of the hand throughout the *Trachiniae* I would like to suggest that quite the opposite occurs, a suggestion which might help to defend this drama against charges of unmitigated pessimism and offer a glimmer of hope for its outcome.[5]

A. The Hands of Heracles

Charles Segal is the only critic, to my knowledge, to comment (albeit briefly) on the repetition of hand words in the *Trachiniae*. For him the hand signifies an antithesis between savagery and civilization, an antithesis which he finds more pronounced and unresolved in this tragedy than any other in Sophocles. Let us begin with his observation that "Heracles' victory over monsters has been by the physical force rather than skill of hands."[6] Heracles' exploits are referred to as deeds of the hands, and epitomize his supremecy over all other men. "He has vanquished everything with his two hands (χεροῖν 488)," says Lichas. It

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cepts of the body. The ancients apparently thought of the body more as an assemblage of discrete units such as the wandering womb or the evil eye. See R.D. Griffith, "Corporeality in the ancient Greek theatre," *Phoenix* 52 (1998) 230–256, esp. 236 and 243–244.

[4] S. Flory, "Medea's right hand: Promises and revenge," *TAPA* 108 (1978) 69–74. It is significant that Medea negotiated her "marriage" to Jason and tendered the oath independently, while the union of Hyllus and Iole is sealed by an oath between two men, a more culturally normative arrangement.

[5] "[T]he *Trachiniae* ... reads like the poem of a young man who has just realized the full cruelty of the world" (C. Whitman, *Sophocles* [Cambridge, MA 1951] 103); "by the end, characters, images, past and present, all seem to have fused under a single mask of human helplessness" (C.K. Williams and Gregory W. Dickerson, trans., *Sophocles*: Women of Trachis [Oxford 1978] 3). See also C. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA 1981) 60–108. For Segal the radical antitheses of wildness/civilization are never reconciled in the play, since the mediating potential of the *oikos* has been polluted by the centaur's potion kept within the house.

[6] Segal (above, n. 5) 90

would be an oversimplification, however, to claim that this son of Zeus is defined in terms of physical strength alone. After he is brought before the palace, racked with agony, the hero laments his disintegration by apostrophizing his hands and back (1047–8), καὶ χερσὶ καὶ νώτοισι μοχθήσας ἐγώ (1047); as R.C. Jebb suggests, his hands represent skill while his back represents strength. Heracles, founder of the Olympic games, is the ultimate exponent of Greek athleticism, exhibiting a combination of both skill and strength, and we are reminded of this aspect of his excellence several times. When the chorus sing of the battle between Achelous and Heracles for possession of Deianeira, they say τοτ' ἦν χερός, ἦν δὲ τόξων πάταγος, "then there was the clash of hands, and of bows" (518): χερός probably refers to a wrestling or boxing match between Heracles and the river god.[7] A line or two later the chorus mention the ἀμφίπλεκτοι κλίμακες, a wrestling maneuver requiring both manual ability and force. In addition to his expertise at wrestling, Heracles also uses his hands to draw the bow against Achelous, another sport of skill at which he excels; in fact it is in this capacity that we first hear of the hands of Heracles. Lichas reports that Eurytus insulted Heracles by attributing his victory in an archery contest to the infallible arrows in "his two hands": λέγων χεροῖν μὲν ὡς ἄφυκτ' ἔχων βέλη (265). Later in the same report however Lichas relates how Heracles used trickery to take Iphitus "in hand" (χειρουμένῳ, 279) by hurling him over a wall; the potent Heraclean hands are capable of feats of skill, but commit acts of violence and deceit as well. Although Lichas suppresses important information in his account to Deianeira—probably that the contest was for Iole, and certainly that Heracles sacked Oechalia out of lust for Iole—he does provide testimony for both the τέχνη and the βία of the hands of Heracles.[8] Yet savage impulses, which have much to do with Eros, subvert the skillful potential of the hands through most of the play. The problem with Heracles is that he is often gripped by uncontrollable urges

[7] Cf. Jebb (above, n. 1) 81, who envisions Heracles pummeling Achelous with his fist, then withdrawing a bit and shooting an arrow.

[8] See Davies (above n. 1), xxii–xxx for the earlier form of the legend and Sophocles' innovations. It seems most likely that the pre-Sophoclean version had Heracles seeking the hand of Iole immediately after he killed his first wife Megara and her children. R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) gives the matter careful attention and decides that "The basic lie of Lichas is about motives, not about facts" (332). He concludes that the original audience would have known the story from the epic *Oichalias Halosis*. Cf. also H. Musurillo, *The Light and the Darkness: Studies in the Dramatic Poetry of Sophocles* (Leiden 1967) 75, "He does not really lie: his account of Heracles' adventures is merely confused."

which seriously degrade his more civilized activities: he is not really in complete control of his own hands.

Once Lichas is compelled to tell the truth about the captive women to Deianeira he admits that although Heracles has bested all other contestants with his hands, χεροῖν, he has been mastered by Eros himself (488–89). The athletic metaphor is one of several strands of imagery knitting the play together; the conclusion seems to be that since Eros compels Heracles to rape Iole, Eros is the better athlete. Before this ode and in reference to herself Deianeira comments on the athletic ability of Eros:

> Ἔρωτι μέν νυν ὅστις ἀντανίσταται
> πύκτης ὅπως ἐς χεῖρας, οὐ καλῶς φρονεῖ.
>
> Certainly whoever challenges Love to a boxing match (with his hands) is a fool. (441–2)

Eros the athlete is a familiar topos of Greek art and literature (e.g. Anacreon 51 = PMG 358), which Sophocles exploits again in the first stasimon.[9] As we have already noted, the chorus draws attention to the superior athletic skill of Heracles over Achelous, but the real champion of the contest, they suggest, is Cypris, who "carries away the victory" (497).[10] These reports by an unreliable narrator (Lichas) contribute to the ambiguity surrounding the combination of τέχνη and βία which supports the power of Heracles. Still it is perfectly clear that the intense passions of the son of Zeus direct him to perform some brutish deeds. The rape of Iole makes an Achelous or a Nessus out of Heracles; he is as vicious as any monster he slays, and ultimately he will succumb, like them, to the skill and violence of another's hand.

B. The Hands of Deianeira

Heracles possesses both strength and skill, a combination which enables him to defeat a range of monsters while staying one step ahead of death himself. Yet his practiced hands are not entirely under his command and in a sense they are instruments of his own demise. If he had not used them to acquire Iole (and lose the contest against Eros), then Deianeira would have no reason to resort to her magic potion, given her so long ago by Nessus. Deianeira's account of this event re-

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[9] Segal (above n. 5) 78 notes that Deianeira's reference to Eros the boxer is made concrete in the battle between Heracles and Achelous. Musurillo (above, n. 8) 68 connects the past wrestling contest between Heracles and Achelous with Heracles' present contest "with Love and Death."

[10] Easterling (above, n.1) 132–133 identifies certain epinician elements in the ode which highlight Aphrodite as an athletic victor.

veals that she is not in complete control of her hands either. Hands are a prominent motif in Deianeira's narrative with its striking collocation of five occurences of χεῖρες as datives of agent; four of these occur at identical positions in the trimeter. To begin with, Deianeira announces to the chorus that she has come outdoors τὰ μὲν φράσουσα χερσὶν ἀτεχνησάμην (534), "to tell you the things that I have made with my hands." Like her husband, she will be using her τέχνη for violent ends, although she is as yet unaware of the full implications of her actions. It might seem that χερσίν, emphasized by its position outside its clause, foregrounds the agency of Deianeira, who holds a coffer bearing her own seal and containing the fatal robe.[11] When she presents the casket to Lichas, she describes it as δώρημ' ἐκείνῳ τἀνδρὶ τῆς ἐμῆς χερός (602), "a gift of my hands to that man." From Lichas' perspective she is referring to the act of weaving the robe; the chorus and audience realize that she could also refer to smearing the robe with the charm. And since weaving is often associated with feminine guile and skill,[12] the juxtaposition of the two meanings contributes to the superficial sense that it is the mind of Deianeira which impels the action of her hands, both in annointing the robe and giving it to Lichas. Moreover Deianeira's activity seems to be based on such civilized qualities as technical skill and reciprocal gift-giving.

Yet beneath this civilized exterior lies a wellspring of lust, deceit and violence. Deianeira's actions arise both from her own sexuality and the vengeful motives of the centaur. As she holds the casket in her hands she proceeds to narrate its origins, repeating χερσίν three more times in exactly the same metrical position to emphasize the sinister history of the robe. The second instance of χερσίν refers to Nessus who used his hands for apparently civilized purposes:

> ὃς τὸν βαθύρρουν ποταμὸν Εὔηνον βροτοὺς
> μισθοῦ 'πόρευε χερσίν, οὔτε πομπίμοις
> κώπαις ἐρέσσων οὔτε λαίφεσιν νεώς. (559–61)

[11] Williams and Dickerson (above, n. 5) 40 provide stage directions indicating that Deianeira is holding the casket herself when she emerges from the house. Easterling (above, n.1) 12 suggests that a maid is carrying it at this point. It seems pointless to argue about a hypothetical single staging in Athens in the fifth century, since we have absolutely no stage directions. Nonetheless a plausible and effective staging might have Deianeira taking the casket from a maid at some point. I would insist that she must give the gift to Lichas herself, since it would not be appropriate for the maid to hand over what is supposedly a high-status gift.

[12] Greek myth provides adequate examples of this association: Penelope's weaving trick is the most famous. See I. Jenkins, "The ambiguity of Greek textiles," *Arethusa* 18 (1985) 109–132.

> Who, for a price, ferries mortals with his χερσίν across the deep-flowing river Evenus, neither rowing with the escort of oars, nor the sails of a ship.[13]

The centaur's hands and arms function first as oars as he swims across the river, but culture gives way to savagery in midstream:

> ὃς κἀμέ, τὸν πατρῷον ἡνίκα στόλον
> ξὺν Ἡρακλεῖ τὸ πρῶτον εὔνις ἐσπόμην,
> φέρων ἐπ' μοις, ἡνίκ' ἦ 'ν μέσῳ πόρῳ,
> ψαύει ματαίαις χερσίν· ἐκ δ' ἦυς' ἐγώ (562–5)
>
> who was carrying me on his shoulders when I was first a bride sent by my father with Heracles, he touched me with wanton hands in the middle of the river; and I cried out.

It is the hands of Heracles which subdue Deianeira's brutish suitor, just as they had earlier defeated Achelous in another river battle (recently described in the first stasimon):

> χὠ Ζηνὸς εὐθὺς παῖς ἐπιστρέψας χεροῖν
> ἧκεν κομήτην ἰόν· (566–7)
>
> And straightway the son of Zeus turned about and shot a feathered arrow with his two hands.

Notice that the hands of Heracles are in the dative dual, as they were previously (265 and 488), and that χεροῖν is highlighted by a rather harsh enjambment which contrasts "the wanton hands of Nessus (565) and the promptly avenging hands of Heracles."[14] So too it would seem that Heracles' skillful manipulation of the bow can stop the lustful hands of the beast, but of course there is more to the story. Nessus has a devious, intelligent, human-like mind; his hands may at times be governed by his bestial lower half, but ultimately his clever thinking will guide the hands of Deianeira after his death. Her hands will do his work, perform his vengeance. As he is dying the centaur offers the innocent young bride a love charm:

> ἐὰν γὰρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἷμα τῶν ἐμῶν
> σφαγῶν ἐνέγκῃ χερσίν, ᾗ μελάγχολος
> ἔβαψεν ἰὸς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας (572–4).

These lines are so vexed that Malcolm Davies devotes two and a half pages of commentary to them, but the general meaning seems to be: "If you gather (or carry away) the clotted blood from my wound with

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[13] Deianeira specifies that Nessus was rowing χερσίν, and Davies recommends that we translate the term as "arms" here; Easterling suggests "strength of arm." Undoubtably this is what we must picture, but it is significant that the text uses the term when Greek does have a more specific term for arms.

[14] Easterling (above, n.1) 144.

your hands, at the place where Heracles wounded me with an arrow dipped in the Hydra's poison."[15] The important point here is that χερσίν (referring to the hands of Deianeira) occurs at the identical point in the line as the two previous references to the hands of Nessus.

This brings the total occurrence of hand words to five in Deianeira's speech to the chorus: four in the dative plural referring to Deianeira and Nessus and one in the dative dual referring to Heracles. The plural forms, all in the same metrical positions, are arranged chiastically with the two references to Deianeira's hands (534 and 573) framing the references to the hands of the centaur (560 and 565). Several scholars maintain that Deianeira is simply the instrument of Nessus; the linguistic patterning of her speech certainly supports such an interpretation.[16] It is as if her hands are not really her own, and that the lustful impulses that controlled the hands of Nessus now motivate her hands. Christopher Faraone, however, offers a persuasive argument against the completely "innocent" Deianeira when he observes that she was far from ignorant of the nature of Nessus' blood. Desmond Conacher makes the important point that she does in fact deliberate about her action, while Segal analyzes the skewed logic of this deliberation.[17] After stating her disapproval of overbold women

[15] Davies (above, n.1) 159–162 discusses the problems of these difficult lines; my translation follows the suggestions of Easterling (above, n.1) 144.

[16] Proponents of the completely passive reading of Deianeira include M. McCall, "The *Trachiniae*: Structure, focus, and Heracles," in H. Bloom, ed., *Sophocles* (New York/Philadelphia 1990). McCall observes that Deianira, represented in the choral odes as lacking authority, cannot shake her unauthoritative image when she recounts the story of Nessus. V. Wohl, *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy* (Austin 1998) focusses on Deianeira's attempts to participate in an aristocratic pattern of gift-giving by offering the robe as "gifts in return for gifts" (494). In the end she simply reactivates the conflict between Nessus and Heracles, while she herself is eliminated from the structure of exchange completely.

[17] Faraone concludes that Deianeira understood that Nessus' blood was poisonous because it contained the blood of the Hydra, yet she was working on a principle (well known to the Athenians) that a small amount of poison could be used to restore the affections of a disinterested husband. Nessus' deception of Deianeira was thus quantitative rather than qualitative. C.A. Faraone, "Deianira's mistake and the demise of Heracles: Erotic magic in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *Helios* 21.2 (1994) 115–135, esp. 120. I cannot, however, agree that Deianeira's decision was motivated strictly by concerns for her social position, and not by sexual impulses as well. She refers quite explicitly to her own submission to Eros (444), and seems to assume that Iole is smitten by the same passion for Heracles. My objections do not vitiate Faraone's conclusions. On the culpability of Deianeira see also D.J. Conacher, "Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: Some observations," *AJP* 118 (1997) 21–34, at 28. Segal (above, n.3) 78 and 88 discusses the distorted logic of Deianeira as an aspect of the centaur's charm which is itself a metaphor for

(582–4), she wonders if she herself is acting "wantonly" (587 μάταιον, the same word she used to describe the hands of Nessus as he molested her, 565). It bears remembering that Deianeira's hands are set in action by her sexual jealousy (on one level of meaning the beast represents her own sexuality): she thinks she is using a love charm to recapture her husband's attentions. Deianeira's hands are also motivated by external forces: the revenge of Nessus, the force of Aphrodite,[18] and the will of Zeus whose oracle at Dodona predicted Heracles' death by a force no longer living. Ultimately it would appear that the catastrophe of the play is the product of several sets of hands, or to put it another way, of multiple agency.[19]

Nessus does influence Deianeira, but her actions conform to a predetermined plan relating to Heracles' demise. His destiny has actually been written down, a detail which seems to reinforce the whole sense of inevitability. The motif of textuality works in conjunction with that of the hand to suggest an interweaving of human agency and divine pattern. Heidegger discusses handwriting, especially in societies without mechanical writing devices, as the most fundamental correlation between thought and the hand.[20] Yet although writing is a definitive human skill, the characters of this tragedy seem unable to comprehend the complete meaning of the texts they create. Others dictate to them; writing thus becomes paradigmatic for the complex notion of agency. The most conspicuous example of this metaphor is the oracle kept by Deianeira within her own house. It is notable that the actual inscription of the oracle is highlighted (ἐγγεγραμμένην): it is a δέλτος (47, 157) which human hands transcribed. Deianeira possesses these ξυνθήματα inscribed by Heracles (158) although she depends on him to inform her that they foretell the end of his labours at a specific time. Yet Heracles' ability to read and write grant him no insight: although he wrote down this oracle at Dodona, he is unaware that he transcribed the time of his own death. His hands performed a civilized human act, but one which suggests that such cultural gestures are

her "unleashed sexuality."

[18] Although the power of Aphrodite has been manifest throughout the play, and indeed given utterance by the chorus, there is no battle for control between the gods as there is in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Winnington-Ingram (above, n. 8) 87–89 discusses the matter well, and concludes that "There is one world, and it is Zeus's world."

[19] See T.F. Hoey, "Causality and the *Trachiniae*," *CJ* 68 (1973) 306–309 for a discussion of multiple agency. He examines the phenomenon of "co-causes" in the play: characters' destinies are the result of their own actions and the influence of outside agents.

[20] Heidegger (above, n. 3) 15.

pointless. Deianeira is one of the animators of this text since she trusted the centaur enough to follow his instructions; indeed she refers to these instructions as a type of text:

> παρῆκα θεσμῶν οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἐσῳζόμην,
> χαλκῆς ὅπως δύσνιπτον ἐκ δέλτου γραφήν. (682–3)
> I let nothing of his injunctions go, but I saved them for myself like an indelible mark from a bronze tablet.

The commands of Nessus (θεσμῶν is a strong word here) are etched in the mind of Deianeira like laws engraved on brass tablets, dictating her actions years after they were spoken.[21] The syntax of this passage is so ambiguous that it is impossible to determine who is supposed to have transcribed the text; the obliquity of the metaphor allows us to imagine that Deianeira is in a sense the amanuensis of Nessus. He dictates, she writes. Be that as it may, we have to remember that Nessus, and by extension Deianeira, facilitate the fate contained in Zeus' oracles. By recording the specifications of the centaur and then enacting them, Deianeira actualizes the oracles' promises. There is a palpable connection between the commands of Nessus inscribed on the tablets of Deianeira's memory and the text that issued from Dodona.[22] That oracle has been kept within the house in the company of Nessus' poison, and indeed Deianeira refers to the box which contains the poisoned robe as ζυγάστρον (692), a word which also connotes a box used for keeping oracular texts.

Although Deianeira has only been the instrument of fate, she does perform one autonomous act; it is the act permitted to many female characters in tragedy, their own death. Her own mind governs her hands now, as several χείρ cognates suggest, but of course she has fulfilled her role in the fated demise of Heracles. When the Nurse announces the death of her mistress she tells the chorus that Deianeira died by her "own hand" (χειροποιεῖται, 891).[23] In the fuller descrip-

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[21] Kamerbeek (above, n.1) 154 comments on the loose syntax of the passage "faithfully reflecting D.'s excitment." The metaphor of the text of memory is fairly common and usually suggests that individuals write on their own mind; cf., for example, S. *Phil.* 1325, γράφου φρενῶν ἔσω. Agency is indeterminate in this passage, allowing Page DuBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago 1988) 154–155 to read this passage as a sexual metaphor: the inscription of Nessus on the δέλτος of Deianeira is an act of penetration. See also K. Ormand, *Exhange and the Maiden: Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Austin 1999) 53–54.

[22] L. Bowman, "Prophecies and authority in the *Trachiniai*," *AJP* 120 (1999) 335–350 lists the parallels between both texts (339–342) and Deianeira's relationship to both (342–344).

[23] As Jebb (above, n. 1) 132–133 comments, the force of αὐτή emphasises that

tion the Nurse narrates how Deianeira, having touched the familiar objects of her household, then loosens her gown with "a vehement hand" (cυντόνῳ χερί, 923). "Would a feminine hand (τις χεὶρ γυναικεία) dare to perpetrate these deeds?"(898), ask the chorus when they hear that she killed herself with the sword. Although most tragic women kill themselves by the noose, Deianeira chose a method of suicide with decidedly phallic overtones, a final deed of force which accentuates the power of her hands, and which deprives Heracles of the satisfaction of tearing her limb from limb himself.[24] Yet this single autonomous act performed in the margins, as it were, of the story of Heracles, is still an act of terrible violence and can hardly be seen as any sort of evolution in the ethos of the play.[25]

C. The Hands of Hyllus

Although the physical presence of Heracles is delayed until the long exodus, he has been the focus of the play while others longed for him, looked for him, and remembered the exploits of his hands. The final scene emphasizes Heracles' inability to use his manual force and skill; the erstwhile strongman must rely on the hands of others to bring him to the palace. The actual stage business is a physical illustration of how violent lustful deeds are a thing of the past; they may have fulfilled the will of Zeus once, but now violence is to be replaced by civilized acts of the hands authorized and even sanctified by Zeus. Heracles' present state attests to the destructive potential of the hand: he shot Nessus with his hands, Nessus guided the hands of Deianeira, Heracles is now dying—a cycle of violence that can only be ended by ritualized ministrations of the hands.

The impotence of Heracles in his present state could not be more emphatic. Even the frail touch of the old attendant is enough to send the once mighty hero into spasms of agony (1105–17). The old man releases Heracles into the arms of his son: ψαύω, says Hyllus (1020), "My hands are helping" (Jebb's translation). According to a recent in-

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this "was the work of her own mind and her own hand."

[24] On the phallic implications of Deianeira's death by the sword see D. Wender, "The will of the beast: Sexual imagery in the *Trachiniae*," *Ramus* 3 (1974) 1–17, at 13; H. Parry, "Aphrodite and the Furies in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," in M. Cropp, E. Fantham, and S.E. Scully, eds., *Greek Tragedy and its Legacy* (Calgary 1986) 103–114, at 109.

[25] Regarding the irrelevance of Deianeira's action in the context of the primacy of Heracles' relationship with other men, Ormand (above, n. 21) 38 concludes that "Deianeira's complete failure to understand this form of marginalization constitutes her pathos and her tragedy."

terpretation of these difficult lines, Hyllus is administering a "therapeutic touch offered to those who are no longer in control of their bodies."[26] Jennifer Clarke Kosak argues that this type of gesture occurred often enough in tragedy for an audience to recognize that Hyllus' embrace and manual support of his father were attempts to alleviate pain. Although Hyllus knows that he cannot cure his father's ailment, he is using his hands for beneficial humane purposes. And as Dorothea Wender points out, Hyllus can touch the venom-ridden Heracles and remain unscathed: "Does this mean that Hyllus is immune to Heracles' disease?"[27]

The gentle hands of Hyllus provide a vivid contrast to both the former dangerous athletic force of Heracles and his present lack of prowess. The man who once put Iphitus to hand (χειρουμένῳ, 279) is now "handicapped by unspeakable fetters" (ἀφράστῳ τῇδε χειρωθεὶς πέδῃ, 1057). The verb χειρόω is relatively rare and its repetition here links Heracles' present state to the sack of Oechalia. He is even incapable of getting his hands on the woman responsible for his agony. He tries to command his son:

> δός μοι χεροῖν καῖν αὐτὸς ἐξ οἴκου λαβὼν
> ἐς χεῖρα τὴν τεκοῦσαν (1066–7)
>
> get your mother from the house for me with your hands and give her unto my hand.

The repeated χεροῖν ... ἐς χεῖρα almost seems redundant, so strongly does it emphasize the wish of Heracles that his hands might vanquish a final enemy[28]; and it emphasizes too the brutal passion that can drive the hands of Heracles to perform acts of violence. When his son announces the suicide of Deianeira, Heracles laments:

> οἴμοι· πρὶν ὡς χρῆν σφ' ἐξ ἐμῆς θανεῖν χερός; (1133)
> Alas, she should have died by my hands first.

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[26] J. Clarke Kosak, "Therapeutic touch and Sophokles' *Philoktetes*," *HSCP* (1999) 93–134, examines the use of "therapeutic touch" in tragedy: a form of embrace which involves lifting or raising the patient. She discusses the interaction of Hyllus and Heracles (at 106–107) as an example of therapeutic touch being offered to a man "who can no longer lay claim to the normative status of the male sex because they have lost their physical power." Kaimio (above, n. 2) 16–19 suggests that such physical support of "the dying hero" is a conventional scene in tragedy.

[27] Wender (above, n. 24) 15 suggests that this contrasts with the infectious quality of Medea's poison, which afflicts Creon as soon as he touches his daughter.

[28] Easterling (above n. 1) 207 notes the "[i]nterlaced word order, with brutal emphasis on 'hands'."

Heracles' inability to use his hands to kill emphasizes the obsolescence of this type of savage handiwork. But once he hears about the centaur's role in his pain, he is able to piece together prophecies and understand that he is about to die. He can finally read the full text of his own life, a text which he helped to write by setting in motion the chain of events beginning with the rape of Iole. As his body continues to waste away Heracles' thoughts guide his hands to one last action. Like Nessus his hands will have power after he has died, or to be more specific they will ensure that someone else carries out his instructions with their hands. As soon as Heracles achieves complete understanding of the situation and knows that his death is nigh, according to the combined prophecies, he starts to make the necessary arrangements and thus brings to completion the χείρ motif in the play.

All of the misguided and violent acts of the hand thus far are replaced by the civilized rite of oath taking. When Heracles enjoins his son to swear an oath (cited at the beginning of this essay), Hyllus asks "Why do you insist on this pledge (πίστιν)?" (1182). We might well ask the same, since a promise to a dying father would surely have as much force. Yet the oath is thematically appropriate here in that it illustrates a type of evolution. Now that his physical force has failed him, Heracles must come to realize the importance of family and society.[29] The oath ritual is a mainstay of civilized society, although its sanctity has been abused in various ways until this point in the play.[30] Heracles, according to Lichas, swore an oath to himself to avenge his maligned honor by sacking Oechalia (255). That oath represents "a duty imposed on himself"[31] rather than an attempt to enter into a contractual arrangement with another human being—another illustration of how isolated Heracles has been throughout his life. The nature and

[29] "To remain the heroic son of Zeus, Heracles must find another means to achieve honor and another idea to order his world": C. Elliott Sorum, "Monsters and the family: The exodos of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *GRBS* 19 (1978) 59–73, at 66. Sorum observes how Heracles, who controlled the lives of others and existed outside the bounds of family and society, is now passive and insightful. Now that his physical prowess has disappeared, Heracles reaches an understanding about the necessity of submitting to his father's will. His desire to collect his scattered family reflects his recent understanding of its importance.

[30] Hyllus' covenant conforms to the basic structure of the oath: a) solemn declaration of a promise—Hyllus swears (1188) to perform what Heracles previously named as "the deed spoken"; b) an invocation of a god as guarantee—Hyllus names Zeus; and c) a curse—Heracles demands that Hyllus "pray to accept the penalty" if he breaks the oath, and Hyllus responds that he will (1190). See J. Plescia, *The Oath and Perjury in Ancient Greece* (Tallahassee 1970) 3.

[31] Kamerbeek (above n. 1) 256–257.

purpose of Heracles' earlier vow are occluded by Lichas' dissimulation, yet its relation to the capture of Iole is unquestionable. Perhaps there is no better evidence of Heracles' undeveloped social capacity than the fact that he uses that earlier oath to commit himself to violence and rape. Now, thanks to another oath, Iole will be passed from hand to hand once again, but the arrangement is a marriage, not a rape. Oaths are certainly not exempt from violent consequences, but the oath of Hyllus to his father suggests a more civilized counterpoint to Heracles' former vow to commit an act of savagery.

The second oath in the play is the false one sworn by Lichas to Deianeira who requests τὸ πιστὸν τῆς ἀληθείας (398) regarding Iole's identity. Lichas swears in the name of Zeus (399) that he will answer honestly, and then proceeds to lie. The deceptive herald meets a gruesome ending when Heracles bashes his head against a rock: punishment perhaps for taking the name of Zeus in vain.[32] Later Deianeira lies about having made a vow (610) to present a new robe for Heracles if he returned.[33] The suggestion that the poisoned robe is the fulfillment of a vow helps to connect the gift-giving and oath taking scenes; this connection is strengthened visually by the gestures which accompany them. The similarities between these two significant actions accentuate the differences between them. The exchange between Deianeira and her husband is performed entirely through an intermediary; husband and wife never touch hands, much less actually meet in person. Furthermore, Deianeira is not being straightforward about the significance of the deeds of her hands, while Heracles is quite open about what his exchange with Hyllus will accomplish.

It is true that Hyllus takes a blind oath "to accomplish the deed spoken" by Heracles, without knowing what that deed might be, but his father informs him immediately of what he must do.[34] First he must

[32] That Hyllus employed his oath to protect Deianeira is of little consquence; he has commited an act of perjury nonetheless. He suffers a penalty (a smashed head) similar to the curse named in the oath between Greeks and Trojans who ask that the brains of any perjurer be poured out like wine (*Il.* 3.300) The connection between Lichas' perjury and his almost immediate death is of course only implicit, but such an implication is not unique. Compare D. Kovacs, "Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*," *AJP* 114 (1993) 45–70 on the punishment of Jason for breaking his oaths to Medea.

[33] Deianeira uses ηὔγμην (620), which suggests "vow" here. Strictly speaking a vow is different from an oath in that it is a contract exclusively between a mortal and a god. Yet earlier Heracles' vow to sack Oechalia (εὐχαῖς, as described by Lichas in 240) is then termed an oath (ὅρκον ... διώμοσεν, 255).

[34] Granted, this blind oath will obligate Hyllus to an unwelcome marriage. Nevertheless the consquences of this marriage are the creation of an aristocratic household and illustrious dynasty. Compared to the blind oaths tendered by

lift the body of his father with his own hands (αὐτόχειρα, 1194), although Heracles allows him to elude pollution by avoiding the pyre (1214). Thus the tortured confusion of Heracles' death is put into a ritualized format beginning with an *ekphora* and culminating in an etiological rite.[35] The second term of the oath, the "little favour," as Heracles puts it, is that Hyllus take Iole as his bride, an idea that Hyllus finds as repugnant initially as most modern commentators do. To Victoria Wohl, for instance, this is the Oedipal moment in which Hyllus' position in the patrilineal succession is authorized by the exchange of a woman.[36] To an audience accustomed to arranged marriages between parties who may never have seen each other, the union of Hyllus and Iole might be less offensive. At any rate Hyllus does acquiesce. Rush Rehm is among the critics who consider this arrangement as a salutary perpetuation of the *oikos*: "The co-operative nature of the funeral rites and the promise of a new wedding give the play a sense of ritual closure."[37]

Yet past events have not been engendered by ritual: the text has specified that the unions of men and women were feats of conquest.

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women in Greek tragedy, which have quite the opposite effect, this is a wholesome outcome. Medea gets Aegeus to swear an oath which guarantees her safe haven after killing Jason's wife and children. Hippolytus' unwitting oath to the Nurse prevents him from defending himself against Phaedra's allegation and incurs his own death. In both cases women tender oaths which contribute to the diminution of the patriarchal family, rather than its continuance. Also relevant are the oaths between Medea and Jason which occur before the dramatic action, but are mentioned throughout the play. Like Jason, Hyllus is bound to a woman by an oath, but the important difference here is that while Medea, a woman, negotiates the contract with Jason without any male intermediary, the transfer of Iole is strictly a contract between two men. See the excellent discussion in Ormand (above, n. 21) 37–59 of this aspect of Heracles' character in this play: women are merely tokens of exchange in his (mostly) agonistic dealings with other men.

[35] R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death* (Princeton 1994) 80 suggests that Heracles' last moments in the theatre resemble the prothesis or laying out of the corpse, while the exodus becomes a type of *ekphora*. See P. Holt, "The end of the *Trachiniae* and the fate of Herakles," *JHS* 59 (1989) 69–80 for strong arguments that the ending of the play suggests the apotheosis of Heracles. He denies, however (against Rehm), that any indication of funerary rites are present, nor does Heracles make any provisions for the disposal of his bodily remains in his instructions to Hyllus. Instead Heracles is instituting a ritual and he "brings religious order out of the disorder of his pain and rage" (76).

[36] Wohl (above, n. 16) 490.

[37] Rehm (above, n. 25) 82–83; cf. Musurillo (above, n. 8) 75, "a certain equilibrium is foreshadowed and, to an extent, achieved."

This combative history is now ameliorated by the ritual gesture of the oath; hands accomplish similar ends by means of ritual as they did by violence, but through fructifying and rational methods. The oath seems to represent a development towards the health of the family and society, while it involves a physical contact and intimacy that has been absent from the play thus far. The hands of Deianeira sent her deceptive gift through Lichas; she and Heracles never meet or touch. In contrast, Heracles and Hyllus clasp hands in a gesture that signifies trust and concord. Property (i.e. Iole) is exchanged in a manner that must have seemed civilized and rational to an ancient audience. The mighty hands of Heracles can no longer perform the feats of athleticism of former times, but they still exercise a certain power over present and future events. It is not the physical strength of hands, but rather their power as an agent of a civilized institution, the handclasp of the oath, which takes precedence now. Hyllus makes a decision about his future with more knowledge and insight than either his father or his mother, although he understands the capriciousness of the gods. "There is nothing here that is not Zeus," he announces in his final line (1278): Zeus has directed the strange course of events leading to Heracles' death and as the god of oaths he ensures that the name of Heracles will survive.

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