

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Women of Trachis*** Disputed: between 450-430 B.C.E.

Sophocles

### **Story**

The play opens with Deianira, the wife of Herakles, bemoaning her marital situation. Her husband has been gone for a long time, and she feels pained by his neglect of her and their family. This is the Herakles who is always off on some adventure or labor; finally, the servant of Deianira suggests that she should send someone to find out where her husband is. No sooner does her son, Hyllus, start off on this mission, than a messenger arrives, announcing that Herakles is on his way home. Lichas, the messenger of Herakles, comes back next, leading a group of captives whom, according to report, Heracles has taken while besieging a city in Euboea against which he has a particular grudge. It takes the audience some time to realize that Herakles has brought back his girlfriend, Iole; and that she is the reason for his passionate interest in the current military campaign.

The remainder of the play involves the efforts of Deianira to win some kind of revenge for her husband's very painful betrayal of her. She recalls a traumatic experience of her own youth, when the Centaur Nessus tried to rape her on a ferry crossing, but, having failed to do so, receives a poisoned arrow shot by her lover Herakles; Nessus dies leaving Deianira with a prediction; that the arrow which killed the centaur contained a love potion which would enable Deianira to win Herakles' love at any time. Working on that memory and eager above all to keep the love of her husband, Deianira takes a fateful decision, to send her son Hyllus to look for Herakles, and to present to Herakles a robe soaked in the charm given her by the evil Nessus. But Deianira's quest to be avenged is doomed, for the love potion robe, which Hyllus takes to his father, turns out to be an inflammatory garment, which begins to burn Herakles—and which by play's end will have brought him to a desperate burned condition. (Nessus had deceived Deianira, for as he died, poisoned by Herakles' arrow, Nessus had concealed the lethal nature of the weapon that had killed him.) By the time Deianira becomes aware, of the fatal incendiary poison, which she has sent to her husband, she commences to kill herself, and the playwright continues to burn Herakles to death, on a vast funeral pyre which gives him his escape from life.

### **Themes**

**Death.** By the play's end Deianira and Herakles are dead, the former by suicide, as she realizes the fatal mistake she has made, in sending the poisoned robe to Herakles; and Herakles is about to be dead from the funeral pyre he makes his son Hyllus set for him.

**Jealousy.** It is Deianira's jealousy of Herakles that initiates the chain of agonies that entrap both Herakles and herself. Unable to bear the idea of the intrusion of Iole into her life, Deianira sends Herakles what she takes to be a love charm, which will permanently hold his love. (And kill him.)

**Evil.** One outstandingly evil figure grounds the series of horrors which punctuate this play. That figure is Nessus, who takes revenge on Deianira after he has unsuccessfully failed to rape her, as he ferries her across the river. As he dies, Nessus assures Deianira that the blood forming around his wounds, from the arrow with which Herakles kills him, will in future serve as a love potion, to retain Herakles' love. This is an evil deception.

### **Characters**

Deianira,      wife of Herakles  
Nurse  
Hyllus,        son of Deianira and Herakles

Chorus, women of Trachis  
Messenger  
Lichas, herald of Herakles  
Captive women of Oechalia including Iole (silent parts)  
Old Man, perhaps a doctor  
Herakles

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Deianira.** Deianira is the main character. It is her jealousy, of her long absent husband Herakles, that awakens when she learns that Herakles is returning from war with a girlfriend; and it is her jealousy that leads her to send her returning husband a poison-soaked robe which gradually burns up his body. Nonetheless Deianira is far from an evil woman. Think what Euripides' Medea would have done to Herakles, as he returned with another woman. Instead of jumping to bloodshed, Deianira chooses the benign vengeance of what she considers to be a love potion, but which, thanks to Nessus, turns out to be an incendiary to burn up his body.

**Shock.** When Deianira learns from the messenger that Herakles is returning home with a concubine in tow, she is hurt and shocked, but her reaction is to make every effort she can to retain Herakles' love.

**Despair.** Deianira despairs when she reflects that she is losing her beauty and youth just as Iole, the epitome of sex appeal, is coming into her household.

**Horror.** When Deianira learns from her son that she has mistakenly killed, rather than protecting, her husband, she is overwhelmed with horror. She had never realized what a death rite the dying centaur Nessus had burdened her with.

**Suicide.** When she realizes how deeply she has lost her man and her self-esteem, Deianira has no other recourse than to kill herself, as Sophocles' Ajax had done. In both plays does suicide solve a problem, have no effect on the problem, or prove valueless?

**Parallels.** One gets the sense that, for the spectator of ancient Greek tragedy, the characters constituent of that literary body—a body of some thirty five plus remaining plays—are a distinctive vocabulary of gender styles, emotional repertoires, and speech peculiarities; and that the theater habitue of the time would in time grow skilled at noting intra-theatrical character parallels and their distinctive traits. Look at the fine nuances linking the Herakles of *Women of Trachis*, to the Herakles of Euripides' *Alkestis*; or Deianira to the Clytemnestra of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, two ladies indescribably angry with their spouses; or Euripides' Medea to Sophocles' Electra, steely women on the warpath, but how different in setting and anxiety. Parallels like these three abound in the thematic intra-structure of ancient Greek characterology.

## Discussion questions

What do you see as the point of the play? Is there heroic moral action? Significant bravery? Have any moral choices been made?

Why is Herakles so insistent that Hyllus should marry Iole? Is it a way that the hero can soothe his conscience? Is Herakles unsure of his sexual powers? After he has lost Deianira he refers to himself as a woman. Is it that in losing his wife he fears that he has lost himself?