



Alagkiozidou, S. (2012) 'Female power in *Trachiniae* and in *Hercules Oetaeus*: Women of fear and women of anger'.

Rosetta **12**: 154-158.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_12/alagkiozidou.pdf

Female power in *Trachiniae* and in *Hercules Oetaeus*: Women of fear and women of anger

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LONGER SUMMARY

This paper explores the way female social and political power is perceived and represented in *Trachiniae* and in *Hercules Oetaeus*. This study attempts a comparative study of the main female characters, i.e. Deianira, Iole and Alcmene, to highlight crucial analogies and differentiations.

The main argument used in this paper is that the traditional critical approach that regards Sophocles' depiction of femininity as more gentle and sympathetic in comparison with Seneca's or Pseudoseneca's depiction does not take into consideration important aspects of the female characters.¹ We try to show that the representation of femininity in *Hercules Oetaeus* is more vigorous, assertive and influential in shaping the political and religious establishment. In this way women in *Hercules Oetaeus*, in comparison with *Trachiniae*, reveal the reinforcement of female social and political power.

A further argument is that there is a clear distinction between the dominant female emotions represented in these plays. In *Trachiniae*, the dominant female emotion is fear, whereas in *Hercules Oetaeus* it is anger. Based on this fundamental antithesis, we try to reveal how and why the female portraiture in *Trachiniae* reflects a more suppressed, neglected and less powerful type of femininity than in *Hercules Oetaeus*.

Deianira in *Trachiniae* has aggressive feelings, which are repressed to suit the social norms of obedience and self-restriction. The word *kakē*, which is used by Deianira to denote two different meanings, moral decline and social

¹ The issue of the authenticity of Seneca's or Pseudoseneca's depiction is not addressed in this paper.

decline, indicates the social framework of her morality. Deianira's emotional repression is part of the female nobility she represents. The only emotion of Deianira's that is not repressed at all is fear and, in its extreme manifestation, agony. The feeling of anxiety marks Deianira's character throughout the play and it is evident in her frequent introspective monologues. Seneca's or Pseudoseneca's Deianira is the exact opposite. In Seneca her anger is explosive, its analysis and depiction exhaustive and displayed for its own sake. Deianira's anger in *Hercules Oetaeus*, if regarded in the perspective of gender dynamics, discloses a more vigorous and assertive role for women. Deianira radically challenges Herakles' heroism and by extension the male model of heroism. The dispute of male heroism is further intensified by Iole. Iole speaks in *Hercules Oetaeus* and describes the horror and the pain, the devastating results of Herakles' action. This is in stark contrast with Iole's role in *Trachiniae* where she is a mute presence. In this way, the relationship between female and male is far more equal in *Hercules Oetaeus* than in *Trachiniae*.

Another important hint for Deianira's political role is the character that Herakles' imminent death assumes. In *Trachiniae*, Deianira regards the loss of Herakles as a private loss, whereas in *Hercules Oetaeus* she regards it as a public loss, more specifically as a public crime against all nations. It becomes obvious that Deianira's crime is politicized in *Hercules Oetaeus*. Furthermore, the spatial limits of Deianira's action are totally different in *Trachiniae* and in *Hercules Oetaeus*. This spatial differentiation has clear political value. Deianira in *Trachiniae* is not only limited to the *oikos*, she is absorbed by it. The *oikos* does not merely signify her physical surroundings or her emotional attachment to these surroundings. The *oikos* determines her ideological, moral and political identity. On the other hand, Herakles' action, agony and imminent death unfold outside the *oikos*. This antithesis between inner and outer space corresponds to the antithesis between female and male. It assumes clear political character and defines the limits of socio-political activity for both sexes. In *Hercules Oetaeus*, this antithesis is less intense. Deianira is not absorbed by the *oikos*. She addresses the nations and creates the impression that her actions and the credit or discredit because of

them have universal impact, exactly like the political role of Herakles in the play. She appears as a universally influential female figure, not to the same extent as Herakles, but in the same way.

In both plays Deianira wants to secure the privileges of her social status, of her quality as Herakles' wife. Marriage is regarded more as an extremely important constitution, the dominant element of the female social identity, rather than as an emotional union. The termination of the marriage signifies the dissolution of the female social identity. Similarly, motherhood as biological and socio-political link, precondition for the preservation of lineage and of political continuity, is honoured in both plays. In this respect, motherhood could be considered as another type of female political involvement. Therefore the reason for the distinctive emphasis given to motherhood in *Hercules Oetaeus* is the hereditary succession of political power in constitutions like Roman *imperium*.

Apart from Deianira, Alcmene is the main personification of motherhood in both plays. In *Trachiniae*, she is mentioned by Herakles after the realization through the coincidence of the oracles that the end of his life is approaching. Alcmene does not appear and Hyllus justifies her absence. Alcmene's absence is not coincidental or insignificant. It indicates the exclusion of the female from the process of establishing a new political order. Since Alcmene is absent, Hyllus is the only recipient of Herakles' orders about the preparations for his death and the marriage to Iole. Marriage is the foundation of the *oikos*, the principal political unit in *Trachiniae* and it secures the political continuity and the continuation of Herakles' lineage. There is no female interference in the establishment of this new political entity, which is the result of male initiative and implementation (Herakles' and Hyllus' respectively). On the other hand, Alcmene's presence in *Hercules Oetaeus* is decisive for the end of the play. She is the only spectator of Herakles' epiphany and she takes on the duty of spreading his cult throughout the world. This spreading of the cult is a religious and political mission, since Herakles' epiphany adds divine authority to the exertion of political power and the political constitution he personifies, the Roman *imperium*. In a sense, Alcmene's religious and political

role at the end of *Hercules Oetaeus* could be regarded as a new birth for Herakles, who obtains the status of absolute divine and political power.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, female characters in *Trachiniae* and in *Hercules Oetaeus* offer a new insight into the political meaning of these plays and especially the female socio-political role. In *Trachiniae*, fear is the dominant female emotion, whereas obedience and self-restriction are moral prerequisites for women. In *Hercules Oetaeus*, anger is the dominant female emotion and constitutes an open and explosive dispute of male heroism. Marriage is part of the female socio-political identity in both plays. In *Trachiniae* Deianira is physically and ideologically restricted to the *oikos*, whereas in *Hercules Oetaeus* her actions have universal political impact. In *Trachiniae*, there is no active female involvement in the establishment of the new political order at the end of the play, whereas in *Hercules Oetaeus* Alcmene's role is crucial in legitimizing Herakles' divine and political authority. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that female presence in *Hercules Oetaeus* is more socio-politically active and more influential than in *Trachiniae*. This conclusion challenges the traditional critical approach which disregards the political aspect in *Trachiniae* and in *Hercules Oetaeus* and which looks more favourably on Sophocles' Deianira rather than on her Roman counterpart.

METHODOLOGY

The research has been conducted based on the comparative study of both plays, Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and Seneca's or Pseudoseneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*, with close reading of the texts as well as use of the primary and secondary sources. The emphasis was given to the investigation and analysis of the emotions and reactions of the three main female figures in both plays, (Deianira, Iole and Alcmene), as indicators of the way the socio-political role of the feminine is expressed in each play. The basic argument is that the angry Deianira of Seneca versus the fearful Deianira of Sophocles is not only

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an emotional, but also a political antithesis. The purpose of the research is precisely to explore in detail the political connotations of this antithesis.