

## Classics / WAGS 38: Fourth Essay

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Length: 1250-1500 words

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Eavesdropping

## Wives and Sons

With Aristophanes and Euripides, our readings come exclusively from the war years (431-404 BCE) and look more closely at ordinary life than is the case with Aeschylus and Sophocles. The heroic ideals of earlier in the century – the Marathon-fighters, Pericles – no longer hold things together. We had a full taste of this shift with Euripides' *Electra* (? 413 BCE) as a response to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In these years Sophocles seems similarly dispirited; e.g., his *Electra* offers scarcely more in the way of heroic characters.

Aristophanes and Euripides regularly use errant wives and sons to reflect this sense of social fragmentation (e.g., Medea, Phaedra, Hippolytus, Pheidippides). They also sometimes blur the boundaries between comedy and tragedy. *The Clouds* ends darkly, while *The Bacchae* has funny scenes, and the *Ion* ends happily. Aristophanes blames Euripides for betraying tragedy's high tone and moral uplift by bringing on stage kings in rags (e.g., King Telephus, whom Dikaiopolis imitates) and by creating a series of sensational "bad" women.

These useful generalizations naturally need to be handled with caution: Tragedy is always about things coming apart, so the war years mark at most a change in emphasis. Comedy and tragedy have been drawing on each other from the first; e.g., Aeschylus' over-the-top Furies owe much to comic choruses. Even in the pre-war plays of Sophocles, the father-son relationship seems fraught (Haemon with Creon; Ajax and Teucer with Telamon).

Still, there does seem to be pattern of plays where the strong Father/King/Hero no longer holds things together as he does in earlier tragedy (if only, like Ajax and Oedipus, to bring the house down). Often in the war years the father-son link can be established only by adoption: Philoctetes-Neoptolemus, Oedipus-Theseus, Xuthus-Ion, and the unseemly case of Paedagogus-Orestes. And when “saviors” exist – males who can win wars or redeem cities – their anger can be more of an issue than their powers: Philoctetes, the aged Oedipus, Theseus in the *Hippolytus*, Dionysus.

The following topics propose various match-ups among the plays of late century. They also give you the option of interpreting on your own Sophocles’ *Trachinian Women*, the one tragedy we haven’t read (in *Sophocles II*). Please feel free to propose other topics.

## **I. *Oikos* and *polis*: *Lysistrata* and *The Trojan Women***

Written within four years of each other, Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and Euripides’ *Trojan Women* stage related, but in ways polar, visions of a *polis* that comes to be led by or embodied by female groups who find themselves outside the *oikos* and who bring to bear a gendered perspective on war. At this time Euripides and Aristophanes probably hold roughly similar views of the war and its consequences. In the modern era both plays continue to be produced as classics of “anti-war” literature.

**► What realities about the spheres of *polis* and *oikos* have to be absent (or masked, or charmingly reversed) for Aristophanes to make comedy of the situation? How does Euripides give these realities fresh impact in *The Trojan Women*? That is, how does Aristophanes construct the fantasy of a peace-loving gynocracy, and how does Euripides take that dream apart?**

As on most questions of social structure, differing views of the gods may be an important dimension. Also, since the female characters in both plays uniformly wish for the restoration of conventional male-dominated *oikos* life, there may be little evidence that either playwright is launching a feminist challenge to the gender system. But, given the functions that males are reduced to in these two plays, it may be interesting to consider how the male playwrights have paved the way for such a challenge.

## **II. Athena and Dionysus: *Lysistrata* and *The Bacchae***

A variation on the preceding scheme would put the Acropolis-occupying women of *Lysistrata* into comparison with the Theban women’s celebration of Mountain Day (as maenads) in Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Zeus’s two experiments in single-parenting, Athena and Dionysus, serve as the respective patrons of these female groups that transgress the *polis* / *oikos* boundaries.

**► How does the different perspective on gender roles in the *Lysistrata* (with Athena as a central symbol) and in *The Bacchae* (Dionysus) explain the contrasting outcomes for**

### **Lysistrata's followers and the Theban women? (Be careful not to confuse the Theban women with Dionysus' chorus of Asiatic followers.)**

Recall that there is a tendency to line up the female / male dyad as nature / culture, body / mind, emotion / thought, night / day, and so on. On these issues see notes on *The Furies*. Or, in other words, how is the female equivalent (or not) to "nature" in each play?

### **III. Sexual violence: *The Women of Trachis* and *Ion***

Neither Deianira nor Creusa is in the category of the disloyal or "bad" woman, such as Clytemnestra and Medea, yet both revert to using drugs, as Medea does, when betrayed by their husbands. Both of them have suffered (or nearly suffered) sexual violence. However, they work respectively to a catastrophic and a happy ending.

**► Is it possible to make a case for why Creusa deserves her happy ending *more* than Deianira does (though no one would say that Deianira deserves her death)? Or, alternatively, are these two plays, if we take away the *Ion's deus ex machine*, largely the same story? Or does the *Ion* with its happy ending make Deianira's end seem even more poignant?**

Recall that in class I attempted to make a case for why Creusa might deserve (to Athenian male eyes) her happy outcome more than might Medea because of the latter's disloyalty to her father and brother and her indulgence of her own desire. This is a tough exercise: Deciding the relative culpability of an oppressed group (e.g., which slave most deserves to be whipped) is unsettling, but it forces clarity about the values embedded in the tragedies without the easy piety of just pitying all the sufferers.

### **IV. Comedy and Tragedy: *The Acharnians* and *The Bacchae***

Comedy relies on the plot of the plucky underdog who turns the tables on frauds, bullies, perverts, and tyrants. (Strepsiades in *The Clouds* is an inept version of such an underdog.) The city is better off when he succeeds. Dionysus in *The Bacchae* is also a trickster and, like Dikaiopolis, is in tune with the life force and something of a party animal.

**► Taking *The Acharnians* as a norm, how does *The Bacchae* incorporate the elements of comedy, before turning to black comedy?**

### **V. The Generation Gap: *The Clouds* and *The Bacchae***

The *agōn* of Right and Wrong in *The Clouds* demonstrates how sharp was the conflict of old and new in religion, thought, art, and morals. The chorus of *Clouds* turns out not to be neutral in this conflict.

**► Using *The Clouds* as a model of the generation gap in late-5<sup>th</sup>-century Athens,**  
Classics / WAGS 38: Fourth Essay (Dec. 19, 2009)

consider how the advent of Dionysus and his cult in *The Bacchae* reveal and exacerbate similar tensions in mythic Thebes. Is the winning side in *The Bacchae* old or new?

## VI. Fathers and Sons: *Hippolytus* and *The Women of Trachis*

In *Iliad* 24 we encountered the funereal father-son scene as a way to end an heroic tale as Priam and Achilles, playing father and son to each other, respectively lament an absent son (Hector) and an absent father (Peleus). In that scene the father-son relationship has the power to efface the difference between Achaeans and Trojans and to frame the *Iliad*'s concluding reflections on the mortal condition.

The *Hippolytus* and *The Women of Troy* both end with death-bed scenes where a son reaffirms his loyalty to dad despite the disruption caused by a wife/(step)mother. Both dads have to come to terms at the same time with the legacy of their own fathers (gods, as it happens). But we're not in Ilium anymore, Toto!

► **Considering the larger pattern of father-son relations in the plays, discuss how these conclusions represent the father-son relationship. *Iliad* 24 puts the father-son relationship at the center of its value system; what are Euripides and Sophocles saying with these play endings?**

Keep in mind my opening generalizations (above) about how subversive Euripides is taken to be, as well as about how treacherous that assumption can be. A basic question, obviously, is the price paid by Hippolytus, Hyllus, Theseus, and Heracles to be sons of their heroic or divine fathers.

## VII. Good Wife / Bad Wife: *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Alcestis*

► **Is Phaedra closer to Alcestis (the best of wives) or to Medea (a worst case)?**

Try to determine what criteria seem to be important to Euripides. All three are married to losers, but do not get distracted into sorting out degrees and kinds of loseriness. What kinds of interactions can a proper woman have on stage (i.e., in what kinds of scenes can she play), and what scenes set off alarm bells (killing her kids, obviously, but before that)?

(This topic is not as easy as it looks. In being restricted to three Euripidean women, the comparison involves less of stretch than the two-author comparisons, but you've got to be astute about the evidence to make a compelling argument.)

## VIII. Silence and Cries: *The Women of Trachis*

The *Hippolytus* is a study in failed communication, in which Phaedra, Hippolytus, and Theseus all play major scenes by refusing to talk; the dead Phaedra gives more persuasive

testimony than the living Hippolytus; and of the three principals, only father and son play a scene on stage with each other, while gossip and eavesdropping drive the plot. Hippolytus sacrifices his life by keeping his oath to Phaedra and by *not* divulging what she has said to him. The play seems to deviate from or at least complicate the general expectation that verbal self-control is a masculine imperative, while verbal incontinence is gendered as female (though always with exceptions).

► **Analyzing the patterns of silence and miscommunication in *The Women of Trachis*, consider how the patterns of verbal control dramatize the disintegration of familial and other gender roles in the play.**

## **IX. The Ephebe:** *Ion* and *The Women of Trachis*

Tragedy presents a large repertory of youths who manage and do not manage to mature: Orestes (we have seen three versions at various levels of credibility), Neoptolemus, Haemon, and Hippolytus.

Ion and Hyllus are two cases of rapid maturation; both will found dynasties.

► **Trace the maturation of Ion and Hyllus in the plays. What do they have to achieve and endure to secure status as mature males? How do they get around the problems of the sheltering mother and the rivalrous father?**

## **Sophocles, *The Trachiniae*** (430-420 BCE?)

### **Prologue** (1-93):

Deianira recalls the fearfulness of her life ever since she was courted by the river Achelous, whom Heracles vanquished. She is worried that Heracles, gone for 15 months, is overdue. The Nurse suggests that Deianira dispatch their son Hyllus, who arrives with the news that Heracles is besieging Eurytus' town, Oechalia. Deianira cites a prophecy that this attack would either mark the end of his life or the final threat to his safety.

### **Parodos** (94-140):

Young women of Trachis enter, not having heard Hyllus' news. They ask the sun where Heracles is and describe Deianira's sorrow. Heracles' fortunes vary, but the gods always help him in the end. They bid Deianira not to despair, since Zeus gives mixed fortunes to everyone. Fortunes vary like the circling stars and the alternations of day and night.

These kind, hopeful, and obviously inexperienced maidens are the "before" of which Deianira laments being the "after." The number of cycles in her own life has its own problems: maidenhood (+), Achelous (-), rescue by Heracles (+), Heracles' absence (-), Hyllus' news that Heracles is in Euboea (+), Deianira's memory of the prophecy that the siege of Oechalia will be a watershed in Heracles' life (+ or -?).

### **Episode 1 (141-496):**

Deianira contrasts her anxieties as a wife with the peace and freedom of maidenhood. She explains Heracles' instructions when he departed 15 months before. The make-or-break time of crisis has arrived. The Messenger arrives to announce that the herald Lichas has arrived in Trachis and is reporting Heracles' triumph. In a brief, astrophic choral song (205-224) the Trachiniae react with jubilation. Lichas arrives with the captured women, including the silent Iole. Lichas gives a convoluted account of why Heracles besieged Oechalia. Deianira reacts with joy, but pities the captive women, especially the noble Iole.

Lichas and the captives begin to leave the stage. The Messenger blocks Deianira's departure and tells her that he heard Lichas announce in Trachis that Heracles besieged the city for Iole, who is his concubine. When Lichas returns, the Messenger confronts him, and Deianira forces the truth from Lichas.

Like the *Agamemnon* (and the *Odyssey*), this is a *nostos* (return) narrative. The anxious household awaits the returning hero, whose return marks a perilous passage (as Odysseus well understands). As in the *Agamemnon* the official triumph is undercut by messengers with other angles on the story and with the human booty (Iole [cf. Cassandra] and the other captive women—a visual contrast to the jubilant Trachinian maidens). When the Messenger blocks Deianira's departure, a scene that seemed to be ending does not end and indeed erupts into a complex three-way confrontation.

The chorus' reflection on time and season as the engines of change give way to Deianira's reflections on *eros*. ***Given her traumatic experience (e.g., with Achelous, very close to a rape narrative), why should Deianira take pains to be non-judgmental about Heracles' passions?***

***Contrast Deianira's encounter with Iole to that of Clytemnestra with Cassandra in the Agamemnon.***

### **Stasimon 1 (497-530):**

The maidens reflect on the power of Aphrodite ("the Cyprian Goddess"), who has tricked Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon. They recall the bout of Heracles and Achelous (as bull) for Deianira, with Aphrodite as referee. Deianira waited lonely and pitiable to be the prize for the victor.

Deianira earlier cited this struggle, which she could not bear to watch (21-23). Far more than referee, Aphrodite is the victor.

***How different are Heracles and Achelous as they struggle?***

### **Episode 2 (531-632):**

Deianira returns with a gift for Heracles, but now explains to the chorus that she cannot bear to yield place to Iole. To win Heracles' love back, she has applied to the robe a love charm, namely, blood from the centaur Nessus, who explained its powers as he was dying from the arrow that Heracles had dipped in the bile of the Hydra. Deianira gives the robe to Lichas to deliver to Heracles

The various stages of the narrative merit some sorting out:

- 1) Among his other labors, Heracles vanquished the Hydra and appropriated its power (bile/poison). Arrows, like serpents, "bite."

- 2) Having won Deianira from Achelous, Heracles rescued her from Nessus.  
(Once Deianira was in the position of Iole, being fought over, causing destruction).
- 3) Nessus designed to use his blood to poison Heracles.  
(Like Achilles and Hector, both Heracles and the Centaur end up dying from the victor's triumph.)
- 4) Heracles dies of the Hydra's bile, via Nessus' blood, via Deianira's trick (i.e., through a series of Heracles' own victims).

***Apart from being fatally attractive to them, what is Deianira's relationship to monsters?***

**Stasimon 2 (633-662):**

The maidens look forward to Heracles' return but also resume the theme of Deianira's lonely waiting. They hopefully imagine the effect of the love charm on Heracles.

**Episode 3 (663-820):**

With alarm Deianira reports evidence that the charm may be a poison. Hyllus arrives with the news that Heracles is in agony and curses Deianira as a murderer. Deianira leaves the stage in silence.

Hyllus enters with three wishes: that Deianira (1) die, (2) not be his mother, (3) be other than she is (i.e., not guilty). Only (1) can be realized, and she has just vowed it (719-722).

***As the maidens ask (813-814), why does Deianira depart in silence?***

Eurydice makes a silent, but rapid, departure in *Antigone* (1244-1245), which is noted only afterward. In *Oedipus the King* (1073-1075), the elders draw attention to Jocasta's departure only after she has rushed from the stage.

**Stasimon 3 (821-862):**

The chorus sees the catastrophe as fulfillment of the oracle that Heracles would find the end (*telos*) of his labors at the end of 12 years. Heracles has been done in by: the centaur, the Hydra, the unwitting Deianira trying to protect her household, the "fatal bride" Iole, and Aphrodite.

Heracles has brought a bride whose child is a Fury (893-895); earlier the maidens expected him to return like a bridegroom (205-207). (On the bright side, the play will end with an arranged marriage.)

**Episode 4 (863-946):**

A cry is heard from inside the house. The Nurse reports that Deianira is dead, to which the maidens sing their shocked reaction. The Nurse narrates the suicide.

***Why does Deianira, like Ajax and other warriors, use a sword?*** Antigone and Phaedra (Euripides, *Hippolytus*) hang themselves, though Eurydice uses a sword.

**Stasimon 4 (947-970):**

The maidens sing a lament for Deianira and Heracles, but then express their desire to avoid seeing the tormented Heracles. They comment on the procession as Heracles is brought in

upon a litter. They do not know if Heracles is sleeping or dead.

**Exodos (971-1278):**

As Heracles is carried in, Hyllus cries out in horror. The Old Man who accompanies Heracles tries to quiet Hyllus. Waking up, Heracles in lyrics asks where he is, begs for death, and commands Hyllus to kill him. In iambs Heracles gives a long speech (1046-1111) about his agony, his anger at Deianira, his desire for revenge, and his desire for death. He contrasts the glory days of his labors with his current agony. Hyllus tells Heracles that Deianira is dead and that the poison was intended as a love charm. Heracles extracts an oath from Hyllus to burn his body without mourning on Mt. Oeta and to marry Iole. Hyllus conducts the body out with bitter reflections about the cruelty of the gods.

This is an earlier version of something like the contact of Neoptolemus with the afflicted Philoctetes as narrated in the *Philoctetes*. ***If Heracles has issues with his father (Zeus), what issues could Hyllus have with dad? How do father and son receive the pathos of Deianira's death? Why is the chorus silent? Hyllus gives a textbook definition of "tragic heroine":*** "In all that she did wrong she had intended good" (1136).

The protagonist would play both Deianira and Heracles. The play therefore has an obvious star, even though the question of who the "hero" of the tragedy might be (Deianira or Heracles?) is, as often, fruitless. ***What is the dramatic gain in having husband and wife never meet?***

The sacrifice that Heracles would have celebrated at his homecoming turns out to be himself, on Mt. Oeta (shades of *Agamemnon*). Heracles reproves himself for weeping like a girl (*parthenos*, 1072) and being reduced in his misery to the state of a woman (1075); ***compare the accounts of lamenting maidens earlier in the play.***

That Heracles was deified at his death is a widespread tradition (assumed at the end of the *Philoctetes*) but not the topic here. In other contexts, Heracles was one of the boundary cases that establish the absoluteness of mortality. Recall that Achilles uses him to accept his own death: "Not even Heracles fled his death, for all his power, / favorite son as he was to Father Zeus the King. / Fate crushed him, and Hera's savage anger. (*Il.* 18.139-141, 18.117-119).



Heracles, Deianira, Nessus