

# Lichas' Lies and Sophoclean Innovation

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**W**HEN IN SOPHOCLES' *Trachiniae* Lichas arrives to explain to Deianeira Heracles' delayed homecoming, he does not speak the whole truth. He confirms the earlier messenger's report (180ff): Heracles is alive, victorious, and now busy sacrificing to Zeus. Then, in response to Deianeira's question about the delay (246f), he describes the events that led to Heracles' sack of Oechalia (248–90): Eurytus' abusive treatment and expulsion of Heracles from his house provoked Heracles' stealthy murder of Eurytus' son Iphitus; after Zeus punished Heracles for this murder by having him sold as a slave to the Lydian queen Omphale, Heracles fulfilled his vow of vengeance and sacked Oechalia, taking from it the band of women who accompany Lichas. One young woman among these attracts Deianeira's attention, but Lichas claims to know not even her name. No sooner does he exit into the house with his captives than the first messenger contradicts Lichas' account of Heracles' motive in sacking Oechalia: he did so on account of his passion for this very girl; love alone was his motive for the murder of Iphitus (351ff). In the next scene, interrogation by both the messenger and Deianeira forces Lichas to confess his lie: it was indeed Heracles' passion for Iole that led to the destruction of Oechalia (476–78).

Why does Sophocles present this lying tale only to reveal it almost at once as false? On the general function of this 'false tale discovered' scholars are agreed:<sup>1</sup> the audience is allowed to see Deianeira's reaction both to the news of Heracles' apparent success and to Iole *before* she learns this woman's identity and her relation to Heracles. Deianeira reacts at first with an immediate sympathy towards the young captive (307ff)—a sympathy soon lost when she realizes that this young woman actually threatens her married life with Heracles. The contrast between the initial impulse of pity and the harsh impact of truth is possible only through a deception. Still another function of the lie is thematic: nuances of truth and seeming, knowledge and igno-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin 1917) 142–45; K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, trans. H. Harvey and D. Harvey (Oxford 1979) 43f; A. Beck, "Der Empfang Ioles," *Hermes* 81 (1953) 10–21; G. Gellie, *Sophocles: a Reading* (Melbourne 1972) 61.

rance are explored throughout the play;<sup>2</sup> the deception of Deianeira plays a rôle in the larger structure of the drama and is balanced later when she herself dissembles in sending the poisoned robe to Heracles.

But while the general function of the initial deception-scene has found scholarly agreement, insufficient attention has been paid to the specific details of the lie and their dramatic purpose. Recently M. Davies<sup>3</sup> has argued quite plausibly that Lichas' tale does not derive from a different version of the story in earlier epic,<sup>4</sup> but is rather the poet's invention, elaborated with various motifs, to create for his particular dramatic purpose an account from which Iole is absent. But this argument still neglects a prominent element in Lichas' tale: Heracles' crafty murder of Iphitus and Zeus' resulting anger.<sup>5</sup> It is my intention here to examine Sophocles' adaptation of his sources for this portion of the speech, the rhetorical emphasis given to and within it, and its function in the drama as a whole.

At *Odyssey* 21.13ff we are told that Odysseus' bow was a gift from Iphitus, who, when looking for his horses, met his death at the hands of Heracles (27–29):

ὄς [Heracles] μιν ξεῖνον ἔοντα κατέκτανεν ᾧ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ,  
σχέτλιος, οὐδὲ θεῶν ὄπιν αἰδέσασ' οὐδὲ τράπεζαν,  
τὴν ἣν οἱ παρέθηκεν· ἔπειτα δὲ πέφνε καὶ αὐτόν. . . .

Homer presents Iphitus' murder as a crime against *ξενία*: Heracles killed Iphitus while the latter was a guest in his house, and did so without regard for the vengeance of the gods. The one other extant source prior to Sophocles' treatment is Pherecydes of Athens (*FGrHist* 3F82b), who seems to confirm this version of Iphitus' murder.<sup>6</sup> Pherecydes mentions that Heracles employed trickery in killing Iphitus (*μηχανῆ τιμὴ καὶ στρατηγία*), but no particular opprobrium is attached to the element of stealth. In fact the scholium that attributes the story to Pherecydes states: *λέγεται δὲ ὡς ἀγανακτήσας*

<sup>2</sup> On these themes see especially Reinhardt (*supra* n.1) 41–44; S. E. Lawrence, "The Dramatic Epistemology of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *Phoenix* 32 (1978) 288–304.

<sup>3</sup> "Lichas' Lying Tale: Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 260ff.," *CQ* N.S. 34 (1984) 480–83.

<sup>4</sup> As held, most notably, by Wilamowitz (*supra* n.1) 108–16.

<sup>5</sup> Davies (*supra* n.3) 482 n.20 simply asserts that Iphitus' murder was traditional; he does not comment on the unusual details of the murder and Zeus' anger. Wilamowitz (*supra* n.1: esp. 101–08) maintains that Sophocles was the first to bring Iphitus' murder and the year spent with Omphale into the story of the sack of Oechalia, but does not comment on the reasons for Zeus' anger. Lawrence (*supra* n.2) briefly considers their purpose, without discussing Sophocles' use of his sources or explaining what dramatic effect is served by the prominence of these elements within the tale.

<sup>6</sup> On the connection between 82b and 82a and the problems therein, see Jacoby's commentary *ad loc.*

ὁ Ζεὺς ἐπὶ τῇ ξυνοκτονίᾳ προσέταξεν Ἑρμῆ λαβόντα τὸν Ἡρακλέα πωλῆσαι δίκην τοῦ φόνου.<sup>7</sup> In both these accounts Heracles violates ξενία; and in the one case where Heracles employs craftiness, it is not this that causes Zeus' anger.

The murder of Iphitus is handled differently in Lichas' tale: here it is embedded in a complex narrative in which Lichas first relates Heracles' enslavement among the the Lydians (248–53) and the sack of Oechalia in revenge (254–60); this leads back to the origin of the strife with Eurytus and the murder of Iphitus (260–73). The narrative then returns to the opening topic, Heracles' servitude in Lydia, now explained as punishment from Zeus (274–80), and concludes with a brief description of the consequences of the sack of Oechalia (281–85) and a promise of Heracles' imminent return (285–90).<sup>8</sup> The narrative order has a certain logic. Deianeira has asked if sacking the city has kept Heracles away so long; Lichas first offers a corrective reply (“No, he spent most of his time in servitude”) and then proceeds to explain the aftermath of that servitude, the sacking of Oechalia, and finally the source of the quarrel. Having gone back to the origin, he now relates the tale straight through: quarrel, murder of Iphitus, punishment in Lydia, sack of Oechalia.

The emphasis in this narrative falls on the alleged source of the quarrel: Heracles' anger at Eurytus' outrageous treatment, the subsequent murder of Iphitus, and its punishment. Heracles' thwarted passion for Iole, the true cause of the city's destruction, is obscured by this central narrative,<sup>9</sup> while Zeus' rôle in these events is given prominence.<sup>10</sup> Lichas' tale focuses on the quarrel and its aftermath, Zeus' punishment of Heracles' stealthy murder of Iphitus. Zeus' rôle is emphasized also at the beginning of this rhesis, where we hear that behind Heracles' servitude stands Zeus (250–53):<sup>11</sup>

ἀλλ' ἐμποληθεῖς—τοῦ λόγου δ' οὐ χρὴ φθόνον,  
γύναι, προσεῖναι, Ζεὺς ὅτου πράκτωρ φανῆ—

<sup>7</sup> Σ M *ad* Hom. *Od.* 21.22. Jacoby (*supra* n.6) argues that this concluding sentence is wrongly attributed to Pherecydes. If so, it remains noteworthy that the use of stealth does not incur Zeus' anger.

<sup>8</sup> In my analysis of this speech I roughly follow P. E. Easterling, ed., *Sophocles: Trachiniae* (Cambridge 1982) 110.

<sup>9</sup> Note also that in this speech Lichas twice (249, 253) claims that Heracles himself vouches for part of the story, and at the end (285f) explains that Heracles sent forth the band of captive women. While distorting the reason for Heracles' sack of Oechalia, Lichas seeks credibility by reference to the man himself.

<sup>10</sup> As throughout the drama; see especially the rhetorical question of 139f, 'answered' in the play's closing dictum (1278): *κοῦδέν τούτων ὄ τι μὴ Ζεὺς.*

<sup>11</sup> I cite Easterling's text (*supra* n.8) throughout.

κείνος δὲ πραθεὶς Ὀμφάλῃ τῇ βαρβάρῳ  
ἐνιαυτὸν ἐξέπλησεν, ὡς αὐτὸς λέγει.

Later in the speech Lichas explains why Zeus caused the servitude of Heracles (274–80):

ἔργου δ' ἕκατι τοῦδε μηνίσας ἄναξ  
ὁ τῶν ἀπάντων Ζεὺς πατήρ Ὀλύμπιος  
πρατὸν νιν ἐξέπεμψεν, οὐδ' ἠνέσχετο,  
ὀθούνεκ' αὐτὸν μούνον ἀνθρώπων δόλῳ  
ἔκτεινεν· εἰ γὰρ ἐμφανῶς ἠμύνατο,  
Ζεὺς τᾶν συνέγνω ξὺν δίκῃ χειρουμένῳ·  
ὑβριν γὰρ οὐ στέργουσιν οὐδὲ δαίμονες.

Zeus was angered by Heracles' extraordinary use of stealth: this is strongly underscored by the phrase *μούνον ἀνθρώπων*; *δόλῳ* at verse-end position and the enjambed *ἔκτεινεν* are emphatic. The point is echoed in the following explanatory sentence: Zeus would have forgiven an open slaying of Iphitus. This section of the speech then concludes with a reinforcing sententia: *hybris* does not please the gods.<sup>12</sup> Zeus' rôle here reduces in part the disgrace of Heracles' servitude in Lydia,<sup>13</sup> but face-saving alone does not account for the emphasis given to Zeus' reason for anger. Sophocles does not, as Homer and Pherecydes had done, present Heracles' scandalous treatment of Iphitus as a violation of *ξενία* but instead transfers this outrageous treatment of a guest to Eurytus, Iphitus' father.<sup>14</sup> According to Lichas' tale (262–69), when Heracles was a *ξένος* in Eurytus' house, he was reviled, insulted, and even ejected from the house. With this version, Sophocles does more than have Lichas vilify Eurytus:<sup>15</sup> by removing the traditional account of Heracles' conduct, which centered on his disrespect for *ξενία*, he provides greater weight to the reason he does supply, the use of stealth (*ὀθούνεκ' αὐτὸν μούνον ἀνθρώπων δόλῳ / ἔκτεινεν*, 277f). The rhetorical emphasis of Lichas' speech thus underlines Sophocles' alteration of the story, drawing attention to this novel reason for Zeus' punishment of Heracles.

<sup>12</sup> This maxim, as some scholars have suggested (e.g. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*<sup>3</sup> [London 1961] 293), may have further application to Heracles, but in the present context its primary, if not exclusive, reference is to the wanton behavior of Iphitus' family.

<sup>13</sup> As observed, e.g., by R. C. Jebb, ed., *Sophocles: Trachiniae* (Cambridge 1892) ad 275; Easterling (*supra* n.8) ad 274f.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Davies (*supra* n.3) 482.

<sup>15</sup> Easterling (*supra* n.8) ad 262–69 notes that the language here “alienate[s] sympathy from Eurytos.”

Lichas is soon forced to own up to his deception: passion for Iole was in fact the reason for Heracles' attack on Oechalia. He also explains that the lie was his own, not enjoined by Heracles. Lichas is at least well-intentioned, and Heracles is not one, we are led to believe, who usually deals in deception. But these revelations suggest three related questions about Lichas' tale. Did the audience recognize his lie as he was telling it? What is the status of his tale after its exposure? What is the function of Zeus' novel reason for punishing Heracles for the murder of Iphitus?

There is no prior indication to the audience that Lichas' tale is false<sup>16</sup> (indeed, it is difficult to imagine how this could have been arranged in the play), nor is there anything in the report itself that clearly suggests the deception.<sup>17</sup> The difficult syntax in the central portion of the speech (262ff) has been taken as a sign of Lichas' attempt to conceal the truth.<sup>18</sup> But this brief obscurity may well represent a problem in the transmission;<sup>19</sup> and it should be noted that for most of the speech, including other parts of his lie, Lichas speaks quite lucidly. There is no reason to suppose that stage actions (Lichas' gestures, fidgeting on the part of the first messenger in response to Lichas' story) would indicate the deception to an audience:<sup>20</sup> no reference at all to such alleged stage business is made in or can be inferred from the text.<sup>21</sup> But one factor might have suggested to the audience that Lichas was not speaking the whole truth: their knowledge of the tradition. The issue of the audience's acquaintance with these tales and how this would affect their viewing of dramatic productions is notoriously hazardous. Within certain limits, poets constantly reshaped their inherited material; not every discrepancy with the traditional account rendered a character suspect as a liar. It is striking, however, that Iole is totally absent from Lichas' narrative, and this

<sup>16</sup> Unlike the situation in *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus Coloneus*, where earlier scenes prepare for the later deceptions; for the so-called *Trugrede* of Ajax there is also no advance notice.

<sup>17</sup> U. Parvalantza-Friedrich, *Täuschungsszenen in den Tragödien des Sophokles* (Berlin 1969) 27, observes that the speech does not contain any obvious irony or ambivalence that might indicate the speaker's duplicity.

<sup>18</sup> J. C. Kamerbeek, ed., *Sophocles: Trachiniae* (Leiden 1959) ad 262–80; Parvalantza-Friedrich (*supra* n.17) 27.

<sup>19</sup> For discussion of the problems of these lines and suggestions for improvements, see T. C. W. Stinton, "Notes on Greek Tragedy, I," *JHS* 96 (1976) 133f; R. Dawe, *Studies on the Text of Sophocles III* (Leiden 1978) 82f.

<sup>20</sup> As Parvalantza-Friedrich (*supra* n.17: 29, 80f) suggests; rightly dismissed by P. E. Easterling, *CR* n.s. 22 (1972) 21.

<sup>21</sup> The convention of the Attic stage in this regard is clear: significant actions are indicated in the text or can be inferred from it. The fullest demonstration of this point is O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1977).

absence may have piqued the curiosity of some in the audience.<sup>22</sup> It is also possible, but by no means necessary, that the novel reason for Zeus' anger was, in this environment, also suspect. To sum up: nothing in the speech clearly points to the falsehood; the characters and, it is safe to assume, the audience initially accept Lichas' story as true.

Once Lichas' lies are unmasked, what is the status of the circumstances surrounding Iphitus' murder and Zeus' anger? Not everything Lichas reports is false. The murder of Iphitus (38) and Heracles' servitude in Lydia (69ff, *cf.* 248ff), for example, are accepted in the drama without question. And although the messenger initially claims that Lichas spoke nothing *δίκης ἐς ὀρθόν* (346f), his subsequent explanation (351ff) shows that he is referring to the motivation ascribed to Heracles in sacking Oechalia, not to all the individual actions detailed in Lichas' speech. In his confession Lichas admits to nothing other than the lie about motive. The audience is asked to discount Iphitus' murder as a motivating factor in the sack of Eurytus' city, but not to ignore it completely. Precisely how this murder fits the 'truth' is not clear.<sup>23</sup> But the audience has no reason to discount the circumstances of the murder *per se*. As Winnington-Ingram has observed, "Just because he [Lichas] is (sometimes) a liar, it would be rash to disregard the impressive statement about Zeus that Sophocles puts into his mouth."<sup>24</sup> Especially so when the poet stresses it, and when it is unnecessary for the deception of Deianeira. Sophocles could just as easily have had Heracles kill Iphitus openly and the punishment result from Zeus' anger at the violation of *ξενία*, as in Pherecydes' account.<sup>25</sup>

We have already noted that scholars agree on the general purpose of the deception-scene: it allows the audience to see Deianeira's response to Heracles' victory and to Iole both before and after she learns the actual situation, and it supports the essential themes of knowledge and ignorance. But pre-existing versions of Iphitus' murder could have served these purposes equally well: these explanations, important as they are, do not account for Sophocles' innovation and its emphatic telling. Lichas' version of Heracles' murder of Iphitus serves in fact as

<sup>22</sup> Davies (*supra* n.3) 482f and Parvalantza-Friedrich (*supra* n.17) 28f, *e.g.*, entertain this possibility.

<sup>23</sup> R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) 332f, attempts to combine Lichas' original (in part) false tale and the later revelations; in his reconstruction of events accepted as true in the drama *after* Lichas' unmasking there is no need or reason to dismiss the details of Iphitus' murder as false.

<sup>24</sup> Winnington-Ingram (*supra* n.23) 213 n.26.

<sup>25</sup> That disrespect for *ξενία* has already been ascribed to Eurytus need not have deterred Sophocles from repeating it in this portion of the tale; in fact such a balance would have a certain appeal.

an exemplum for viewing Deianeira's decision to send the poisoned robe to Heracles.<sup>26</sup> This latter act of stealth is vital to the play, as the means of causing Heracles' death and, indirectly, Deianeira's own. The subterfuge that surrounds Deianeira's use of the philtre recalls the stealthy murder of Iphitus and invites the audience to evaluate the former from the perspective of the latter. The emphasis given to this part of Lichas' tale highlights its novelty; and in the corresponding secrecy of the love-philtre (κεκρυμμένον, 556) and, even more, Deianeira's use of it,<sup>27</sup> Sophocles' purpose becomes clear.

Even before we reach this point, however, the language describing Iole's introduction into the house serves as a bridge to Deianeira's description of her own plans. When Deianeira learns from the messenger about Heracles' passion for Iole, she refers to her as a *πημονήν . . . λαθραῖον* (376f); shortly thereafter the chorus curses the deception (383f):

ὄλουντο, μή τι πάντες οἱ κακοί, τὰ δὲ  
λαθραῖ' ὄς ἀσκεῖ μὴ πρέπονθ' αὐτῶ κακά.

This curse, with the enjambed *λαθραῖ'*, echoing *λαθραῖον* used of Iole only moments before, also looks forward to Deianeira's secret deed.<sup>28</sup> After her exchange with the messenger leads Deianeira to extract the truth from Lichas, she returns to the house to prepare gifts for Lichas to convey, along with her message, to Heracles.<sup>29</sup> As soon as she has prepared these gifts, Deianeira returns to explain in secret (*λάθρα*, 533) her use of the philtre. The scene then ends as it began, with a request for secrecy: Deianeira asks the chorus to be silent about her deeds (596f).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence (*supra* n.2), esp. 293, mentions the connection between Lichas' tale and Deianeira's action, but, as noted (*supra* n.5), does not discuss Sophocles' purposeful adaptation of his sources or the rhetorical emphasis in the narrative.

<sup>27</sup> The association of secrecy with Deianeira is a part of the larger pattern of the imagery of darkness and light in the play; see, e.g., C. P. Segal, "Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: Myth, Poetry, and Heroic Values," *YCS* 25 (1977) 141–46. T. F. Hoey, "Sun Symbolism in the Parodos of the *Trachiniae*," *Arethusa* 5 (1972) 146f, shows how Deianeira is linked with night in the play's first song.

<sup>28</sup> The verbal connections are noted by G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958) 232f.

<sup>29</sup> Her words at the end of the scene might suggest that her thoughts have already turned to anointing the robe with the philtre (494: ἄ τ' ἀντὶ δῶρων δῶρα χρῆ προσαρμόσαι). Deianeira later uses the same word (*ἀρμόσαιμι*, 687) to describe her application of the philtre. There might also be an ominous reference to the robe's effect on Heracles (see 767f); so F. H. M. Blaydes, ed., *Sophocles: Trachiniae* (London 1871) ad 768, and Jebb (*supra* n.13) ad 494ff.

<sup>30</sup> When she later recounts her use of the philtre she again employs a term of secrecy (*κρυφή*, 689). Note also that Heracles in his agony refers to her with the *hapax* *δολῶπις* (1050).

μόνον παρ' ὑμῶν εὖ στεγοίμεθ'· ὡς σκότῳ  
κἄν αἰσχροῖα πράσσης,<sup>31</sup> οὔποτ' αἰσχύνῃ πεσῆ.

The parallel between the past and present use of stealth rouses anxiety about the consequences of Deianeira's actions that is compounded by her own moral reservations, expressed both here and at the conclusion of her preceding *rhexis* (582–87).<sup>32</sup> For Deianeira's reservations, as the audience may now suspect and as subsequent action reveals, are well-founded. Heracles deliberately employed stealth in killing Iphitus; Deianeira's deception, however deliberate, has consequences she does not foresee: she becomes the unwitting murderer of her husband. In Hesiod (fr.25.17–25 M.-W.), the single unquestionably earlier account that treats this part of the Heracles saga, the anointed robe caused Heracles' death.<sup>33</sup> The audience is thus familiar with the potentially fatal effect of the robe, while Deianeira is ignorant of it. But in creating this irony Sophocles does more than rely on the audience's knowledge of the myth and on Deianeira's ominous misgivings about the philtre. Lichas' false tale serves in part to inform one's view of Deianeira's action. Stealth in that tale incurs the anger of Zeus, who figures so prominently throughout the drama. The depiction of Deianeira's actions in similar terms of secrecy leads to the expectation that her actions, too, will meet with disastrous results. The exemplum against stealth applies also to Lichas: it is he who stealthily leads Iole into Deianeira's house, and after he delivers the robe, the product of Deianeira's stealth, he is murdered by a pain-stricken Heracles.<sup>34</sup> But it applies most forcefully, of course, to

<sup>31</sup> In agreement with virtually all editors and critics, I construe *πράσσειν* transitively. The dissenting view is argued by C. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1951) 266 n.37; Kamerbeek (*supra* n.18) *ad loc.*; G. Ronnet, *Sophocle, poète tragique* (Paris 1969) 102; see the rebuttals by Kirkwood (*supra* n.28) 114 n.16 and Winnington-Ingram (*supra* n.23) 79 n.23.

<sup>32</sup> I am not suggesting that Deianeira is criminally guilty (on this issue see M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* [Oxford 1944] 127f, 147f; Whitman [*supra* n.31] 114), only that her uneasiness creates a special emphasis upon her deeds for the spectators, who have already heard Lichas' tale. Her action also causes alarm, as it ironically goes against the advice she solicits from the chorus in the brief stichomythy of 588–93; on this last point see F. Solmsen, "ἀλλ' εἰδέναι χρὴ δρῶσαν: The Meaning of Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 588–93," *AJP* 106 (1985) 490–96.

<sup>33</sup> This detail of the story is also assumed by Bacchyl. 16.23–35, but the date of this poem relative to that of *Trachiniae* is uncertain.

<sup>34</sup> This is noted also by C. P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1981) 72. There is a further irony, noted by Segal and others, that Lichas' lie, as elsewhere in Sophocles, contains certain elements of the truth. It is also noteworthy that the lying Lichas tells a tale in which deception plays a rôle. But, considering the main function of this lying tale, we cannot view this primarily as a reflection of Lichas' own mendacity.

Deianeira. Although she has heard Lichas' tale, she does not see the significance of Zeus' anger. The audience, on the other hand, has, as we have seen, good reason to recognize its import. Deianeira learns only when it is too late. The irony of late learning is central to this drama,<sup>35</sup> and by emphasizing the new reason for Zeus' anger in Lichas' tale, Sophocles creates an environment in which the audience can the more acutely perceive this tragic irony.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> On this theme in the play, see Whitman (*supra* n.31) 103–21; Lawrence (*supra* n.2).

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