

“NO MAN KNOWS HIS LUCK 'TIL HE'S DEAD”:
EZRA POUND'S *WOMEN OF TRACHIS*

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If one studies Pound's lifelong reading and analysis of ancient Greek poetry, it is evident that from the very beginning of his poetic career he had deep admiration for Homer and Sappho. As regards the Greek dramatists, however, it took him considerably more time to come to a certain appreciation. Pound saw in them a decline from Homer upon whom they were too dependent. He also claimed that the poetry of Greek tragedy was not of the same quality as lyric Greek poetry, because it had been made subservient to the dramatic action. This strong criticism, however, may have been partly guided by his dislike of existing translations, as his reference to the “unreadability” of the Greek dramatists in *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) makes clear: “There are, to the best of my knowledge, no translations of these plays that an awakened man can read without deadly boredom. Eliot's interment of Murray might have been the last word: ‘erected a barrier between Euripides and the reader more impassable than the greek language’” (GK 92).

Richard Ingber has claimed that several books by F. R. Earp, whom Pound called “the only man who knows any-

thing about Greek" (qtd in Davenport 33), furnished Pound with the kind of tool he needed to overcome his ignorance and negative opinion of Greek drama, and that they were partly responsible for his renewed interest in the Athenian tragedians (135). In several books published in the 1940s, such as *The Style of Sophocles* (1944) and *The Style of Aeschylus* (1948), Earp criticized many translators of Greek tragedy for having used a uniform style in rendering the playwrights, thereby failing to see how the dramatists varied their style throughout their career. His studies attempted to redress this by a careful and formal analysis of the styles of Greek drama, and to show the excellence of its poetry as poetry. Earp's work, then, may be a first major reason why Pound during his stay at St. Elizabeths Hospital translated, with the help of Rudd Fleming of the University of Maryland, two of Sophocles' plays, namely *Elektra* and *Women of Trachis*, which was published in full in the *Hudson Review* in the Winter issue of 1953-54.

A second major reason for these Sophoclean projects has been pointed out by, *inter alios*, Hugh Kenner and Wendy Stallard Flory, who claim that Pound saw in the sufferings of Elektra and Herakles echoes of his own situation. Flory has argued that

Elektra, humiliated, ill-treated, obsessively committed to righting a horrible injustice yet deprived of all power to act, speaks for [Pound] ... Elektra's situation is similar to Pound's own in that she herself has no freedom of action and must wait for someone from outside her own captivity to bring an end to her suffering and restore her to a position of honor. (174)

Pound also may have felt some affinity with Herakles, as the Greek hero after a life of fighting and struggling met with an unavoidable fate, a fate that seemed to be out of all proportion to the nature of his error. Moreover, the plot of Sophocles' tragedy may also have hit home (almost in a literal

sense) in its depiction of the fatal attempt of Deianeira to regain her husband Herakles' love after he has fallen in love with Iole, the daughter of the king of Oechalia, a city sacked by Herakles. Given this plot, one can surmise with Irvin Ehrenpreis that the play "reminded [Pound] of the occasion when he asked his own wife [Dorothy Shakespear] to share a home with his mistress [Olga Rudge]" (6).¹

In this article I want to focus on two other major reasons for Pound's work on the *Trachiniae*, namely his approach to the play as determined by his admiration for the Japanese Noh plays, and by his lifelong use of the tradition of Neoplatonism. (Given the length of this paper, I won't have time to go into Pound's translation as a translation, but I hope to address this matter in a forthcoming book in which I'll give a close textual, stylistic and metrical analysis.)²

In the 1950s, while Pound was rereading his treatment of Ernest Fenollosa's writings on the Japanese Noh theatre and his versions of these plays while preparing a new edition, he came to regard the *Trachiniae* as "the highest peak of Greek sensibility registered in any of the plays that have come down to us, and ... at the same time, nearest the original form of the God-Dance" (WT 23). This is a clear reference to his earlier discussion in *Noh Plays* (1916) about "the god dance" being "the central feature" of a Noh play (T 279). In his use of Fenollosa's notes on the Noh, Pound had embraced Fenollosa's recurrent references to Greek drama as a means to ease the understanding of what he believed to be its Asian counterpart. Following Fenollosa, Pound described a Noh play as an embodiment of "some primary human relation or emotion" which is always fixed "upon idea, not upon personality" (T 279). Pound believed that the unity of Noh plays "lies in the image," but he added that "they are built up about it as the Greek plays are built up about a single moral conviction" (T 247). This single image or single mood is enforced by the refined speech, the music and the stylised gestures. In this way the Noh as a still existing form of drama is "as primitive, as

intense, and almost as beautiful as the ancient Greek drama at Athens" (T 269).

Given his acceptance of Fenollosa's premise that both Greek tragedy and the Noh stem from festivals for the gods, Pound wanted to use the still viable Noh as the "*closest modern equivalent of the now defunct Athenian drama*" (Ingber 141) in order to convey the meaning and atmosphere of any Greek play. In his view, the *Trachiniae* was by far the closest in spirit to the Noh, and he therefore decided to translate Sophocles' play to see "how the Greek would measure up under similar or approximately similar treatment".³ This is why Pound dedicated his *Women of Trachis* to Kitasono Katue, one of the leaders of Japanese avant-garde poetry and a correspondent with Pound since the 1930s, in the hope that "he will use it on my dear old friend Miscio Ito, or take it to the Minoru [an ancient family of Noh actors] if they can be persuaded to add to their repertoire" (WT 23). Moreover, Pound included a number of directions for the use of the same instruments as employed in the performance of a Noh play.

Pound's interest in and high regard for the *Trachiniae* is noteworthy given the fact that in his own time this play was the least studied and admired of Sophocles' seven extant tragedies. It was perhaps not until the last quarter of the twentieth century that the *Trachiniae* would gain a more positive reputation. Readers and commentators of the play always seemed to have had considerable difficulties in appreciating its structure and plot. Furthermore, they also found the characterization of the play (with Herakles as a rather untypical hero) as well as its style hard to reconcile with the other plays by Sophocles.

For most of the commentators, the main difficulty of the *Trachiniae* resides in the fact that the play seems to fall into two halves, unlike the other Sophoclean tragedies in which readers have more readily found one central character about whose fortunes the entire play revolves, such as Oedipus,

Elektra and Philoctetes. Many have seen Deianeira as the central figure of the first half of the *Trachiniae*, and Herakles of the second, thus producing a fragmented play. The classicist D. L. Page, for example, noted that “the action of the play [is] disjointed, and the beauty of the play about Deianeira [is] tarnished by the incomprehensible appendix about Heracles” (qtd in Davies xviii). Yet if one does away with the notion of one leading figure in the *Trachiniae*, and looks for unity of theme, as Pound did in his Noh-like approach, one can focus on the play as a description of events leading up to the death of Herakles, and of all those involved. Then one can appreciate that the play’s unity seems to lie in the fact that the driving force behind the entire chain of events is the all-powerful *eros* or force of violent passion, personified in Aphrodite, who claims both Deianeira and Herakles as victims when they have destroyed themselves and each other under the influence of a passion overriding all judgment and common sense. Herakles sacked Oechalia out of lust for Iole, which in turn prompts Deianeira, afraid of losing Herakles, to send the robe smeared with the poison given her by Nessus when Herakles prevented him from satisfying his lust for Deianeira. At the end of the play, Herakles must suffer the consequences of all these different manifestations of *eros*. Such a unifying analysis of the play as dealing with irrational and uncontrollable forces and urges outside man’s rational control, in combination with Sophocles’ unromantic, even harsh treatment of sexual passion, would perhaps require more of a late-twentieth-century sensibility to be able to appreciate the specific qualities of this tragedy.⁴

The notion of Love as a force that overrides all reason very much appealed to Pound as his entire work may be said to be dominated by the struggle between egotistical, self-interested Love (or Lust) and selfless, altruistic Love. This struggle affects all human beings who throughout history in their confrontation with Love must, by a conscious *directio*

voluntatis, choose between Good and Evil. This could explain why Pound was attracted to the *Trachiniae*, because he would be able to relate to Sophocles' use of Aphrodite as the universal driving force behind all human actions and motives, while the contrast between divine knowledge and mortal ignorance, which is a central issue in all of Sophocles' works, is also a major key to *The Cantos*.

This Poundian interpretation may explain why Pound in his version of Sophocles emphasized the role of Aphrodite even more than in the original. We see this, for example, in his rendering of lines 851-61, the 2nd Antistrophe of the 3rd Choric Ode. Here Pound has given the stanza not only a form very distinct from the other three of this Stasimon, but he has also added a stage direction in which he used the term *dea ex machina* in a punning sense to underline how it was the machinery of Aphrodite that determined the course of events:

LET the tears flow.
 Ne'er had bright Herakles in his shining
Need of pity till now
 whom fell disease burns out.
How swift on Oechal's height
 to take a bride.
Black pointed shaft that shielded her in flight,
Attest
That
Kupris stood by and never said a word,
Who now flares here the contriver
manifest...
and indifferent.

[The dea ex machina, hidden behind a grey gauze in her niche, is lit up strongly so that the gauze is transparent. The apparition is fairly sudden, the fade-out slightly slower: the audience is almost in doubt that she has appeared.] (WT 54-55)

The apostrophe to the spear in the original is an implicit

address to the might of Herakles, of which the spear is the overt instrument that carried Iole to the palace. In his Loeb translation, used by Pound, F. Storr rendered these lines (856-61) as follows:

... O bloodstained spear that bore
 From proud Oechalia's height
 Stormed by the hero's might,
 A vanished bride, how clear
 The Cyprian wiles appear!
 Unseen, thy spear she steeled,
 And now she stands revealed. (325)

This is a rather free rendering of the original Greek which literally translated would read:

O black point of the defending spear,
 Which then brought back
 The swiftly running bride from the height
 Of Oechalia by its might!
 And the Cyprian as silent attendant clearly
 Is revealed as the doer of these things. (my trl)

In his version, Pound makes an even more explicit connection between this instrument and Aphrodite as its real agent. The graphic arrangement of Pound's version underscores the importance of the revelation, which then culminates in his stage direction. The use of the word "flares" rather than "revealed" may be seen as a reference to what will happen to Herakles on Mount Oeta at the end of the play: his death on the pyre is also a result of Aphrodite's action. This is also why Pound a few lines earlier emphasizes Herakles' association with light by rendering *agakleiton Hèrakleous*, "the glorious Herakles," as "bright Herakles in his shining."

Given the fact that light is a dominant motif in the play in preparation for its finale, Pound in his version also added

many references to light and dark. In this respect, D. S. Carne-Ross has observed that "both imagery and action do a good deal to associate Herakles with light, Deianeira with aspects of night. Like night and day they directly or indirectly destroy each other, and Deianeira's device for winning back Herakles' love will literally put him to bed in flame" (64). Although I agree with the association of Herakles with light, I fail to see the same strong connection between Deianeira and night. Even Carne-Ross has to admit that "there is [not] any neat equivalence; Deianeira's reflective intelligence suggests light rather than darkness." However, he still insists that there is "a powerful symbolism that is in part expressed through the two leading characters" (64-65). In contrast to Carne-Ross, I would rather suggest that the opposition between light and darkness in the play is attributed to Herakles and the non-human forces (Akheloos, Nessus) which merely use the unwitting Deianeira as their instrument. This is most likely also Pound's interpretation, given the fact that he defines Achelous in his list of *Dramatis personae* as "symbol of the power of damp and darkness" (WT 24) – as opposed to the light and (later) the fire associated with Herakles. This is also why Pound added the word "cloud" in his rendering of the depiction of the river-god, because later in the play it is a cloud, that is, a symbol of darkness and death, that will envelop Herakles in his hours of agony.

Given the Poundian interpretation of the play as dominated by *eros* and his use of darkness/light, we then may appreciate more fully what Pound regarded as the centre of the play, namely the point at which Herakles suddenly realizes the full truth about the oracle given earlier in the play (ll. 1171-78):

κἀδόκουν πράξειν καλῶς.
τὸ δ' ἦν ἄρ' οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν θανεῖν ἐμέ.
τοῖς γὰρ θανοῦσι μόχθος οὐ προσγίγνεται.

ταυτ' οὖν ἐπειδὴ λαμπρὰ συμβαίνει, τέκνον,
 δεῖ σ' αὖ γενέσθαι τῷδε τάνδρῳ σύμμαχον
 καὶ μὴ ἴπιμεινα τοῦμὸν ὄξῦνα στόμα,
 ἀλλ' αὐτὸν εἰκαθόντα συμπράσσειν, νόμον
 κάλλιστον ἐξουρόντα, πειθαρχεῖν πατρί. (Storr 348-50)

and I thought [*kadokoun*] that I would be happy [*praxein kaloos*], but it [*to d'*, i.e. the promise of release] was nothing else [*èn ouden allo*] than that I should die [*plèn thanein eme*]. After all [*gar*], toil [*mochthos*] comes no more [*ou prosgignetai*] to the dead [*tois thanousi*, i.e. the dead do not have to labor]. Since, then [*oun epeidè*], my son [*teknon*], these things [*taut'*] are clearly being fulfilled/ borne out [*lampra sumbainei*], you must in turn be [*dei s'au genesthai*] my ally [*tooide andri summachon*], and do not wait [*kai mè 'pimeinai*] so as to sharpen my tongue [*toumon oxunai stoma*, i.e. make me angry by delaying], but consent and help me [*all' auton eikathonta sumprassein*], finding [*exeuronta*] that the most beautiful law [*nomon kalliston*] is to obey your father [*peitharchein patri*]. (my own literal trl)

Pound has translated 1171-78 as follows:

I thought it meant life in comfort. [1171]
 It doesn't. It means that I die. [1172]
 For amid the dead there is no work in service. [1173]
 Come at it that way, my boy, what

SPLENDOUR,

IT ALL COHERES

[1174]

[*He turns his face from the audience, then sits erect, facing them without the mask of agony; the revealed make-up is that of solar serenity. The hair golden and as electrified as possible.*]

But you must help me [1175]
 and don't make me lose my temper,
 don't dither, and don't ask me why. [1176]
 This is the great rule: Filial Obedience. [1178] (WT 66-67)

Pound also added a note to his translation of 1174, "SPLENDOUR, / IT ALL COHERES": "This is the key phrase, for which the play exist" (WT 66).⁵

This note makes clear that the poet saw the play as a unity, not as a tragedy in two halves. To him, all the characters and events of the *Trachiniaiæ* were linked by the all-powerful force of *eros*, and this is what in his view Herakles recognized when he realized in that moment of lucidity in agony that now all oracles about his life were being fulfilled, and that Nessus and Deianeira were only instruments in the hands of Zeus to be killed in the manner ordained by him. In this respect, Pound may have related Herakles' *taut' oun ... lampra sumbainei* (1174), "these things are now clearly being fulfilled", to Deianeira's words at the beginning of the play, when the period of fifteen months has passed away which would bring either prosperity or death for Herakles (and the outcome is still uncertain): *kai toonde namerteia sumbainei chronou/ tou nun parontos, hoos telesthènai chreoon* (ll. 174-75), "and the exact moment when these things [i.e. prosperity or death] should be fulfilled falls at the time now present". Thus the word *sumbainei* connects Deianeira, Herakles and the exact moment of the fulfilment of the oracles. The word *sumbainei*, then, occurs for the first time when all options still seem open – but in practice Herakles has already been foredoomed to die because of his *eros* for Iole. The second occurrence of *sumbainei* marks Herakles' insight that it is because of all the different manifestations of *eros* (as violent passion in himself, in Deianeira and in Nessus) that the oracles are coming true. Although, then, Pound's "SPLENDOUR, / IT ALL COHERES" as a translation of *taut' oun ... lampra sumbainei* may be said to give the Greek phrase a weight it cannot sustain per se, Pound regarded it not only as a phrase given to Herakles to express his insight, but also as the evaluation of the play's unity. His rendering here thus epitomizes his creative translation of the *Trachiniaiæ* as a form of literary criticism.

And this gives us the fourth reason why Pound was so interested in this particular play. As I have tried to show in my book *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (2004) Pound had a lifelong interest in this philosophical tradition. Throughout his work he used and adapted Neoplatonic notions to express his own religious-philosophical worldview. A key notion in Pound's work is that of the epiphany, and it also occurs here in his version of Sophocles. Pound renders Herakles' insight through the word "splendour" which is a carefully chosen word, as it not only ties his version of the play to the philosophy of light advocated in *The Cantos*, but also very specifically to Neoplatonism. In the founding text of Neoplatonism, the *Enneads*, Plotinus uses the word *aglaia*, "splendor", to describe the splendor of the *Nous* and of the One when it is attained in the mystic vision, that is, when one attains a sudden and full insight into the workings of the divine. Thus we may read in the final *Ennead* VI.9 about the difficulty to attain the beauty of the Intelligible:

The main source of the difficulty is that awareness of this Principle comes neither by knowing nor by the Intellection that discovers the Intellectual beings but by a presence overpassing all knowledge....

Our way then takes us beyond knowing ... knowing and knowable must all be left aside; every object of thought, even the highest, we must pass by, for all that is good is later than This and derives from This as from the sun all the light of the day....

There are those that have not attained to see. The soul has not come to know the splendor [*aglaias*] There; it has not felt and clutched to itself that love-passion of vision known to the lover come to rest where he loves. (trl MacKenna 539-40)

This is why Pound regards the "splendour" of *Women of Trachis* as the focal point of the entire play, as from here both forward and backward in time, all events and actions become meaningful.

The use of the specific noun "splendour" to render the Greek

adverb *lampra* ('clearly', 'splendidly', 'brightly') also explains why Pound in his list of *dramatis personae* described Herakles as "the solar vitality", that is, as the eternal force behind the alternation of human fortune. In his moment of extreme intelligence and lucidity, Herakles attained the ultimate insight into his human condition and into the connection between past, present and future, thereby transcending human mortality and its limits, limitations and fragmentary awareness of the forces behind everyday reality.

After the moment of Herakles' insight, the play focuses on the way the hero must now face his predestined goal, and how Herakles does this willingly, thereby gaining in divine stature. Although Sophocles did not include the hero's apotheosis on Mount Oeta where he died in the clarity of fire, and lets the play end with Hyllus' comment on the cruelty of the gods, the audience was of course familiar with the myth so it needed not to be reminded that Herakles' life at the point where Sophocles left off was not the final, painful and bitter end. As Pat Easterling has rightly noted, the play is not about the apotheosis itself, but "the emphasis of the action is on suffering and mortality" (10). This is why Pound, with his insight into the structure of the play, emphasized what he saw as the key line. He believed that the tragedy at this point more or less concluded its story by contrasting Herakles' insight with Hyllus' failure to understand the full significance of the course of events. Although in the *Trachiniae* Herakles is not shown as really understanding whether the fulfilment of the will of Zeus will lead to a good or bad end, for Pound there was no question about this: in his eyes, Herakles at line 1174 overcomes the gulf between human and divine knowledge. This also accounts for the difference in the stage directions: when Herakles makes his first appearance on the stage, he is said to enter "*in the mask of divine agony*" (WT 59). After the moment of the hero's insight, Pound inserts the following description which emphasizes his conception of both Herakles and the plot of the play:

[Herakles] *turns his face from the audience, then sits erect, facing them without the mask of agony; the revealed make-up is that of solar serenity. The hair golden and as electrified as possible.*] (WT 67)

Although, then, Herakles may be believed to suffer severe physical pain through the inflammation of the poison on his clothes, from which only the fire of the pyre can relieve him, Pound saw Herakles' insight as the moment in the play when the "body of light" took over from the "body of fire," to adapt phrases used in canto 91. In his moment of extreme lucidity, Herakles attained the ultimate insight into his human condition, and regarded it *sub specie aeternitatis* as a success.⁶ This is why Pound re-used the image of Herakles' splendour in canto 116 in a moment of despairing self-evaluation of his lifetime's work:

I have brought the great ball of crystal;
 who can lift it?
 Can you enter the acorn of light?
 But the beauty is not the madness
 Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.
 And I am not a demigod,
 I cannot make it cohere. (815-16)

This passage from canto 116 may be read as a very painful admission by Pound that he is not a Herakles, and that his lifelong search for enlightenment and release would still end in a "dark night of the soul." Still, despite the "Many errors," the long poem still has "a little rightness," and thus may be said to be

A little light, like a rushlight
 To lead back to splendour. (817)

Notes

¹ Cp. Bacigalupo's comment that "the tragedy functions as a metaphor of a situation which [Pound] recognizes as his own" (209).

² Pound's translation of *Elektra* was widely acclaimed after its first delayed performance in 1987 and publication in 1990. The *Trachis*, however, met with much more criticism. It seemed inconsistent to most critics who generally objected to Pound's style that is sometimes extremely colloquial and at other times formal or archaic. To give but one representative example: in 1961 Bernard F. Dick described Pound's version as "a burlesque of Greek tragic poetry – caustic, pedestrian, and often in dubious taste", with the Sophoclean diction turned into "subway-circuit dialogue" (236-37). As regards the contents, Dick blames Pound for having failed to give his version some intrinsic value, such as the use of myth to reflect a contemporary situation, or to advance an ideology. This view is more or less shared by D.S. Carne-Ross who notes: "The vagaries of Pound's *Women of Trachis* are for the most part unilluminating, since they are not governed by any clear grasp of the statement the play is making" (253 n. 36). For a defence of the unity of Pound's version as well as its linguistic freedom, see Bacigalupo 209-19.

³ *Confucius to Cummings* xi. Cp. "The *Trachiniai* came from reading the Fenollosa Noh plays for the new edition, and from wanting to see what would happen to a Greek play, given that same medium and the hope of its being performed by the Minorou company" (qtd in Hall 40).

⁴ For a detailed interpretation of the many aspects of the play, see Easterling 1-12.

⁵ Pound had used the Italian phrase *Che splendore* in "canto 73", written at the end of 1944, in which the spirit of Guido Cavalcanti tells the story of a peasant girl whose spirit he had met at Rimini. She had been raped by Canadian soldiers, after which she was told to give them directions to the Via Emilia. The girl answered she would lead them there herself, but she deliberately guided them into a minefield. Cavalcanti praises her courage and self-sacrifice: "Conquistò la sorte/ peregrina.../ Che splendore!" (*Cantos* 440; "She conquered her exceptional fate.../ What splendour!").

⁶ Cp. Bacigalupo: "the message spelled out in WT is that the secretive processes of fate, no matter whether ostensibly just or unjust, are revealed as totally luminous, assigning coherent meaning to all, if only man can contemplate them from without the human condition"(214).

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