

Although the *Trakhiniai* has often been called a “*nostos* play” (e.g., Alexopoulou 2002: 57), and indeed specific diction and themes lend themselves to comparison with the paradigmatic unsuccessful return of Agamemnon in the *Oresteia*, no study I am aware of has examined Sophokles’ use of the homecoming motif in this play. This is despite the fact that the first 960 lines—a full 75% of the play—aim at building up the anticipation of Herakles’ return home. I argue that the play employs a conception of *nostos* rooted in epic and epinician tradition, wherein the success or failure of homecoming is indicated by whether the hero is fully reintegrated into the home and society. The *Trakhiniai* in fact presents us with imagery of both a successful and an unsuccessful *nostos*: initially the characters are led to expect the triumphant homecoming of Herakles as victor, but at the *peripeteia* victor is revealed as vanquished and his *nostos* is ruined. The divergent possibilities of *nostos* reflect in addition the fundamentally dual nature of Herakles. As a sacker of cities who has more in common with the beasts he slays than with his own family, he can never be successfully reintegrated into the community of mortals; and yet, the imagery of both victory and defeat in the homecoming of Herakles anticipates his true and final *nostos*—to Olympos.

Before his arrival, Herakles’ *nostos* is variously figured as the return of an athletic victor (185-186) and as the triumph of a conquering warrior (182, 644-646, 750-751). The Chorus imagines a celebration accompanied by the “fair-sounding flute” (216-217, 640-641) when Herakles reaches the city. In addition, messengers announcing Herakles’ imminent arrival (cf. Hdt. 1.60) along with the use of the verb δέχομαι to signal the welcoming of the hero (233; cf. Pi. *Ol.* 4.9, *Py.* 5.22, *Ar. Av.* 1708, 1729) both create an expectation of a triumphal procession. This triumph imagery has direct significance for Herakles himself. Numerous representations of the hero’s apotheosis on Attic and South Italian pottery beginning ca. 560 portray his procession to Olympos as the return of the victorious athlete to his city: Herakles arrives by chariot, often with Nike at his side, and very frequently wears or receives the wreath of the victor. Slater (1984: 242) has argued that these visual depictions of the apotheosis provide evidence for the ritual of *eiselasis*, the homecoming of the victorious athlete and his entry into the city, and moreover, that these very scenes serve as a visual mythological paradigm for a successful *nostos*.

There is a shift in the *nostos* imagery, however, that occurs after Hyllos tells of the terrible events at Kenaion, and announces that Herakles will soon arrive, either alive or dead (805-806). At this point the Chorus wishes no longer for Herakles’ return, but instead pray that they themselves would be carried away by winds before they see the unspeakable horror that approaches the household (953-961). Immediately thereafter Herakles returns not as a victor on a chariot, but as a helpless victim, conquered by Eros and Nessos, carried on a bier. The procession is funerary rather than triumphant (965-966), and instead of celebratory *aulos*-music the procession is entirely silent (967-968), except for the shrieking of the Chorus (963). And significantly, as Segal (1995: 44) emphasizes, Herakles proves throughout unable to transition from his own outer world into the inner space of the household.

Expectation of a successful *nostos* has given way to disaster. And yet, even the failure of Herakles’ homecoming points to a much brighter future. As Crotty (1982: 121-138) has demonstrated, the bonds which are supposed to join the returning hero to society also conceptually link him to mortality, such that the failure to rejoin society can have connotations of immortality. According to this model, the failure of Herakles’ *nostos*, although it would seem to indicate only death, actually complements the image of his triumphant apotheosis from the pyre.