"When I compare Euripidean to Sophoclean heroines, I prefer Euripides’ Medea and Hecuba, for they are successful. Deianira, in Sophocles’ Trachinian Women, naively mixes a potion intended to restore her husband’s affection for her; instead, the potion tortures and kills him. Antigone courageously and singlemindedly defends her ideals, and is willing to die for them, but her last words dwell not upon her achievements but lament that she dies unwed. Medea and Hecuba are too strong to regret their decisions” 1). Thais bellicose-sounding statement by Sarah Pomeroy is typical of the way she uses literary evidence to support the provocative argument in her famous book. Subscribing to Pomeroy’s views, J. Gould discerns in Sophocles’ Trachiniae the playwright’s intention to present Deianira’s suicide with the sword as a “horribly masculine way to die” (my italics). Indeed “the shock of it reverberates through the play”, but even the passages referred to by Gould do not qualify this shock as having been provoked by an offence against social standards 2).

To my mind, such criticisms raise two important questions. Can the substance of a playwright’s view on women be inferred from the social position of the females as they are presented in his plays? And to what extent, if any, did a dramatist really intend to give his own opinion on the question of women’s rights? In this paper I shall first (I) shortly treat both problems with regard to Sophocles. Next (II) I shall describe the way his female characters handle their specific

dramatic situation from their given social position. In the final part (III) I shall bring together the results of this inquiry.

I

Sophocles’ texts, as we know them, do not lead us to believe that the poet dealt with the difference man/woman as a separate, not to say discriminatory, factor in characterization. Of course I do not mean to say that Sophocles did not put recognizably male and female characters upon the stage. What should rather be examined systematically is whether and to what extent dissimilarities in thought, feeling and behaviour tend to coincide with differences in sex. In most studies about the function and position of male and female heroes respectively in Attic tragedy, the opposite sex is commented upon only at random3). However, any description of one of both categories dramatis personae should allow the features of the one to be checked against the characteristics of the other. In investigating women in Sophocles one should ultimately not leave aside his men.

In the structure of Sophocles’ tragedies characterization and dramatic action are dynamically put together4). This coherence prohibits the critic from isolating theoretically a consistent


The rare instances of a confrontation of both sexes in tragedy (drama) show a tendency to psycho-analytical speculation, e.g. M. Shaw, The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-Century Drama, CPh 70 (1975), 255-66, an analysis of the conflict between “the pure male” and “the pure female” in Ajax, Medea and Lysistrata.

Some patterns for comparison are to be found in M. Gagarin, Aeschylean Drama (Berkeley-London 1976), an interesting attempt to explain dramatic action as resulting from conflict and concordance between political and sexual forces (cf. D. Korzeniewski, Gymn. 1978, 455-7).