



# Fear and Healing Through the Serpent Imagery in Greek Tragedy

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Fear and Healing through the Serpent Imagery in Greek Tragedy

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## Abstract

This work explores how the tragic poets, by means of snake imagery, convey the notion of disease. Moreover, it examines how snake imagery contributes to the process of healing through the emotion of fear that it triggers. My analysis of the tragedies in which the three main tragedians employ snake imagery builds upon findings from ancient authors that refer to snakes and their characteristics, and upon the findings of contemporary scholars. My overall method relies on tools from structuralism and psycholinguistics. Through snake imagery the tragic poets portray disease as it manifests itself through arrogance, deception, physical pain, and madness. For this purpose the poets employ images inspired by the particular anatomy and behavior of the snake. Within the context of tragedy, and through the fear that it triggers, the snake imagery encourages self-knowledge and healing through self-correction.

## Dedication

“For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You”

David *Chronicles* 1.29.14

I would like to dedicate the first fruits of my harvest to God, who has been making the last ten years of my life a continuous miracle; and to my father, who is with us, but not among us.

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## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	v
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Arrogance and Snakes: How High Can Serpents Fly?.....	9
Snakes and Warriors: Aiskhylos' <i>Seven against Thebes</i> and Euripides' <i>Phoinissai</i> .....	11
Grooms and Snakes in Aiskhylos' <i>Suppliants</i> .....	20
A Kingdom and a Snake: Aiskhylos' <i>Persians</i> .....	25
Snakes and Tyranny in Aiskhylos' <i>Agamemnon</i> and <i>Khoephoroi</i> .....	29
A Snake against a God: Euripides' <i>Bakkhai</i> .....	36
III. Snakes and Deception: Criminal Minds.....	41
When Love Goes Wrong: Aiskhylos' Klytemnestra in <i>Agamemnon</i> and <i>Khoephoroi</i> .....	46
Snake-fighting in Aiskhylos' <i>Khoephoroi</i> and Euripides' <i>Orestes</i> .....	50
Rapes, Murders, Snakes, and the Athenian Lineage in Euripides' <i>Ion</i> .....	57
The Snake's Double Tongue and Odysseus in Euripides' <i>Trojan Women</i> and Sophokles' <i>Philoktetes</i> .....	62
A Snake in Panic: Hermione in Euripides' <i>Andromakhe</i> .....	67
IV. Snakes, Poison, and Mad Heroes.....	74
Snakes and Punishment in Sophokles' <i>Trakhiniai</i> and <i>Philoktetes</i> , and in Euripides' <i>Bakkhai</i> .....	77

Possessed by Lyssa: Herakles in Euripides' <i>Herakles</i> .....	85
Avenging Spirits in Aiskhylos' <i>Khoephoroi</i> and <i>Eumenides</i> and Euripides' <i>Elektra</i> , <i>Iphigeneia among the Taurians</i> , and <i>Orestes</i> .....	89
V.    Conclusion.....	101
Notes.....	105
Bibliography.....	110



## Chapter I

### Introduction

This thesis is a study of snake imagery as it occurs in the plays of the three Greek tragic poets Aiskhylos, Sophokles, and Euripides, and as it connects with the notion of disease. Scholars, such as Jacques Jouanna in *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, have explored the interplay between tragedy and the medical texts of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. and indicate the common vocabulary that the tragic poets and the medical authors used to describe disease and suffering (81). The tragic heroes describe as disease any condition that causes suffering and not necessarily only an unhealthy physical condition. Therefore, a hubristic behavior, caused by arrogance and cunningness, which ends up in suffering is considered as disease as well. In order to highlight a specific quality of their heroes, the tragic poets often use images of animals, both domesticated, such as heifers and dogs, and predatory animals, such as lions, eagles, and wolves; among them, the snake imagery is dominant. So far, many scholars have studied the animal imagery in ancient Greek literature, but they have not focused exclusively on the snake imagery in relation to disease and healing in Greek tragedy.

The goal of my study is to examine why the tragic poets employ snake imagery so often in their tragedies and how this relates to suffering. I hypothesize that the tragic poets employ serpent imagery often because the snake as a symbol encompasses qualities of other animals, such as the lion's pride, strength, and cruelty, the wolf's cunningness, and the dog's hunting skills. Moreover, due to its particular nature and due to its poison, the snake inspires metaphors, similes, and metonymies that portray disease and suffering. Therefore, the tragic poets use snake imagery to indicate physical suffering and madness

as well as pride and deception, which they perceive as mental disease. Through serpent imagery and the demonstration of human suffering, the tragic poets deliberately evoke the audience's fear by way of empathy, which may lead to a certain level of self-knowledge. Ultimately, through the reenactment of their suffering, the tragic heroes who take on serpentine aspects become the people's wounded healers and teach humility and moderation.

In order to convey arrogance, deception, or physical and psychological suffering, the tragic poets employ images derived from the snake's anatomy and particular behavior, such as the never-closing eyes, the double tongue, the poison, the hissing, the snake's particular movement and coils, its flexibility, adjustment, hiding skills, and unexpected attacks. In *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Daniel Ogden tracks down the appearance of snakes in myths and suggests some explanations regarding the connection of certain snake features with fear and pain, such as the poison's connection with fire (220). However, he does not connect the snake features with arrogance and deception. In Greek tragedy, arrogance is expressed through unjust violence and impiety. In order to indicate a hero's cruelty, the tragic poets either compare the hero with a snake, a *drakōn*, or they focus on the hero's fierce snake-like glance. Among the scholars who do not concentrate only on violence when they comment on such comparisons but also see arrogance is Froma Zeitlin. In her work *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes*, Zeitlin makes the connection between snake, arrogance, and primitivism—a combination that appears often in tragedy.

These scholars who have studied snake imagery in tragedy have focused on the notion of deception, mirroring perhaps one of the dominant universal perceptions of the snake as a symbol of treachery. Two works that include the analysis of snake imagery are

Daniel Tsung-Wen Hu's dissertation "Metaphors in Aeschylus" and Evangelos Pertounias' *Funktion und Thematik der Bilder bei Aischylos*. Although they focus only on Aiskhylos' plays, sometimes their observations apply also to those Euripides' plays, which deal with the same myths that Aiskhylos dealt with before. The image of the snake's double tongue in a play often occurs to convey a character's mastery of speech. In his book *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Simon Goldhill explores the pattern of double speaking, although he does not connect it with the snake metaphor. Goldhill's observations on Klytemnestra's speech in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon* apply to Sophokles' and Euripides' *Odysseus* too, whose main characteristic is the ambiguous language, which in Euripides' *Trojan Women* is referred to as double tongue (*Tro.* 279-287).

The tragic poets use images with snake's poison to indicate extreme physical pain and madness, such as in Sophokles' *Philoktetes* and *Trakhiniai*. In her two works *In and Out of Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* and *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness*, Ruth Padel offers an important insight on the ancient Greeks' perception and representation of disease, especially madness, through the composite figures of the Erinyes, Lyssa, and others, where snakes are an inseparable part of their bodies. Taking into account Padel's observations, I study the cases where the tragic poets connect directly or indirectly their heroes to these figures in order to convey the heroes' imbalance and mental disorder. For example, in *Seven against Thebes*, Aiskhylos portrays certain Argive leaders holding shields that depict figures with serpentine features, such as Typhōn, to convey the warriors' arrogance and martial frenzy (*Seven* 489-496). Likewise, Aiskhylos and Euripides connect Aigisthos and Klytemnestra with the snake-haired Gorgon to demonstrate their violent disposition (*Aisk. Kh.* 831-837; *Eur. El.* 855-857). In *Pots and Play*, Oliver Taplin's study on vases with depictions of scenes from tragedy, shows the interplay between visual art and tragedy and offers us visual

representations of the snake as part of composite figures that indicate disease and trigger fear (40-41, 55-59, 70-71). Taplin suggests that their portrait as beautiful female figures might be a way to placate these creatures, which the vase painters treat as divinities (59). In contrast, the tragic poets portray them as ugly, terrifying creatures and highlight their connection with disease, although they treat them as divinities too.

Closely related to disease and suffering is snake imagery that conveys justice and punishment. Now, the snake imagery becomes as ambiguous as the concepts that it conveys. In *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato*, John Heath argues that the animal-human conflation indicates the primitive levels of human culture, where the law of retribution dominates in human relationships. Only through the differentiation between animals, humans, and gods progress is secure (215-217, 221). The same idea appears in the work of other scholars as well, such as Charles Segal, who draws upon Victor Turner's work and, in *Tragedy and Civilization*, discusses the tragic hero's liminality as it is conveyed through the metaphors of bestiality (48). Justice that is not based on retaliation can bring balance, which equates with health. Jouanna notes that the Greek authors, among them the tragic poets, employ definitions of health or disease in terms of the balanced mixture or separation of the constituting elements of the body that we can find in the Hippocratic Corpus, such as the *Ancient Medicine* or the *Nature of Man* (23-24). Aeschylus conveys the idea of justice, balance, health, and prosperity at the end of *Eumenides*, where Orestes' acquittal for his mother's murder puts an end to retributive justice, Athena establishes a legal system based on democracy and restores the honors of the snake-like Erinyes, who now become beneficial spirits and change their curses for disease and sterility to blessings for health and prosperity (*Eum.* 780-790, 938-948, 956-958). In most cases, though, in tragedy there is no such balance and the diseased hero takes on the serpentine aspects of his disease

usually under the state of anger and fear. For example, in Euripides' *Orestes*, Orestes is called *drakōn* and behaves like the Erinyes that madden him, ready to kill in order to take revenge for his relatives' lack of support and for fear about his life. Also Sophokles' Philoktetes becomes as bitter toward his enemies as the snake that bit and impaired him (*Or.* 1163-1174, 1424; *Ph.* 1321-1323).

One of my interests relates to the gender of the arrogant and wily characters, as well as the gender of the personified diseases. My study aligns with scholars, such as Zeitlin and Jean-Pierre Vernant, who show that the tragic poets portray physical disease and the horror of death as female monsters. Regarding arrogance, my findings show that most of those characters who take on aspects of snakes are male with the exception of Klytemnestra—yet, even she is considered to have a male mindset (*Ag.* 10-11). Since arrogance is demonstrated as physical violence and male gender is considered stronger than the female gender, snake imagery that signifies arrogance is connected with the male gender. Regarding deception, certain plays reflect the idea that the female gender is more treacherous than the male one. However, the tragic poets portray male characters who are compared to snakes as deceitful as the female ones, without thereby becoming effeminate. Such examples are Odysseus in Sophokles' and Euripides' tragedies and Orestes in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi* and in three of Euripides' tragedies. The male characters tend to be effeminate only under suffering, which is not always their cunningness' outcome, but it may relate to their arrogance or their madness. For example, Euripides' Herakles in *Herakles* appears effeminate after a seizure of madness (*Her.* 1412).

Suffering triggers the audience's fear and pity— emotions that have cathartic qualities in the context of tragedy, according to Aristotle (*Poetics* 1449b). In his *Poetics*, Aristotle mentions the pleasure from learning even by watching the heroes' sufferings (1448b.10-15). Moreover, in his *Politics*, the philosopher stresses the need for the citizens

to be moulded to suit the form of government under which they live. Education should be public since all the citizens belong to the state (1337a1; 203). Tragedy is a product of the Athenian democracy and educates the citizens to live in democracy. Fear, in particular, relates closely to the didactic purpose of tragedy. The tragic poets evoke it deliberately through their heroes' suffering to indicate attitudes and choices destructive for themselves and the society. In his book *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Carl Jung connects the snake with the "trickster-figure," who becomes the victim of his own malicious actions exacted out of vengeance. His suffering, though, leads him to wisdom, which the hero can use to enlighten and heal other people (255-6, 271-2). Vernant in "Ambiguity and Reversal" and Gregory Nagy in *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* convey a similar idea through the notion of the scapegoat, the *pharmakos*, who purifies and heals his community through his own destruction (Vernant 125-140; Nagy 162-166). In this process, fear as the audience's reaction to the hero's suffering plays an important role. As Nagy explains, in fact, the spectators are afraid that something similar might happen to them that would make them suffer the same way (65). Through the ritual reenactment of the tragic heroes' suffering by means of tragedy, the spectators share the heroes' serpentine qualities, but also they take part of the heroes' knowledge that comes through suffering.

In order to explore the snake imagery in Greek tragedy, I turned first to the primary sources, namely the three tragic poets' plays, which employ the snake as a symbol to indicate disease and suffering. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work, *Metaphors We Live By*, helped me to analyze the snake imagery. Based on evidence from disciplines such as cognitive psychology and linguistics, the two authors argue that our conceptual system is based on our constant interaction with our physical and cultural environment and that metaphors are the product of this interaction. Metaphors, however,

can create realities too since changes in our conceptual system may affect our perception of the world (119, 144-146). This theory has led me to study ancient authors' texts regarding animals, such as Aristotle's *History of Animals* and Aelian's *On the Characteristics of Animals*, in order to grasp the ancient Greeks' perception of snakes. Writing about the physical and psychological nature of the snake, Aristotle portrays it as mean and treacherous, a notion that the tragic poets denote too when they employ the snake imagery (HA 488b16). Moreover, Aelian presents *ἀμφίσβαινα*, a mythical snake with two heads that can move in either direction, which Aiskhylos uses to denote cunningness. Back to Lakoff, his work *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* has helped me to understand how a feeling's physiological effects create metaphors and metonymies for the feeling itself (380-409). His theory helps me to interpret feelings of fear and anger that so often the tragic poets convey through simple metaphors, such as the serpent's fierce glance, and through more complex images, such as those of the snake-haired Erinyes that embody a dead spirit's anger and cause fear and madness. The tools from psycholinguistics in combination with the theory of structuralism helped me to interpret the figurative language related with snakes that conveys emotions and traces of morality and signifies liminality.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the concept of arrogance as mental disease in Greek tragedy and I analyze the snake imagery that presents this notion mainly through the features of physical strength, the unclosing eyes, and hissing. Chapter Three explores the concept of deception as it is signified through the image of the serpent's double tongue, its meandering movement, and its abilities to hide and attack unexpectedly. The different kinds of punishment that the myths and the tragic poets reserve for the proud and deceitful heroes show which attitudes the Greek society of the 5<sup>th</sup> century could tolerate more. Finally, Chapter Four examines snake imagery that relates with suffering as it is

demonstrated through excruciating pain and madness. Moreover, it discusses the divine-mortal relationship, which pain and madness challenge dramatically.

Overall, the snake imagery mirrors the tragic heroes' flaws, fears, and suffering. In the context of tragedy, it helps to trigger the spectators' identification with the heroes' flaws and their empathy for the heroes' suffering. Depending on the audience's perception, the snake imagery begets a certain level of self-knowledge. Moreover, the fear of suffering the same as the tragic heroes who are compared to snakes yields the healing of diseases such as hubris and cunningness.



## Chapter II

### Arrogance and Snakes: How High Can Serpents Fly?

In this chapter, I will explore the ways that the tragic poets employ serpentine imagery to convey arrogance. For this purpose, I will analyze Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon*, *Khoephoroi*, *Seven Against Thebes*, *Persians*, *Suppliants*, and Euripides' *Phoinissai* and *Bakkhai*.<sup>1</sup>

By comparing and contrasting the arrogant characters whom the tragic poets associate with serpents I will try to show how and why arrogance and serpents are connected in the Greek culture of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In his *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Michael Ferber reports that the symbol of the serpent, ambivalent as it is, stands for wisdom, but also for false knowledge, which may be fatal, and for “human mortality” (Ferber 186). Arrogance is the result of false idea about the potential of one’s self, sometimes to such extent that the hero forgets that he is vulnerable and mortal. Since arrogance is based on delusions, it is considered as mental disease, *νόσος φρενῶν* (*Pers.* 750). In Greek tragedy, the arrogant heroes who are compared to serpents are violent toward other people and impious toward gods; therefore, they are punished almost always with death. Zeus cannot tolerate haughty humans and he hurls them down from their lofty-towering hopes (Aisk. *Supp.* 96-100).

The snake’s distinct form and anatomy provides the tragic poets with the proper images to indicate a haughty character. Although snakes are well known for their venom, certain serpents are distinguished for their physical strength. Quoting Philumenus, Petrounias argues: “Es war bekannt, dass die Riesenschlangen keine Giftschlangen sind; cf. Philum. 30.1 f. *δράκων· τὸ ζῷον τοῦτο οὐκ ἔστιν μὲν ἰοβόλον, ἀλκῆ δὲ καὶ δυνάμει*

ἀναιρεῖ.” (“It was known that the giant snakes are not poisonous snakes; cf. Philum. 30.1 f. *drakōn*· *this animal does not throw poison, but it kills through might and power*” Petrounias 53). Thus, in Greek tragedy, serpents may stand for power as well, not necessarily physical. For example, in Aiskhylos’ *Khoephoroi*, Klytemnestra and Aigisthos, who are compared to snakes, have political power that they misuse (*Kh.* 1046-1047). As such, the snake as symbol takes negative connotations and alludes to tyranny. When it comes to physical strength, the snake stands for uncontrollable and unjust violence. Warriors like Tydeus, Hippomedon, and Parthenopaios in *Seven Against Thebes* and Aigyptos’ sons in Aiskhylos’ *Suppliants* represent this category (*Seven* 380-381; *Supp.* 511). Most often, these characters recall or are compared to Hesiod’s prototypical examples of violence and arrogance, such as Typhōn, the Sphinx, or the Lernaean Hydra (*Seven* 511-520; *Th.* 295-337). The tragic heroes’ comparison with monsters whose bodies are a fusion of human and animal parts may indicate the heroes’ excessive force, which they use for destruction.

Another serpentine anatomical feature that the tragic poets exploit is the snakes’ limited eye movement. Together with the venom and the extreme pain that comes from it this feature creates images of snakes with fiery eyes. As Ogden argues in his work *Drakōn*, “The *drakōn*’s venom is fiery, and its staring, unclosing, unsleeping eyes are often said to flash fire from themselves” (218). The tragic poets employ this attribute in order to describe arrogant tragic heroes who strike panic to their enemies, such as Xerxes, in *Persians* (*Pers.* 81-82). Moreover, Ogden notes that snakes were considered ideal guardians due the fact that they cannot close their eyes; therefore, “the ancients held *drakontes* to be unsleeping and ever watchful” (238).<sup>2</sup> For example, Pentheus in *Bakkhai*, guards his city from being out of control with such excessive zeal that causes the opposite

results of what he wishes for (*Bak.* 959-960). Again, the snake image as guardian connected to proud characters denotes negative qualities.

Finally, the tragic poets employ images with hissing serpents to portray characters that convey terror: such is Tydeus, in *Seven* (381). Since speech is the medium with which humans communicate, such images indicate primitive characters that are closer to animals than to humans. In fact, all the clearly arrogant characters that take on aspects of snakes either do not speak, or when they speak, they talk nonsense. Instead of rational arguments, they use threats and accusations. They are incapable of dialogue since they hear only themselves; therefore, they end up isolated. Again, Pentheus is the best example. When he converses with Teiresias or Dionysos, he does not listen to them because he is already preoccupied with his own just cause; therefore, he never changes his mindset (*Bak.* 268-269). Only Klytemnestra is portrayed as a master of words in *Agamemnon*, but as we will see in the next chapter, she is not just arrogant—she is deceitful as well.

I propose to analyze each of the tragedies mentioned above separately in order to demonstrate in detail how does the snake imagery function for each play related with arrogance.

#### Snakes and Warriors: Aiskhylos' *Seven against Thebes* and Euripides' *Phoinissai*

Aiskhylos' *Seven Against Thebes* and Euripides' *Phoinissai* deal with the attack of the Argive army against Thebes, triggered by Polyneikes' desire to overthrow his brother Eteokles, who rules Thebes despite their agreement that the two brothers would be rulers taking turns. Although both Aiskhylos and Euripides describe the Argive

leaders, Aiskhylos focuses more than Euripides on their detailed description, through which he reveals their character whereas Euripides focuses on the impact of the two brothers' strife in Oidipous' family. In Aiskhylos' *Seven*, a scout informs Eteokles about the seven Argive leaders and conveys his impressions about their disposition, inferring them by their appearance. In Euripides' *Phoinissai*, the audience is informed about the enemy partly through a dialogue between Antigone and her Tutor, while they watch them from the roof of Oidipous' house, and partly through the Messenger's report to Iokaste after Eteokles and Polyneikes' mutual killing (*Phoin.* 88-192, 1090-1199).

In Aiskhylos' *Seven*, the Chorus of women, who have come in panic to supplicate the gods for the city's safety, compare the whole Argive army to *drakontes*, big snakes, and themselves to dove nestlings who are in danger because snakes are evil bed-fellows (*Seven* 288-294).<sup>3</sup> War brings up the bestial side of humans; if the Argives defeat the Thebans, the women know that they face the danger of being violated by these men (*Seven* 321-335, 363-367). Dreadful pictures of women with ripped clothes dragged by their hair are interchangeable with a conquered city being plundered. Thus, the city is identified with the violated women (*Seven* 247, 321-325, 350-362). As Edith Hall notes in her work *The Theatrical Cast of Athens*, at war, the land is feminized metaphorically and its conquer is conceptualized as sexual union. "Raping a virgin and marrying a maiden are metaphors for sacking a city" (215-216). However, so far, the women *see* the noise, as they say, and not the warriors (*Seven* 103). Their depictions of the Argive army, based merely on the sounds they hear out of the walls, may be wrong (*Seven* 81-115, 151-161). Eventually, the Argives will be defeated and the city will be saved (*Seven* 793-799). Now, though, Eteokles is afraid that the imaginary *drakontes* in the Chorus' mind may prove more dangerous than the Argive warriors who are connected to *drakontes* and fight outside of Thebes' walls, for the Chorus' fear spreads upon the Theban army affecting its

morals dramatically (*Seven* 182-194, 254, 262). For this reason, Eteokles repeatedly tells the women, in a very rigorous tone, to show self-control (*Seven* 223-225, 230-232, 236-238). Adriaan Rademaker correctly remarks in his work *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint* that in Aiskhylos, *σωφροσύνη*, self-control for men means avoidance of unjustified violence whereas for women means control of emotions under stressful conditions (120). In *Seven*, in order to save Thebes, both the men and the women need to cooperate, doing what their role requires them to do. Therefore, instead of untimely laments, the women should encourage their fellow citizens with triumphal ululations (*Seven* 265-270).

As the play progresses, the snake imagery appears again, connected with the Argive leaders. It conveys the scout's impression about them and in some cases, when related with the Argive shields, it indicates the impression that the Argive leaders want to communicate about themselves. The scout's report to Eteokles starts with Tydeus' description. The scout compares Tydeus to a *drakōn* by the way he shouts "like a serpent hissing at high noon" (*Seven* 380-381). Tydeus' appearance stimulates the senses of both hearing and sight in order to trigger panic. Not only does he cry aloud, but "his boastful armor" also makes a terrible sound by the way he shakes it (*Seven* 385-386, 391, 392-393). As George Henry Chase observes in his article "The Shield Devices of the Greeks," the bells upon Tydeus' shield "were doubtless intended to add to the 'terrible' aspect of the shield" (70). Moreover, Ogden compares Tydeus with Stheno and Euryale, Medusa's sisters, who could kill with their voices (240-241). Despite the terrible noise that Tydeus makes, he does not speak; in fact, lack of speech indicates his primitive state. In her work *Under the Sign of the Shield*, Zeitlin suggests that "the shield scene can be read as a developmental model for self and society" (137). Following Zeitlin, since Tydeus is first

in the row of the seven Argive leaders, one may infer that he must be the most primitive of them all.

To Tydeus' violent disposition the scout adds impiety as well. According to the scout, Tydeus deliberately ignores the bad signs from the sacrifices and insults Amphiaraios, the seer and one of the seven Argive leaders, calling him a coward (*Seven* 378-379, 382-383). Surprisingly, Amphiaraios does not render only Polyneikes responsible for this war, but Tydeus as well, calling him the men's "murderer, maker of unrest in the city, principal teacher of evils to the Argives, summoner of vengeance's Curse, servant of Slaughter, counselor to Adrastos in these evil plans" (*Seven* 571- 575). The scout's description and Amphiaraios' words create the image of an arrogant, bloodthirsty, and impious man. Zeitlin remarks that "Tydeus seems to oscillate between two extremes (superhuman/subhuman)" and Eteokles must "humanize" him "by references to death and to tomb" (45). Tydeus' haughty disposition attracts divine punishment and, eventually, his shield's message—the Night— turns against himself and falls upon his eyes, as Eteokles foresees (*Seven* 403-406). Moreover, against Tydeus who behaves like a snake Eteokles posts Melanippos, a man who originally has snake qualities inherited from the Theban *drakōn*, Ares' son, and, yet he is modest (*Seven* 406-414). In this way, Eteokles hopes that he will neutralize Tydeus' power by portraying him as a man who makes a lot of noise in his effort to prove something that he is not. Eteokles claims that it is Melanippos' duty as indigenous to defend the country that nurtured him. By calling the Theban land as mother, Eteokles connects Melanippos with the *Spartoi*, the warriors who sprouted from the Theban soil after Kadmos sowed the *drakōn*'s teeth. As such, Melanippos bears the warriors' and the *drakōn*'s extreme power. Unlike the *Spartoi*, and eventually unlike Eteokles, Melanippos will channel this energy against his country's enemy and not against another Theban citizen.

Hippomedon is the fourth Argive leader in the scout's description, in Aiskhylos' *Seven*. He carries a shield on which Typhōn is depicted as "spitting out of his fire-breathing mouth a dark, thick smoke, the darting sister of fire. And the rim of the hollow-bellied shield is fastened all around with snaky braids" (*Seven* 489-496). A monstrous conflation of human and serpentine form, confident in his extreme power, Typhōn has become a symbol of arrogance and chaos in the world. In *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus describes him as an earth-born monster with a hundred heads, "hissing terror from his formidable jaws while a fierce radiance flashed from his eyes,"<sup>4</sup> intending to overthrow Zeus — yet eventually defeated by Zeus' thunderbolt (*PB*. 351-365). As Chase argues, Hippomedon's sign on his shield is one of the " 'terrible' emblems intended to inspire fear in the enemy" (67). Examining scenes with shield depictions on ancient Greek vases, in his article "Vases Grecs: À Vos Marques," François Lissarrague agrees with Chase that serpentine images were very common emblems on warriors' shields. Therefore we can assume that Aiskhylos and his audience were familiar with such shield descriptions (Lissarrague 240; Chase 69-70). In *L' Autre Guerrier: Archers, Peltastes, Cavaliers Dans L' Imagerie Attique*, Lissarrague argues: "il est la marque même de la valeur guerrière et la signe du rang tenu au combat" ("this [depiction] is in fact the same mark of the martial worth and the insignia of the rank [the warrior] held in battle," Lissarrague 77). By the same token, Aiskhylos employs Typhōn's image to mark aspects of Hippomedon's disposition. According to the scout, the man is inspired by warlike madness and rages like a bacchant, striking terror in his enemies. Indeed, Hippomedon accomplishes his goal, since the scout sees in him the personification of fear boasting at the gates. Even Eteokles sees Hippomedon as a snake threatening the nestlings, namely the Theban citizens; Hippomedon, the Typhōn and drakōn, is Fear itself (*Seven* 490, 497-500, 503).

Gigantic Hippomedon though has been assigned to fight in a fatal gate for him: the Gate of Athena, daughter of Zeus (*Seven* 486-488). For Eteokles, this is a good omen, since it alludes to Athena's victory over the Giants and foreshadows Athena's protection over the Theban citizens (*Seven* 501-503). Moreover, to secure his victory, against Hippomedon and his emblem, Typhōn, Eteokles posts Hyperbios, whose shield depicts Zeus with his lightning bolt. The battle between Argives and Thebans takes cosmic dimensions. Eteokles hopes that once more Zeus, who represents the cosmic order, will defeat the chaos and anarchy that Typhōn conveys and Hippomedon causes through the panic he spreads (*Seven* 510-520). As Tsung-Wen Hu observes, "through the vehicle of the metaphor the mythological past has been ushered into the present" (82).

In Euripides' *Phoinissai*, a play that was produced 57 years later than Aiskhylos' *Seven*, there is no such detailed description of the Argive leaders. The servant who informs Antigone about the leaders never compares Hippomedon to a snake directly. Yet, he does refer to Hippomedon's origin not by saying the name of his city, but by referring to a natural landmark that is connected to a monster: "He is said to be a Mycenaean by birth, and he dwells by the waters of Lerna" (*Phoin.* 125-126). Lerna's waters stand for Argos; however, Lerna may allude to the Hydra as well, the deadly monster that dwelled in that lake. Commenting upon Adrastos' shield, Chase points out that Hydra was an emblem shared locally by all the citizens of Argos (72). Based on Chase's note, I assume that Euripides deliberately refers to Argos as Lerna's water in order to connect the city's emblem with Hippomedon, suggesting that Hippomedon may share Hydra's monstrous desire to exercise violence.

Back to Aiskhylos' *Seven*, another leader that has serpentine qualities is Parthenopaios. He is the fifth leader in the row and, according to the scout's description, he has a terrifying eye, "γοργὸν δ' ὄμμα' ἔχων" (*Seven* 537). The adjective γοργὸν is



cognate with Gorgon, the female monster with hair of snakes and eyes that petrify whomever she looks at.<sup>5</sup> The scout suggests that Parthenopaios' gaze is so terrifying that it petrifies his opponents. Very often, in literature and in vases, warriors are depicted holding a shield with the Gorgon's face, the function of which is both apotropaic and protective.<sup>6</sup> Parthenopaios, though, as the scout portrays him, has the Gorgon's gaze himself; thus, he shares her bestial energy as well. By describing Parthenopaios' disposition as *ᾠμόν*, savage, the scout suggests the warrior's wild nature since the adjective is cognate with *ᾠμηστής*, a raw-flesh eater (*Seven* 536-537). Furthermore, the word *ᾠμόν* connects him with the emblem on his shield: the Sphinx. One of her features, which the scout refers to, is that she eats raw flesh, she is *ᾠμόσπιτος* (*Seven* 541). Both the Gorgon and the Sphinx are a fusion of creatures; their bodies consist of human and animal parts alike. Likewise, Parthenopaios is a man and a boy at the same time, a man with a girl's name, and a human with a monster's look (*Seven* 532-537). Regarding the Gorgon, in "Features of the Mask in Ancient Greece" Vernant argues that, despite her ugliness, she is attractive as well, judging by Poseidon's desire for her and by the traditions that portray her as a beautiful woman before her transformation into a monster (194). Similarly, the Sphinx is highly eroticized. As Emily Vermeule writes in her work *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, the Greek imagination emphasizes the Sphinx's femininity, by giving her woman's breasts. Vermeule continues with a wonderful description of Sphinx: "She combines the clawed body of a man-eater with the wings of a raptor and a face made for love, and a clumsy man who prides himself on his intelligence is likely to end up eaten in her cave" (171). Likewise, Parthenopaios, who has the Gorgon's eyes and bears the Sphinx as his emblem, is dangerously handsome. The scout dedicates three lines to describe his beauty: "the beautiful child of a mountain-bred mother—a warrior, half man, half boy, and his beard's first growth is just now

advancing on his cheeks, his youth in first bloom, thick, upspringing hair” (*Seven* 533-535). Nonetheless, the essence of his character is mirrored in his eyes and not in his innocent appearance.

Apart from a dangerously attractive monster, the Sphinx is known as the riddles’ poser (538). Scholes notes: “Riddles direct attention to language itself, its potential for semantic duplicity, its ability to convey meaning and hide it simultaneously” (qtd. in Zeitlin 68).<sup>7</sup> A serpentine image that may denote double meaning is the snake’s double tongue—a symbol to be examined in detail later. Although the Sphinx does not have a double tongue, she is a master of riddles and, according to Hesiod and Euripides, she is Ekhidna’s daughter, the Viper’s child (*Th.* 326-327; *Ph.* 1019-1025). Ancient Greeks have assigned prophetic powers to serpents due to their association with Mother Earth. Walter Burkert in his *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* and Erwin Rhode in his work *Psyche* remind us that Apollo’s oracle had been founded over Python’s grave, the she-dragon who guarded goddess Earth’s oracle, and whom Apollo slew in order to assume control of the place (Burkert 147; Rhode 98). As a serpent’s descendant, the Sphinx carries a divine knowledge that is very important for the humans: what it means to be a human. Parthenopaios, though, does not relate himself with the riddle’s answer, but with the riddler; instead of being a human and reaching old age eventually, as the riddle goes, Parthenopaios prefers to identify with the violent part of the monster “who eats men raw” (*Seven* 541). Like all arrogant humans and monsters, Parthenopaios is impious; he reveres his spear more than a god and values it more than his eyes—and, of course, he will conquer Thebes in spite of Zeus . . . (*Seven* 529-531). His shield is his eye and his eyes are his spear. Again, Parthenopaios does not see himself as a mere human, but as a conflation of human and armor<sup>8</sup>, a killing machine, as the scout presents him. Zeitlin argues that Parthenopaios “embodies the very notion of the riddle, the man who

personifies the verbal construct of ‘double speak’” (68). Parthenopaios cannot solve the riddle of himself—yet, his enemies who remember the end of the Sphinx will interpret Parthenopaios’ riddle in a different way, foreseeing his own destruction (*Seven* 550-562). In Euripides’ *Phoinissai*, Adrastos shares certain features with Aiskhylos’ Parthenopaios. Instead of the Sphinx, Adrastos carries a shield depicting Hydra, Argos’ emblem, and a hundred snakes carrying off the Theban children in their jaws (*Phoin.* 1134-1138). Apart from an indication of Adrastos’ origin, Hydra functions again as an apotropaic symbol that strikes terror and protects the bearer of it.

Among the Argive leaders, Amphiaraos, the Argive seer, is the only one who fights against Thebes contrary to his will. In *Seven*, not only is he against this war, but he also rebukes Tydeus and Polyneikes in his ultimate effort to avert them (*Seven* 568-586). Amphiaraos is not connected with the snake imagery, and his character juxtaposes with the characters of the warriors mentioned above. The scout portrays him as *ἀνδρα σωφρονέστατον*, a man highly moderate (*Seven* 568); moreover, he mentions that Amphiaraos *is* a good warrior—but he does not wish to appear as such (*Seven* 591-592). This is how the scout interprets the lack of an emblem on Amphiaraos’ shield, suggesting by this that the other warriors may not be as they appear. Moreover, by contrast with the other warriors, Amphiaraos is pious. The scout considers him dangerous because Amphiaraos reveres the gods; therefore, gods are his allies (*Seven* 596). In the end of Aiskhylos’ *Seven* and Euripides’ *Phoinissai*, the proud warriors with or without serpentine qualities lose the war and their lives, despite their performance of confidence and their belief in their own strength and courage. Aiskhylos, in *Seven*, presents all of them dead, and Euripides, in *Phoinissai*, refers clearly only to Kapaneus, Parthenopaios, and Polyneikes’ death. However, in Euripides’ *Suppliants*, all but Adrastos are dead, whereas Amphiaraos has been engulfed alive by earth (*Seven* 792-802; *Ph.* 1104-1201,

1415; E. *Supp.* 636-637, 925-927). His special form of death signifies his divine status; Amphiaraos becomes a divine hero and he receives a cult.<sup>9</sup>

Aiskhylos' poetic art manipulates the Athenian audience so that they identify with their good old enemy, Thebes. He uses the snake imagery in order to demonstrate how war turns the humans into beasts. The scout presents all these heroes who take on aspects of snakes as arrogant, violent, impious, but delusional as well. Death, like the Night in Tydeus' shield, covers forever their warlike cries and their excessive demonstration of power, determining the boundaries between animals, humans, and gods for the warriors and for the audience as well.

#### Grooms and Snakes in Aiskhylos' *Suppliants*

In Aiskhylos' tragedy *Suppliants*, the arrogant characters who take on aspects of snakes are fifty young men from Egypt, Aigyptos' sons, who pursue their cousins, Danaos' daughters, to marry them by force (*Supp.* 816-821). The audience is informed about the young men's disposition indirectly: through the Danaids and through the herald, who represents them. In order to avoid their cousins, Danaos and his daughters flee from Egypt and take refuge in Argos. Tracking their origin from Io, the key-keeper of Hera's temple at Argos, the Danaids claim relationship with the city (*Supp.* 274-276, 291-369). Argos has a special association with snakes. Once, this land suffered from swarming serpents, *δρακονθόμιλον δυσμενῆ ζυνοικίαν*, which Earth had sent up as punishment for old bloody deeds. Apis, Apollo's son, healer and seer, delivered the country from this evil, and, as reward, he is remembered in prayers (*Supp.* 260-270). Therefore, Argos is the

right place for the Danaids, who have come to find protection from men who are “more hostile than malignant serpents” (*Supp.* 511).<sup>10</sup>

Like the arrogant characters who are compared to snakes in the previous tragedies, Aigyptos’ sons are violent, impious, and maddened with delusional thoughts (*Supp.* 104-111, 741-742, 750, 757). As the girls put it, the young men’s *hubris*, outrageous behavior, is that they want to marry them without the girls’ consent (*Supp.* 39, 227-228); such marriage, based on violence, is impious (*Supp.* 9, 227-228). The Danaids indicate their bestial energy by referring to them as ἀρσενοπληθῆ δ’ ἐσμὸν ὕβριστήν, “the thronging swarm of violent men” (*Supp.* 29-30).<sup>11</sup> The word ἐσμός indicates the young men’s large number; however, the word is also proper for animals that live in swarms or flocks. Thus, the young men are indirectly related to Argos’ swarming snakes that Apis extinguished in the past. By contrast, the Danaids present themselves as a “band of women,” θηλυγενῆ στόλον (*Supp.* 28, 1031). The word στόλος denotes humans gathered for a certain expedition. The Danaids portray themselves maintaining their humane qualities whereas their male cousins have lost them and act like irrational beasts.

Apart from associating their cousins with snakes, the girls employ various other predator animals, such as dogs and ravens, to convey the men’s arrogance, violence, and wantonness (*Supp.* 751-752). However, whenever the Danaids compare themselves to animals, they identify with weak or domesticated animals. For example, they see themselves as a heifer, which alludes to Io, their ancestor (*Supp.* 351). As Io abandoned Argos pursued by Hera’s vengeance and transformed to a cow, so do the girls abandoned Egypt pursued by their cousins whom they identify as a wolf (*Supp.* 538-564). However, the comparison is problematic. As Robert Duff Murray notes in his work *The motif of Io in Aeschylus’ Suppliants*, Io succumbs to Zeus’ will whereas the Danaids murder their cousins and future husbands (59). Although the murder takes place in another play of the

Danaids' trilogy, even in this play there are signs that justify Murray's view. For example, when the girls pray to Artemis, they wish that they would remain *ἀδμήτας*, unmarried, untamed (*Supp.* 145-150). Moreover, the Danaids correlate their cousins to Tyreus, who was transformed into a hawk. According to the myth, Tyreus raped his sister-in-law; his wife together with her sister took revenge by killing his son. After the murder, his wife was transformed into a nightingale, always lamenting for her son (*Supp.* 58-76).

Although the girls identify themselves with the nightingale, Tyreus' wife, since they lament continuously for their sufferings, the comparison may in fact imply their fear that their cousins will rape them just as Tyreus raped his wife's sister. Furthermore, Tyreus' story foreshadows the girls' revenge if their cousins force them to marriage. The Danaids hint that they refuse to marry their cousins on account of incest (*Supp.* 330-332)—yet, this is not the first time that relatives marry each other. In Danaids' case, though, the young men, violent as they are, defy Danaos' refusal to give them his daughters (*Supp.* 38). Their action pollutes marriage as if hawks would eat doves (*Supp.* 227-228). Bernard Vernier notices in his article “Les Suppliantes d' Eschyle et l'inceste:”

L'horreur est bien celle d'un viol collectif qui, à la fois, exprime et vient redoubler le rapport de force qui le rend possible. . . . Si ce mariage est souillure, impureté, luxure, ce n'est pas parce qu'il est incestueux mais parce qu'il est violence impie que la loi et les dieux interdisent . . .  
(Vernier 443- 444).

The horror is that of a massive rape, which, at the same time, expresses and comes to intensify the relation of force that makes it possible. . . . If this marriage is defilement, impurity, lust, it is not because it is incestuous but because it is impious violence that the law and the gods forbid . . . .

The Danaids' fear alludes to the corresponding scene in Aiskylos' *Seven*, where the Chorus of Theban women is terrified by the thought of what they may suffer if the Argive army takes their city; again, the Argives are associated with snakes—yet, these are strangers (*Seven* 288-294). The fact that the Danaids' enemies are those who were

supposed to protect them exacerbates their cousins' impiety. Like the Theban women, Danaids too are constantly advised to control themselves and not to exaggerate in their expression of fear (*Supp.* 176, 514, 711-733) In contrast with the Theban women, the Danaids are more active than the formers, who are paralyzed by terror. The girls strike their cousins and the herald that represents them with curses to die (*Supp.* 842-845, 854-857, 867-871). Even before their encounter with the herald, the girls do whatever it takes to avoid their marriage to their cousins by threatening to commit suicide and pollute the city in case that the king refuses to protect them (*Supp.* 457-479). Moreover, Pelasgos' first perception of the girls as "the man-shunning," "flesh-devouring Amazons"<sup>12</sup> may imply a wild energy as well as their barbaric origin (*Supp.* 287). At least in the beginning of the play it is not clear to the king Pelasgos and to the audience whether the girls' case is just or not and whether the young men are as violent and impious as the girls claim.

However, the Egyptians' arrival clarifies the case. Confirming the girls' fears, the herald who represents the girls' cousins threatens to tear out the girls' hair, cut their head, and rip their clothes if they do not get into the boat (*Supp.* 836-841, 859-865, 903-904).<sup>13</sup> The girls call him a two-footed snake, a viper that bites their foot (*Supp.* 895-901). His comparison to a snake evokes the men's comparison to serpents as well indicating that his disposition is similar to the men he represents. Apart from his violent attitude toward the girls, the herald proves himself as uncivilized as the animal with which the girls correlate him. By acting violently in a foreign land, he violates the institution of hospitality. Yet, he has the audacity to accuse Pelasgos for lack of hospitality when the king does not hand him the girls (*Supp.* 911-917, 924-926). Moreover, the herald is impious since he makes fun of the girls who invoke Zeus to save them. Although he declares that he is not afraid of gods that he does not know, when Pelasgos pressures him, he evokes Hermes the Searcher (*Supp.* 872-875, 894-895, 920). The king's firm attitude

makes him leave, but his intense discourse with the king creates the conditions for future war between Egypt and Argos since the king offers asylum and dwellings to the Danaids (*Supp.* 930-965). If the men are like the herald who represents them, then the Danaids are right to refuse to marry them.

At the end of the play, the audience sees Aigyptos' sons negatively since they are arrogant, aggressive, and impious as *drakontes*. Although they too are Io's descendants, they convey nothing that evokes Greece. By contrast, the girls are interested to comply more with the Greek customs and to be incorporated in their new country, proving that they are Io's true descendants. In her article "Greeks, Barbarians and Aeschylus' *Suppliants*," Lynette G. Mitchell explains this antithesis arguing that the play reflects the Athenians' "ideological framework, making distinctions between different kinds of barbarians. Aigyptos' sons are presented as "straightforwardly, stereotypically and negatively 'barbarian' . . . and even the Danaids are not represented in a wholly positive light and by no means represent a 'Greek face' of barbarity" (220). Agreeing with Mitchell, I would add that Aiskhylos employs the opposition between the male and the female Io's descendants, for practical reasons: he needs a reasonable explanation for the murder of Aigyptos' sons, which follows in another play of the trilogy. The young men need to be portrayed negatively, in spite of the fact that as Io's descendants they too have rights when they appear in Argos.

The crisis is resolved, but only temporarily. Neither the herald nor the Aigyptos' sons get the king's message that the girls may follow them only with their own consent, if they are persuaded with pious words and not by compulsion (*Supp.* 940-941, 1031-1033). The tragedy ends by foreshadowing the Egyptians' death — a typical end for arrogant heroes who are compared to snakes — by the Danaids' hands (*Supp.* 1034-1051).



## A Kingdom and a Snake: Aiskhylos' *Persians*

In 472 B.C.E., seven years after the end of the Persian War, Aiskhylos stages his play *Persians*, where he portrays the impact of the Persian defeat in the naval at Salamis as the Chorus of the Elders, chosen men by the king, convey it. Based on the perceptions of his contemporaries about Persia, on his own experience of the war and, obviously, on his imagination, Aiskhylos creates a glorious and terrifying image of Xerxes and Persia, who end up defeated and humiliated.

In the beginning of the play, the Chorus of Elders, waiting for news about Xerxes' expedition in Greece, presents a fierce king whose "eyes flash with the dark glare of a deadly *drakōn*" leading his huge army (*Pers.* 73-75, 81-86). According to Ferber, "serpents are said to 'fascinate' their prey, cast a spell on them with a look" (186). Xerxes' terrifying glance mesmerizes his people, who simultaneously fear and admire him. Moreover, Xerxes' snakelike terrifying gaze guards the palace and his ancestors' wealth, which he is supposed to preserve. The Queen presents him as the eye of the palace, which stands metonymically for the house's master (*Pers.* 168-169, 751-752). Finally, Xerxes' picture supervising the naval at Salamis while sitting on a high heel close to the sea conveys a sense of omnipotence (*Pers.* 466-467).

By using the word *drakōn*, Aiskhylos presents the difference between the Greek and the Persian world regarding ruling. In texts where the tragic heroes are Greek the word is negatively loaded. For example, in *Khoephoroi* the Chorus of Greek women, who also call Klytemnestra and Aigisthos *drakontes*, look forward to their tyrants' death (*Kh.* 1046-1047). In *Persians*, by contrast, the Elders use the word *drakōn* to convey their awe and fear for their king, emotions that a god could inspire. They feel comfortable and perhaps secure and protected by submitting themselves to such king or, better, to any

king. Indicative is the fact that the Chorus, although old men, call their queen as “mother” (*Pers.* 215). Moreover, the Elders refer to Xerxes and Darios as equal to gods, *ἰσόθεος φώς*, and gods themselves, although the former is still alive and the latter is dead (*Pers.* 80, 157, 634, 641-643). By these expressions, Aiskhylos suggests that the Persians are unable to distinguish between gods and humans since they consider their kings as gods. An analogous adjective, *δαίμονι ἴσος*, equal to a superhuman force, is traced in epic and lyric poetry. In the *Hero*, Nagy argues that such phrases accompany names of heroes who are about to die at war, such as Patroklos and Hektor, or have a near death experience in the battlefield of love, when it comes to Sappho’s poems. The phrases indicate the climactic moment of the god-hero antagonism, where the hero can be equated with a supernatural power (109-145). In *Persians*, though, the phrase conveys the Persian way of thinking regarding ruling, contrasted with the Athenian one. Although the Athenians are “not called slaves or subjects to any man,”<sup>14</sup> the Persians subject themselves to their kings (*Pers.* 242). For the Greek audience the Chorus’ attribution of divine qualities to Xerxes while he is still alive, absent from his kingdom, and at war with Greece consists in hubris and foreshadows Xerxes’ defeat.

Xerxes represents a whole nation. Not only Xerxes looks fierce like a *drakōn* but also his army’s leaders and the whole army is “a fearsome sight to behold.” The Chorus indicates their power by using the adjectives *φοβερός* and *δεινός*, terrifying and terrible (*Pers.* 27, 40, 48, 58). The idea that the Persians have of their king reflects the idea that they have for themselves and their position in this world: their equal-to-gods king rules over a race that sprung from gold (*Pers.* 80). The Persians combine arrogance toward other nations with a slavish attitude toward their kings. It is their destiny, they believe, that urges them to conduct wars and destroy countries (*Pers.* 93-106). The Elders repeatedly use compound words with the prefix *πολυ-*, many/much, which together with

the word χρυσός, gold, depict a glamorous, powerful, and excessively rich country that seems invincible (*Pers.* 3, 11, 53). The word *gold*, though, in addition to wealth, can be associated with divinity.<sup>15</sup> In the *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience* Pericles Georges argues that, historically, the Persians themselves promoted the idea of their relation to divinity in order to seem invincible (Georges 114; Hdt. 7.136.1). However, in the *Theatrical Cast*, Hall argues that the 5th century Athenian audience sees the Asians as effeminized and servile because of their wealth—yet, as Hall shows, this perception is rather a product of the Greek imagination born from “a period of struggle for imperial control of the Aegean” (218-220).

In *Persians*, Aiskhylos suggests that Xerxes welcomes the Chorus’ idea regarding his snakelike qualities, which cause fear, and his equation with gods. His delusional perception about himself makes him impetuous: despite his father’s instructions, Xerxes starts a war against Greece, bringing Zeus’ oracles to fulfillment faster than Darios hopes (*Pers.* 739-744, 783). However, his people admire him because he has accomplished the inconceivable deed to put a yoke on Hellespont, a bridge, and pass with his army to the neighboring country (*Pers.* 65-72). Darios’ ghost, though, thinks otherwise: his son must have been mad to act with such impiety, especially against Poseidon (*Pers.* 744-751). As Tsu-Wen Hu argues, the gods have placed the natural boundaries of the Hellespont between Europe and Asia for a reason; therefore Xerxes should not “overturn what the gods had established” (193). The Hellespont stands as boundary between two different worlds that appear personified as two women in beautiful clothes in the Queen’s dream: “one in Persian garb, the other in Dorian attire. . . ; He [Xerxes] yoked them both to his car and placed the collar-straps upon their necks. The one bore herself proudly in these trappings and kept her mouth obedient to the rein. The other struggled and with her hands tore apart the harness of the car” (*Pers.* 181-196).<sup>16</sup> Due to his overconfidence, Xerxes

easily trusts a Greek spy and “with a cheerful heart” he prepares his army for the naval battle that ultimately fills the sea with his soldiers’ corpses (*Pers.* 361-362, 372, 419-421).<sup>17</sup> In the battle of Salamis, Poseidon is Xerxes’ divine competitor; thus, the king with the glance of a fierce *drakōn* is defeated by the dark-eyed Greek ships with which the god punishes him (*Pers.* 557-563).<sup>18</sup>

Aiskhylos presents the Chorus, Darios, and the Queen reacting differently toward Xerxes’ defeat. Their reactions reveal their contribution—if any—in the construction of Xerxes’ delusional idea about himself and their responsibility for the war’s outcome. Darios assigns the war’s outcome to Zeus’ will, to Xerxes’ young age and arrogant disposition, and to his bad counselors (*Pers.* 739-752, 782-783). The Queen agrees with Darios that certain wicked counselors urged Xerxes to this war and she adds that they accused him as coward for doing nothing to increase his father’s wealth.<sup>19</sup> This, however, and Xerxes’ motivation to avenge the Persians’ death at Marathon suggests that behind the fierce *drakōn*-like glance, Xerxes hides his fear that he may be inferior to his father and this is what he gets in the end (*Pers.* 476-477, 753-758). Regarding the Chorus, the Elders easily transform their admiration for him as the divine king with the snakelike gaze to his condemnation: “Xerxes took them . . . Xerxes lost them . . . Xerxes handled everything unwisely” (*Pers.* 550-553). In the lament that they share with Xerxes, the Elders question him about the fate of the Persian leaders, “the flowers of Persia” (*Pers.* 922-927, 956-960, 966-973, 978-986). The Elders, though, do not reflect on the fact that Xerxes’ expedition against Greece took place because they did not advise him properly; both the Queen and Darios need to remind them their duty to consult Xerxes, so that he will stop offending the gods with his outrageous behavior (*Pers.* 527-531, 829-831). Furthermore, realizing that despite the disaster the Chorus does not get the message, Darios’ ghost explicitly tells the Elders not to think of any other expedition and not to

desire wealth that belongs to others (*Pers.* 795-797, 824-826, 840-842). As long as the Elders refuse to face reality, they will not be able to advise Xerxes wisely.

At the end of the play, Xerxes' image as the terrifying king with the gaze of a *drakōn* and Persia's image as the invincible nation have been completely deconstructed. Xerxes who represents Persia appears on stage / in Susa humiliated, with his ripped robe, lamenting like a woman together with the Elders for the dead Persians, for the gods' punishment, and for his own sufferings (*Pers.* 909-1076). Denuded of escorts, with limbs paralyzed at the sight of his aged citizens, Xerxes would like to escape and wishes for his death (*Pers.* 913- 917, 1036). However, there is no escape for Xerxes either in delusional ideas or through death. His punishment is to face and live with the disaster that he himself created and this is worse than death (*Pers.* 827-828).

#### Snakes and Tyranny in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon* and *Khoephoroi*

In his trilogy *Oresteia*, Aiskhylos uses many animal images to describe his characters and the tensions among them. Explaining this tendency, in *Greek Tragedy*, Hall argues that the humans are "at the infantile stage of social development." Therefore, resorting to the images of wild nature, hunt, and the farm helps them "to conceptualize the universe they inhabit" (200). However, in the trilogy, the snake image is the dominant one conveying manifold meanings. In brief, in *Agamemnon*, Cassandra compares Klytemnestra to an *ἀμφίσβαίνα*, a snake that goes back and forth, indicating mainly her deceitful character (*Ag.* 1233). Yet, in the same play, there are traces that allude to a snake image used to display arrogance as well. In *Khoephoroi*, the snake is associated with Klytemnestra, Aigisthos, and Orestes, and indicates Klytemnestra's and

Aigisthos' arrogance and Orestes' deception. In *Eumenides*, the snake image appears again through the Erinyes' body and with them it is transformed into a benevolent energy through Justice. Since in this chapter my interest is in arrogance, I will focus mainly on Klytemnestra and Aigisthos.

As we have seen already, most of the arrogant characters who are compared to snakes are male. In *Agamemnon* and *Khoephoroi*, though, Klytemnestra asserts a place among them. In both of these plays, the traditional roles of the two sexes are reversed: Klytemnestra is the man of the house. Right from the beginning of *Agamemnon*, alluding to Klytemnestra, the Watchman says that the woman who rules in Argos thinks like a man: “ὄδε γὰρ κρατεῖ /γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ” (*Ag.* 10-11). The Chorus shares the same idea about their queen: “γύναι, κατ’ ἄνδρα σῶφρον’ εὐφρόνως λέγεις.” “Lady, you speak wisely, as a balanced man” (*Ag.* 351). Hall observes that Klytemnestra's speech reveals knowledge from spheres far beyond household, such as hunting and the ocean, or geography and topography, as it appears through her description of the relay of beacons (*Ag.* 312, 958 –60, 1375–6; Hall 215). Although Klytemnestra's masculine qualities bring her closer to the other arrogant heroes who take on aspects of snakes, she diverges from them by exhibiting rhetorical skills. These skills, however, apply more to the cunning characters that we will examine in the next chapter. Klytemnestra's speech reveals both her wicked spirit and her arrogance.

Klytemnestra's first association with snakes is implied through her own words. Before Agamemnon's arrival on stage, Klytemnestra addresses the herald saying that there is no sweeter light to watch, *δρακεῖν*, than this, when her husband returns home, and she orders to unbar the gates (*Ag.* 600-4). By choosing the infinitive *δρακεῖν* instead of *όρᾶν*, Aiskhylos may suggest an allusion to the word *δράκων*, a big snake, which guards a sacred place or a treasure and kills whoever comes close. Indeed, this day's light is

priceless for Klytemnestra and she has been guarding it years and years through her Watchman. This day puts an end to any anxieties about Agamemnon's return and, if plans work well, it will be the beginning of her reign with Aigisthos free from Agamemnon's presence. Moreover, Klytemnestra presents herself as the guardian of Agamemnon's house, "a watchful dog" (*Ag.* 606-607). In Greek myths we find hybrid creatures whose body is a compilation of dog and snake, such as Hades' watchdog Kerberos. Klytemnestra presents herself as a watchdog, but soon she will act like a *drakōn*, by killing Agamemnon and Cassandra and by keeping Orestes away from his property with the pretext of protection from possible enemies who may revolt in the absence of Agamemnon (*Ag.* 877-886). The palace is now the threshold for Hades, and Klytemnestra, like Kerberos, watches Agamemnon and Cassandra so that they will get in but never get out of there alive. Cassandra, who knows this, calls Klytemnestra Hades' mother (*Ag.* 1235).

In addition to her masculine way of thinking, Klytemnestra shares fury with the other male arrogant characters too. In *Agamemnon*, Klytemnestra has serious reasons to be mad at her husband. Apart from her daughter's sacrifice, Agamemnon brings home Cassandra to share his bed (*Ag.* 950-955). Klytemnestra, though, is not the typical submissive wife. She involves her husband in a battle of words and she wins (*Ag.* 940-943). Her boldness, her certainty that she is rightfully angry, and Aigisthos' love make her feel invincible (*Ag.* 1406, 1431-1438). In *Agamemnon*, fury and poison are associated since both may be lethal. Foreseeing her own death, Cassandra says about Klytemnestra: "As if brewing a drug [*φάρμακον*], she vows that with her wrath [*κότῳ*] she will mix requital for me too" (*Ag.* 1260-1261). Klytemnestra's emotions of revenge and wrath are like liquid substances, which Klytemnestra produces, contains, and brews in her mind, thus, making her own self poisonous. Here, one may think of Klytemnestra as a brewing

pot for drugs, or a snake, which contains its poison hidden in its own body. This idea becomes clearer in *Khoephoroi*, where Orestes calls his mother a sea snake and a viper; a mere touch of her could make one rot (*Kh.* 995-996).<sup>20</sup> Like the epic heroes, Klytemnestra takes part in a bloody ordeal, *ἀγών*, and wins (*Ag.* 1377-1379). Klytemnestra's rage reaches cannibalism, which she demonstrates by the way she describes her husband's murder in full detail, rejoicing in the spurt of Agamemnon's blood that hit her (*Ag.* 1377-1394). As for Cassandra, Klytemnestra sees her murder as a side dish, *παροψώνημα*, to her delight (*Ag.* 1446-1447). Her derangement surprises the Elders that wonder whether she ate or drunk something that has disturbed her mind (*Ag.* 1407-1410). As such, her rage correlates with Achilles' rage toward Hektor, whose flesh he would cut into pieces and eat raw if he could (*Il.* 22.345-349)

As soon as Klytemnestra defuses her wrath through the two murders, she gives a recital of arrogance: with *ἀτρέστῳ καρδίᾳ*, fearless heart, she makes clear to the Chorus that she feels justified through her actions and, therefore, their opinion means nothing to her (*Ag.* 1401-1406). Despite her triumphal demonstrations, Klytemnestra assigns Agamemnon's murder to a supernatural power, "a phantom resembling that corpse's wife, the ancient bitter evil spirit of Atreus" who has killed Agamemnon for the death of Thyestes' children (*Ag.* 1497-1504). By identifying herself with a supernatural force, though, Klytemnestra transgresses the limits between mortals and gods. *Agamemnon* ends with Klytemnestra feeling omnipotent. Agamemnon's death means for her that Justice and the gods are by her side. Moreover, Orestes is still very young and away from home so as to take revenge. As for the Chorus, these are just old people, whose words are "empty barkings" (*Ag.* 1672-1673).

Comparing the play *Agamemnon* with visual art of classical Greece which draws upon the same topic, in *Myth into Art: Poet and Painter in Classical Greece*, H. A.



Shapiro ascertains that it was Aiskhylos' innovation to present Klytemnestra as a political figure who plans and executes Agamemnon's murder, leaving for Aigisthos a subsidiary role. In contrast, both visual representations and the pre-Aiskhylean literature, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, stress Aigisthos' role as the illegitimate usurper of Agamemnon's throne (Shapiro 135-136). For the tragedy, though, the reversal of the roles is the rule—not the exception.

In *Agamemnon*, there is no snake imagery connected with Aigisthos. However, it is worth saying a few things about this character, in order to understand why the Chorus in *Khoephoroi* calls him a *drakōn* (*Kh.* 1044-1047). In *Agamemnon*, Aigisthos is as arrogant, wrathful, and self-righteous as Klytemnestra. For Aigisthos, Agamemnon's death is the realization of Thyestes' curse to perish the race of Pleisthenes since Atreus has fed his father, Thyestes, with the flesh of his own children (*Ag.* 1577-1611). By committing adultery, though, and killing Agamemnon, Aigisthos perpetrates both his father's and his uncle's crimes. Due to his violent attitude, the Chorus calls him a tyrant, but no one seems to respect him. In *Agamemnon*, Cassandra calls him *λέοντ' ἀναλκιν*, a strengthless lion, and *οἰκουρόν*, a housekeeper whereas the Chorus calls him openly a woman<sup>21</sup> (*Ag.* 1224-1225, 1633, 1625-1626). Like all the arrogant characters who are compared to snakes, both Aigisthos and Klytemnestra lack of moderation, *σωφροσύνη*, or better, as Rademaker puts it, "to them, *σωφρονεῖν* is the prerequisite of the socially inferior, who should avoid offending their superiors. . . . From their mouths, the injunction to be *σώφρων* amounts to an order to obey and keep quiet" (Rademaker 100; *Ag.* 1421-5, 1620, 1664).

In *Khoephoroi*, Aiskhylos uses explicitly the snake imagery to formulate his characters and convey arrogance, cruelty, and deception. Klytemnestra and Aigisthos are already established tyrants, but they do not feel as secure as they were in *Agamemnon*.

Since Orestes has grown up, he is a constant threat, for he may return at any time and claim what they withhold illegally (*Kh.* 716, 915-917). Therefore, any news about him must be carefully examined (*Kh.* 734-743, 851-854). Klytemnestra's and Aigisthos' main qualities have not changed in *Khoephoroi*: still, Klytemnestra is the mind whereas Aigisthos is the muscles, but with a woman's mind (*Kh.* 304-305). By thinking and acting more like a man, Klytemnestra rejects the traditional role of a nourishing, protective mother; rather, she is more like an evil stepmother.<sup>22</sup> Orestes and Elektra see themselves as "the orphaned brood of a father eagle that perished in the meshes, in the coils of a fierce viper." After their father's death they are in danger as well (*Kh.* 247-250).

The tyrants' cruelty and the terror they strike is indicated also through their comparison to the Gorgon. It is not clear, though, whom the Chorus considers as the Gorgon: it may be either Klytemnestra since the Chorus' exhortation to Orestes about killing his mother precedes, or Aigisthos, since the Chorus meets him first, right after they exhort Orestes to do his duty (*Kh.* 831-837). Or, it can be both Aigisthos and Klytemnestra since the Chorus calls both as *drakontes* ultimately. Eventually, with the Chorus' cooperation and Pylades' support in a crucial moment, Orestes kills both Aigisthos and Klytemnestra. The Chorus exults in the tyrants' death since Orestes has liberated Argos from two *drakontes* (*Kh.* 1044-1047). The same *Perseus-Medusa* motif appears in Euripides' *Elektra* as well, where Aigisthos is identified with the Gorgon explicitly whereas Klytemnestra is identified with it implicitly. The Chorus foreshadows Aigisthos' murder by singing a song about Achilles' shield, which depicts Perseus decapitating the Gorgon in presence of Hermes (*El.* 458-463). When Orestes arrives holding Aigisthos' cutting head, the Messenger who announces him to Elektra compares Aigisthos' head with the Gorgon's (*El.* 856-859). Finally, when Orestes is about to kill his mother he imitates Perseus by avoiding Klytemnestra's sight, thus, equating her with

Medusa. One glance at his mother can immobilize him as Medusa petrifies her victims who look at her (*El.* 1221-1223).

Having no insight or remorse for their actions and motivations, Aigisthos and Klytemnestra retain their bestial energy until their death. In *Agamemnon*, as Zeitlin observes in her article “The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*,” due to their self-deception, the protagonists even use sacrificial imagery, when they really mean murder: “Self-deception as to the nature of their acts and as to their own natures is revealed in their glorification of their corrupted justice as sacrifice” (495, 498). Furthermore, in *Khoephoroi*, although Orestes identifies himself with the snake in Klytemnestra’s dream, she never envisions herself like a snake, as Heath observes in *The Talking Greeks* (235). The same applies to Aigisthos. The consequences of Klytemnestra’s and Aigisthos’ delusions become obvious in *Khoephoroi*. By guarding themselves with their partial sense of Justice, Klytemnestra and Aigisthos are entrapped and isolated in their own world. It is interesting that the stranger’s / Orestes’ origin from Phoea does not alarm Klytemnestra although she is scared by her nightmare the previous night. Judging by the nurse’s words, when she leaves the palace to summon Aigisthos, Klytemnestra hears what she wants to hear: Orestes is dead (*Kh.* 737-740). When she realizes that she and Aigisthos will die by treachery as they too used treachery, it is too late (*Kh.* 887-888). Nor in *Eumenides*, the last play of the trilogy, we see any progress in Klytemnestra’s mindset. As Rademaker notes, after death Klytemnestra treats the Erinyes as if they were her lazy servants and stirs them up to avenge her death (120).

Connected with Klytemnestra and Aigisthos, the snake imagery has only negative meaning, but regarding Orestes, the snake as symbol is ambivalent: on the one hand, it is benevolent for the citizens of Argos, but on the other hand, it relates to an abhorrent crime, matricide. Klytemnestra dies without any hope of changing her mindset. Yet, the

disastrous results of such attitude start a radical, positive change in the judicial system of humans, as we will see in *Eumenides* later.

### A Snake against a God: Euripides' *Bakkhai*

So far, the previous characters connected to serpents have insulted the gods indirectly. There is one arrogant character, though, who fights a god face-to-face: Pentheus, Thebes' ruler, turns directly against Dionysos. In Euripides' *Bakkhai*, Dionysos appears in Thebes as a Lydian stranger, in order to reveal himself as god, to punish the Theban citizens who reject his divine origin by Zeus, and to establish his cult. Pentheus stubbornly refuses to acknowledge and revere Dionysos as god. For this reason, he ends up mutilated by a band of maenads and his pieces scattered on the mountain.

Although both Dionysos and Pentheus trace their mothers' origin from Kadmos, Thebes' founder, and Harmonia, Ares' and Aphrodite's daughter, their origin from their fathers' side bequeaths them different qualities. On the one hand, since Dionysos descends from Zeus and he is a god himself, he tames and manipulates the wild nature either for good or for bad. Dionysos' relationship with snakes offers such an example. When Dionysos was born, Zeus crowned him with snakes and since then these animals accompany and serve Dionysos' female bands of followers (*Bak.* 99-104). They lick the Theban maenads' cheeks and clean the blood drops after the maenads' fight against Pentheus' men (*Bak.* 697-698, 768-769). Moreover, Dionysos himself may transform into an animal; the many-headed snake is one of the forms with which his bacchantes invoke him to manifest himself (*Bak.* 1017-1018).

Pentheus, on the other hand, traces his origin from Ekhion, one of the *Spartoi*, the Sown Men, who sprung from the earth when Kadmos sowed the *drakōn*'s teeth after he killed him (*Bak.* 264-265, 995-996, 1015-1016, 1030). This *drakōn*, though, is Ares' son, as we find in Euripides' *Phoinissai*, and as such, he embodies his father's aggressiveness (*Phoin.* 657-661, 940-941). Kadmos sows fury and reaps fury. The ancient scholars report the myth about the *Spartoi*, who ultimately kill each other, but five survive.<sup>23</sup> Ekhion is one of the survivors and his name relates linguistically with the word *ἔχιδνα*, viper. Pentheus inherits Ares' and the *drakōn*'s aggressiveness, which targets invariably everyone. His messenger, for example, is afraid to report an incident with the maenads to Pentheus, because he is afraid of the king's "irascibility," his mind's "hastiness," and his "too royal temper" (*Bak.* 664-671).<sup>24</sup> In vain Dionysos and the people around him repeatedly advise him to calm down and be moderate (*Bak.* 310, 647, 670-671, 790). Only once does the Chorus refer to Pentheus' descent from Ekhion in such a way as to imply noble birth, alluding to Ekhion's contribution to found Thebes together with Kadmos (*Bak.* 264-265). After this time, Pentheus' origin from Ekhion is repeatedly referred to with negative connotations, stressing Pentheus' connection to the Theban *drakōn* (*Bak.* 995-996, 1015-1016).<sup>25</sup> After Pentheus' death, the Chorus connects him directly with the *drakōn*, calling him the *drakōn*'s offspring (*Bak.* 1115). Thus, the Chorus signifies Pentheus' progress toward dehumanization after a series of violent actions that Pentheus commits against the Theban women, Dionysos' Asiatic followers, and Dionysos himself, including threats, incarceration and an attempt to murder the god (*Bak.* 228-247, 443-444, 492-497, 615-631).

As Aristotle argues in his *Politics*, "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god . . . when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; . . . if he has not virtue, he is the

most unholy and the most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony” (4; bk.1, 1253<sup>a2</sup>).<sup>26</sup> Such is Pentheus’ case, since he is violent, he fights against a god, and he projects onto Dionysos’ female bands lust that they do not have. Pentheus’ sick mind projects its sickness everywhere (*Bak.* 311, 332). Thus, he believes that the Stranger/Dionysos “introduces a new disease and pollutes” his citizens’ marriage beds (*Bak.* 233-238, 352-354).<sup>27</sup> Also, Pentheus suspects the female followers of Dionysos on Kithairon for licentious behavior due to the “unhealthy” bacchic rites (*Bak.* 217-225, 260-262). Finally, he assigns Kadmos’ decision to join Dionysos’ band to his old age while he sees greediness behind Teiresias’ involvement (*Bak.* 250-252, 255-257).

Contrary to the arrogant heroes who take on aspects of snakes and are not good with words, Pentheus articulates speech—yet, he speaks nonsense since he has no insight (*Bak.* 268-271). Although physically healthy, Pentheus is mentally blind and deaf. Despite his many opportunities to see that Dionysos is a real god, Pentheus remains stubbornly stuck to his opinion. First, Teiresias and Kadmos try to change his mindset by narrating the facts about Dionysos’ birth and his offer to humanity (*Bak.* 278-309). Then, Dionysos miraculously escapes from the prison where Pentheus puts him, and shatters down the palace with an earthquake (*Bak.* 616-636). Later, the messengers report miraculous events that take place in the city and on the mountain, where the city’s maenads are gathered, but all that Pentheus hears is that he loses his battles, which makes him more and more furious (*Bak.* 443-450, 677-774, 778-786). Fearing that he loses control, Pentheus treats his subordinates in an authoritarian manner, which denotes a tyrant. In vain Kadmos warns Pentheus that he isolates himself (*Bak.* 331-332). As Richard Seaford observes in his work *Dionysos*, “the individualism of Pentheus is absolute, the boundaries of his psyche are impermeable, and so he remains oddly unaware of the miraculous power of Dionysos that is obvious to everybody else” (*Bak.*

33). His excessive self-confidence is an incurable madness that brings him to fulfill what his name prophesizes about him: he will bring sorrow to Kadmos' house (*Bak.* 311, 325-327, 367-369).

In *Bakkhai*, Euripides suggests that the humans relate with Dionysos either out of free will or by force. Dionysos' Asiatic followers, who worship him out of their free will, stay connected with him without losing themselves whereas the Theban women and ultimately Pentheus, who reject Dionysos' divinity, lose contact with reality: they enjoy supernatural forces, but they also become indiscriminately destructive toward animals and humans (*Bak.* 604-613, 692-764). Madness seems to be the surgical instrument that cuts down arrogance and brings mortals back to their senses whereas the ultimate measure is death.<sup>28</sup> Since Pentheus cannot be cured by any means, Dionysos applies the last measure. For Pentheus, Dionysos uses the infinitive of the verb *θεραπεύω*, of which one meaning is 'to be an attendant' to one's ordeal, but another meaning is 'to cure' as Nagy notes (*Bak.* 932; Nagy 163-164). Although Pentheus thinks that Dionysos will attend him in his transformation into a bacchant in order to spy the maenads at Kithairon, the god implies that he intends to cure Pentheus' sick ego. The treatment starts with light hallucinations. Under Dionysos' spell, Pentheus sees double suns and double Thebes, but he does not see that he has become the double of Dionysos. On this, Zeitlin remarks, in her article "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," that Pentheus' transformation into a woman is necessary since he will become the god's surrogate beast-victim in the ritual on the mountain (64). Pentheus is so anxious to look like a real bacchant that he trusts the stranger to take care of all the little details of his transformation (*Bak.* 918-944). As Nagy observes, the problem with Pentheus is that he does not want to be a bacchant but only to look like one (590). Like the heroes of the tragedies above, he usurps qualities that he imagines he has. Eventually, Pentheus suffers

what he was afraid of most: dressed up as a woman, he is defeated by women who tear him apart under the guidance of his own mother (*Bak.* 1024-1052). Pentheus and the Theban maenads, through madness, learn how to be *σώφρονες*, moderate, but all too late.

Apart from aggressiveness, Pentheus and his ancestor, the Theban *drakōn*, share few more things. As the *drakōn* kept the people away from the vital waters of Dirke, Pentheus tries to keep his people away from Dionysos' vital medicine for misery, wine, considering it as the source of lust and disease (*Bak.* 216-225, 278-285, 353-354).

Although Pentheus' primary motivation is to protect the city's order from a stranger who turns it upside-down, his mistake is that he takes everything too personally. Moreover, Pentheus' end parallels the Theban *drakōn*'s end; as Kadmos had to kill the *drakōn*, which guarded Dirke's waters, in order to set the foundations of Thebes, so Dionysos kills Pentheus, the *drakōn*'s offspring and guardian of Thebes, in order to establish his rites. As Kadmos scatters on earth the *drakōn*'s teeth from which the *Spartoi* rise and among them the first citizens of Thebes, so Dionysos scatters on the mountain Pentheus' members through the maenads, making Pentheus the prototypical example for initiation into his mysteries (*Bak.* 1137-1139).<sup>29</sup> Still, as Dionysos promises, Pentheus gains glory "reaching all the way up to the sky," not by defeating the bacchants, though, as Pentheus arrogantly hopes (*Bak.* 780-786). Pentheus will be commemorated through the ages because of his terrifying experiences and extreme suffering (*Bak.* 963-964, 971-976). Therefore, as the *drakōn* sets the foundation for Thebes, Pentheus is transformed from a destructive king in myth to a beneficial hero in ritual.



### Chapter III

#### Snakes and Deception: Criminal Minds

Regarding human mentality, the snake as symbol is ambiguous and conveys wisdom, but also cunning intelligence. The tragic poets often use snake imagery with its negative connotation to portray characters who plot revenge or hit first in order to prevent their enemy's attack. After I point out the particular features of snakes, which are used metaphorically to denote deceit, I will examine how the snake imagery functions in the following tragedies: Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon* and *Khoephoroi*, Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, and Euripides' *Andromakhe*, *Trojan Women*, and *Orestes*.<sup>30</sup>

From the serpents' ability to hide themselves by adjusting their color and their body to their surrounding derive metonymies, metaphors, and similes in tragedy that indicate cunningness and treachery. Like snakes that lurk secretly so that no one can notice their presence even though they might be near, so certain treacherous characters act in tragedy, transgressing with their plots institutions that are supposed to maintain the social net. As Elisabeth Belfiore notes in *Murder among Friends*, marriage, supplication, and hospitality are formal relationships, involving reciprocal rights and obligations, which bring alien people into a close relationship, a *philia* (144). In *Hero*, Nagy defines the word *φίλος* [philos], which is used in Greek poetry, as *near and dear*. Whoever is called *φίλος* is placed high at the hero's ascending scale of affection (63). The tragic poets use snake imagery to denote transgressions regarding relationships between characters that are *near and dear* either through kinship or through institutions such as those mentioned above. For example, in Sophokles' *Antigone*, Kreon accuses his niece Ismene of treachery and calls her a viper that drinks his blood secretly (*Ant.* 531-532).

Having been close to their victims, such characters have the advantage of knowing them well; thus, either they have their opponents' trust already, or they know how to earn it in order to drag them into ruin. This advantage makes them invisible and invincible enemies like the snake with which they are compared.

The snakes' movement is another feature that the tragic poets use to denote their characters' instability and to trigger alertness and fear: snakes slither and go back and forth, but when they attack they move fast and unexpectedly.<sup>31</sup> Burkert, in *Greek Religion*, considers the serpent as the most unsettling creature: "uncanny in shape and behaviour, it will appear without warning, perhaps to lick libation leftovers, then will vanish as swiftly as it came" (195). In Greek tragedy, the poets use snake imagery to indicate their characters' insincerity and inconsistency. For example, the verb *ἐλίσσω* (move rapidly, go to and fro, revolve,) and its derivatives describe the snake's movement; however, the tragic poets use it also to convey their characters' devious mindset and cunningness. For instance, in Euripides' *Andromakhe*, Andromakhe uses the adjective *ἐλικτὰ*, devious, whirling around, to describe the Spartan mindset and to condemn the Spartans en masse as treacherous plotters (*Andr.* 445-452). Moreover, Aelian refers to *ἀμφίβαινα*, a mythical snake with two heads that can move in either direction (9.23). In Greek tragedy, *ἀμφίβαινα* embodies this notion of doubleness, instability, and cunningness. Klytemnestra in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon* is a representative example connected to this specific snake for her hypocritical behavior (*Ag.* 1233).

A third feature of snakes that the tragic poets exploit in order to portray cunningness and deception is the serpents' double tongue. In Greek tragedy, double tongue stands metonymically for an ambiguous language that certain heroes use in order to lure their enemies and hide their true intentions. For some wily characters, like Odysseus and Klytemnestra, speech is their main weapon. As Odysseus states in

Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, "it is the tongue, not actions, that rules in all things for mortals" (*Ph.* 98-99). In *Politics*, Aristotle argues that speech is a human feature intended to distinguish between the good and the bad, since only humans have "any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state" (1.1253a2; 3-4). The deceitful characters, however, break the language norms and load their words with new meaning, which their counterparts cannot grasp until it is too late. Persuasion in Greek tragedy as it is conveyed through the image of a snake's double tongue is another form of violence. In "Tragedy and Rhetoric," Victor Bers describes persuasion as the weak sister of physical force and deceit, having protean attributes such as aggression, seduction, and irresistible power (184).

The tragic poets portray both male and female characters taking on serpentine qualities that denote guile. Thus, the tragic poets challenge the typical stereotypes about the women's inclination toward deceitful plots, which sometimes their plays reflect, and highlight the fact that guile and treachery is a human nature's vice regardless of gender. The fact that one can find contradictory ideas about gender and guile even in the same tragedy proves the poets' manipulation of this social construction. For example, in Euripides' *Ion*, on the one hand the Tutor encourages Kreousa to resort in a plot, a woman's deed, in order to get rid of Ion; on the other hand, the Chorus of women sings against men "who plot injustice, yet they find nice excuses to conceal their plans" (*Ion* 832-834, 843-846).

Whereas the arrogant characters that are compared to snakes claim their case openly standing for their own selves, the deceitful ones need the others' conscious or unconscious cooperation. In Greek tragedy, it takes two or more to accomplish a plot, including the Chorus: for example, in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon*, Klytemnestra cooperates

with Aigisthos and in Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, Odysseus needs Neoptolemos' contribution to persuade Philoktetes to follow them to Troy. Although many characters may participate in a plot, usually only the physical perpetrator is compared to a serpent. To earn the title of *drakōn*, a hero must participate actively in a crime. For example, in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi*, although Pylades supports Orestes in his plan to kill Klytemnestra and Aigisthos, he is not compared to a serpent (*Kh.* 560 -564). Conversely, in Euripides' *Orestes*, Pylades is as much of a *drakōn* as Orestes is, since he plans and actively partakes in Helen's murder and Hermione's entrapment (*Or.* 1403-1406). Compared to the arrogant heroes, the tricksters are less primitive in their way of thinking. In contrast to the proud characters who underestimate their opponents due to overconfidence in their might or power, the deceitful characters study their enemies before they act. The enemy's power and abilities need to be reduced or annihilated first; the deceitful characters set mind against might. However, despite how well they study their opponents, there is always something that they miss, either because they act under fear and despair, or because they are overconfident about their intellectual abilities. Consequently, the tricksters' actions lead to the same point that the actions of the proud characters lead, namely, chaos.

Compared to the arrogant tragic heroes who take on aspects of snakes, the deceitful characters attract divine intervention, which usually restores order instead of punishing them with death. Among these treacherous heroes, however, Klytemnestra and Aigisthos are punished with death, perhaps because their victory makes them arrogant as well. The different treatment of arrogance and deception by the tragic poets shows that the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Greek society could tolerate deception to some extent. Moreover, through their oracles or by manifesting themselves, gods appear to cooperate with certain deceitful heroes or to use them as instruments for a higher purpose. An unattributed

fragment of Aiskhylos notes: “God does not reject deception in a just cause” (Fr. 301).<sup>32</sup> Such an example of direct divine intervention in human affairs is in Sophokles’ *Philoktetes*, when the deified Herakles intervenes to manifest Zeus’ will and support the purpose of Odysseus’ plots when the hero fails (*Ph.* 1415-1444). Humans, however, cannot perceive the divine plans through their mortal eyes; therefore, they experience them as suffering and as gods’ betrayal. In his *Art of Euripides*, Donald J. Mastronarde suggests that the heroes’ frustration and failure signifies their acknowledgment of human insufficiency in the face of the conditions of human nature, which are personified by the gods (306). From the perspective of psychology, Carl Jung’s *trickster-figure* complies with the deceitful heroes who are compared to snakes in Greek tragedy. Jung links symbolically the *trickster-figure* to the snake and suggests that the *trickster-figure* reflects “a human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level . . . a subhuman and superhuman” at the same time (260-263, 290, 318, 324). The *trickster-figure* becomes the victim of his own malicious actions, exacted out of vengeance. Similarly to the tragic poets, Jung suggests that suffering is important in order to gain freedom from ignorance. Only then can the *trickster-figure* become a *wounded healer* and enlighten and heal other people (255-6, 271-2). Correspondingly, in Greek tragedy, the reenactment of the tricksters’ failure and suffering may lead to the audience’s certain level of introspection and self-knowledge.

Having examined the connection between the snake imagery and deceitfulness in tragedy, I will now explore how the particular points mentioned above apply in the particular plays.

When Love Goes Wrong: Aiskhylos' Klytemnestra in *Agamemnon* and *Khoephoroi*

As we have seen in the first chapter, in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon*, Klytemnestra is the principal perpetrator of Agamemnon's murder and the main ruler of Argos, whereas Aigisthos' role seems ancillary (*Ag.* 1379-1380, 1433). Her power lies in her ability to manipulate every occasion for her own benefit. Swaying between male and female qualities, human and bestial, Klytemnestra's character is so complicated that Cassandra resorts to images of various animals, such as a lioness, a dog, and a raven, to define her (*Ag.* 1258, 1228, 1472–1474). Perhaps, Klytemnestra's comparison with an ἀμφίβαινα, a snake that goes back and forth, is the most apt since it signifies her inconsistency in words and actions and her hypocritical character (*Ag.* 1233). As a good plotter, she plans and waits for the deed all those years that Agamemnon is absent at Troy, hiding her plots like a snake in the grass (*Ag.* 1377-1378). Klytemnestra behaves like an ἀμφίβαινα in her relationships with the citizens of Argos, with Agamemnon, and with the gods. In her relation with the citizens, Klytemnestra hides her power behind the males' perception of women's inferiority in order to direct the events to the course that she wants (*Ag.* 274-277, 479-487). Although the citizens suspect Klytemnestra's relationship with Aigisthos, they rather fear for an upcoming civil strife than a strike from her (*Ag.* 35-39, 433-475, 807-809). Toward the gods and the citizens Klytemnestra behaves like an ἀμφίβαινα when she makes sacrifices for her husband's victorious arrival from Troy, although in fact she wants to secure the gods' support for her purpose to kill him (*Ag.* 587-614). At her encounter with Agamemnon, Klytemnestra pretends that she honors him with flattering words that portray him as his house savior and protector and with an invitation to walk on a fine and very expensive purple carpet, only to make him insult the gods with his arrogance and lead him to death (*Ag.* 896-901, 905-913, 958-974).

With Agamemnon's murder, Klytemnestra proudly confirms Cassandra's characterization, as *ἀμφίσβαινα*, by admitting that she does not feel ashamed to contradict whatever she has said before in her effort to entrap her enemy and take revenge (*Ag.* 1372-1376). Tsung-Wen Hu suggests that both Klytemnestra's behavior and the others' emotional response toward her connect her to snakes: like a snake she lurks hidden until she catches and kills Agamemnon off guard. Moreover, she is hated and feared like a snake (84). When the Elders realize who Klytemnestra really is, they call her *μεγαλόμητις*, very cunning, and *περίφρονα*, very proud (*Ag.* 1425-1427). On the Chorus' reaction, Mastronarde comments that in *Agamemnon* Klytemnestra displays "the contradiction within the gender-constructs of the Greeks: on the one hand, women are assumed to be mentally inferior to men; on the other, their capacity for clever deception of unsuspecting and unperceptive males is also held against them" (272). Even Aigisthos, Klytemnestra's partner, in order to justify his secondary role in Agamemnon's murder, resorts in the stereotypical idea that the entrapment is a woman's job (*Ag.* 1633-1637). By the end of the play, it is clear that Klytemnestra will be the primary ruler in Argos since she is more capable than Aigisthos. His quick temper makes him incapable of effectively solving the crisis that breaks after Agamemnon's murder without spilling more blood (*Ag.* 1617-1624, 1669-1670). Klytemnestra, though, assumes again her feminine and submissive role and calms the Elders and Aigisthos down: on the one hand, she calls the Chorus as dearest of men and reverent elders, and on the other hand, she defies their power by reminding Aigisthos that it is she and he who rule now (*Ag.* 1650-1664, 1672-1673).

In Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi*, with the cooperation of Elektra, Pylades, and the Chorus, Orestes punishes Klytemnestra for being an adulterous wife, an evil mother, and a usurper of his property. The play starts with Elektra, accompanied by the Chorus of female slaves, offering libations to her dead father on behalf of her mother in order to

appease Agamemnon's ghost. The previous night Klytemnestra dreams of a snake to which she gave birth biting her breast (*Kh.* 10-41, 527-539). Although Klytemnestra connects the snake with Agamemnon's anger, she does not correlate it with Orestes to whom she gave birth and through whom Agamemnon will take revenge. In *Dreams in Greek Tragedy*, George Devereux explains Klytemnestra's interpretation of her dream by the strong possibility that she had not nurtured Orestes by herself. According to the Nurse's words, it was she and not Klytemnestra who raised Orestes (Devereux 183-184; *Kh.* 749-760). Approaching her dream psychoanalytically, we may say that in spite of Klytemnestra's lack of memories from Orestes' nourishment, she might have repressed her fear of Orestes punishing her for Agamemnon's murder. Now that Orestes has come of age, her unconscious signals her fear with the dream. However, since Klytemnestra has no relationship with him, she identifies the snake only with angry Agamemnon and with her libations she tries to manipulate his chthonian power (*Kh.* 44-48, 429-440).

Klytemnestra negates Agamemnon not only by murdering him, but also by rejecting her relationship with her children by him. Aiskhylos portrays Klytemnestra rather like a stepmother. In his prayer to Zeus, Orestes describes his dire position by comparing himself and his sister to "the orphaned brood of a father eagle that perished in the meshes, in the coils of a fierce viper . . . gripped by the famine of hunger" (*Kh.* 247-250). Through the snake-bird motif, Aiskhylos indicates Klytemnestra's corrupted morals and stimulates fear. The viper's coils evoke Klytemnestra's schemes with which she ensnared and killed her husband in *Agamemnon* and with which she now threatens her own children. She has already kept Orestes away from his family and his property and she neglects Elektra, who has reached the marriage age, treating her like a slave (*Kh.* 135-136, 486-488, 913-917). Klytemnestra hinders Elektra's wedding by passing on to her daughter a bad fame through her relationship with Aigisthos. Consequently, in their



prayer to Zeus, the two siblings identify themselves with the eagle, their father. However, as Petrounias notes, “Der Adler, das Symbol des Agamemnon geschlechts, ist gleichzeitig der Verkünder von Zeus Macht” (“the eagle, symbol of Agamemnon’s lineage, is simultaneously the herald of Zeus’ power” 163). Therefore, Klytemnestra, the snake, who turns against the eagle, turns against Zeus himself<sup>33</sup> whereas Orestes and Elektra become Zeus’ protégés by relating themselves to him (*Kh.* 250-251).

After Agamemnon’s murder, Klytemnestra does not have the advantage of concealment any more. However, she retains the quality of an *ἀμφίσβαινα* toward the *strangers*—Orestes and Pylades—who appear suddenly at her house, assuming that they do not know her. According to the Nurse who goes out of the palace to fetch Aigisthos, Klytemnestra feigns grief, although in fact she is happy to hear that Orestes is dead (*Kh.* 737-740). When, eventually, Klytemnestra comes face-to-face with death and her son, she plays her last card: as an ultimate argument, she displays her breast that, as she claims, nourished Orestes and evokes their mother-child relationship (*Kh.* 896-898). Again, Devereux explains that the very lack of relationship between mother and son facilitates her murder since Orestes sees only a seductive woman who happens to be his biological mother (208). Only when Klytemnestra sees Orestes’ determination to kill her she interprets her dream correctly, connecting the snake that bites her breast with her son that avenges his father’s blood (*Kh.* 925-929). Klytemnestra’s effort to pretend again the vulnerable woman does not have a second chance. Her dead corpse lies next to the man with whom she committed adultery: together in life and inseparable in death (*Kh.* 973-979, 994-996). Ironically, as Nicole Loraux points out in her work *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, Klytemnestra receives a kind of death that in *Agamemnon* she presented as worthy for a mistress (25). After her murder, Orestes indicates his mother’s moral impurity by comparing her to a sea snake, or a viper, which putrefies anyone by the mere

touch of her.<sup>34</sup> As Douglas L. Cairns mentions in *Aidōs*, in classical Athens a woman's honor is bound up with that of a man. Therefore, Klytemnestra's adulterous relationship with Aigisthos dishonors both Agamemnon and Orestes (186, 188). As *drakōn* –ruler and as viper-mother and wife, Klytemnestra disrupts the balance in her house and between *oikos* and *polis*, house and city. By killing her, Orestes tries to restore this balance and reset the boundaries regarding the male-female roles.

Klytemnestra is unique even in her death, for she does not die like any other woman in Greek tragedy by committing suicide. She dies like a man, hit with a sword, but first, she asks for an axe to kill Orestes (*Kh.* 889-891). Even her death, like a warrior's, trespasses the limits between male and female. Klytemnestra remains consistent in her inconsistency, unique in her doubleness, masculine in a female body, and, ultimately, true to her serpentine qualities.

#### Snake-fighting in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi* and Euripides' *Orestes*

As we have already seen, in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi*, apart from Klytemnestra and Aigisthos, Orestes is compared to a snake too. In contrast to other heroes, Orestes identifies himself with the snake, even before the other characters do it for him. When Orestes arrives at Argos escorted by his best friend Pylades, he stops at his father's tomb to make offerings and prays to Hermes of the Underworld, to his father's spirit, and to Zeus to help him avenge his father's death (*Kh.* 1-19). As Saelid Ingvild Gilhus points out in the *Animals, Gods and Humans*, the serpents were considered as mediators between life and death (108). Compared to a serpent, Orestes mediates between his dead father and his mother, and eventually, he brings his mother from this world to the underworld.

The Chorus of slave women escorting Elektra to the tomb, in order to make libations, interrupts Orestes' prayers. While Orestes is hidden, he hears that the reason for the libations is the queen's bad dream. Although the dream's content is not announced yet, Orestes hears the most significant part of it: its interpretation: "those beneath the earth cast furious reproaches and rage against their murderers" (*Kh.* 38-41). Like a medium, the Chorus communicates to Orestes his father's unappeased wrath that demands revenge (*Kh.* 324-331). As soon as the two siblings recognize each other, they address their father's spirit intensively in order to ensure his support whereas the Chorus informs Orestes about his father's murder in a way that exhorts him to take revenge: the murderers trapped, killed and cut off Agamemnon's hands in order to avert revenge;<sup>35</sup> therefore, Orestes has to be his father's hands (*Kh.* 430-443, 451-455, 491-496).

By communicating to Orestes Klytemnestra's dream, the Chorus signifies who Orestes should become and how he should act from now on: Klytemnestra dreamed of giving birth to a snake, to which she offered her breast; however, together with milk, the snake drew off a clot of blood (*Kh.* 527-533). Orestes identifies himself with the snake and takes up the duty to become his father's vindicator (*Kh.* 544-550). The passive voice past participle *ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς*, have become serpent, suggests a transformation that started long ago (*Kh.* 549). Adding to this, Tsung-Wen Hu notices that Klytemnestra is a true mother to Orestes literally and metaphorically since her violent actions have nourished Orestes to become a *drakōn*, a serpent (222). Eventually, despite his just cause dictated by Apollo, Orestes turns to be as treacherous as his mother, paying her deceit with deceit (*Kh.* 556-559). Ogden's remark that in order to fight a *drakōn* one has to resemble a *drakōn* or to be aligned with other *drakontes* applies to Orestes as well (215). Furthermore, Heath argues that the snakes convey the old system of vengeful justice and the fusion of human and beast in Agamemnon's house. It is not easy to escape from "the

entanglement and ceaseless coils of the cursed house.” Even after Klytemnestra’s and Aigisthos’ deaths the fight continues with the snake-wreathed Erinyes (Heath 236).

In order to achieve his goal, Orestes uses double language alluding to the snake’s double tongue. While Orestes wins Klytemnestra’s trust with persuasive words the Chorus prays to Persuasion and to chthonian Hermes to join their forces with Orestes (*Kh.* 726-729). As Goldhill comments in *Reading Greek Tragedy*, for both mother and son language is means and matter of their transgressions (16). First, Orestes violates hospitality (*Kh.* 702-703). Orestes and Pylades take advantage of Klytemnestra’s delusional idea of security and power and, by assuming the accent of a stranger from Phocis, they gain access into the house (*Kh.* 560-570). Orestes’ speech is short but effective: the message he transfers is that her son is dead and the key that unlocks Klytemnestra’s trust is Strophios’ name, the person to whom she had sent Orestes (*Kh.* 679, 682). Orestes checks his mother’s reactions by mentioning his father and by posing the question regarding the place for the dead’s burial: will it be away, in Phocis, or in his own city, Argos? Although Klytemnestra expresses her sorrow for Orestes’ death, she distances herself from the family males avoiding any comment about them (*Kh.* 683-699). In this battle of snakes, both Orestes and Klytemnestra try to deceive each other. Considered as dead, although he is alive, Orestes exacts vengeance for his father who is dead—yet, alive in Orestes’ memory. Nothing conveys this hide-and-seek game between mother and son better than the servant’s ambiguous phrase: “the dead are killing the living” after Aigisthos’ murder (*Kh.* 886).

The second instance where Orestes uses double language relates to Aigisthos’ murder. Orestes presents it like a libation for the Erinyes “as her third and crowning drink” since Aigisthos will be third in a row of murders (*Kh.* 577-578). However, as Henrichs notes in “Anonymity and Polarity” quoting Pausanias, the Erinyes receive wineless

libations (42-43). Therefore, the Erinys to which Orestes offers libations is the personification of Agamemnon's unappeased anger, which certainly demands his murderers' blood. Moreover, the words that Orestes uses to ask the Chorus to use speech carefully are ritually marked and fit in a sacrificial context: "best keep a tongue that is *euphēmos*: be silent when there is need and speak only what the occasion demands" (*Kh.* 581-584). Orestes is about to spill human blood, but he presents it as sacrifice to convey a sense of justice attributed to the murdered Agamemnon, just as his mother did when she was about to kill her husband (*Ag.* 1055-1059).

Compared to the previous perpetrators of his lineage, Orestes acts out of necessity following divine orders. According to Apollo, Orestes either kills his father's murderers or he will suffer terribly, physically and mentally (*Kh.* 269-301). When Klytemnestra succeeds for a moment in petrifying him by exposing her breast that nourished him, Pylades unblocks him by evoking Apollo's orders (*Kh.* 900-903). A father is more significant than a mother, as Apollo and Athena state in *Eumenides*; therefore, Agamemnon is Orestes' first priority (*Eum.* 658-659, 735-740). Although Klytemnestra retains her fame as treacherous, the Chorus considers Orestes' guile as "guileless" and justifies his actions (*Kh.* 953-955). As soon as Orestes executes Apollo's orders he ceases to consider himself or to be considered as snake, in contrast to his mother who bears the title until the last play of the trilogy. Therefore, Aiskhylos suggests that serpentine qualities are inherent in Klytemnestra whereas Orestes assumes them only temporarily.

At the end of the play, instead of a snake, Orestes rather identifies himself with Perseus, who slew Medusa and was pursued by her sisters, the Gorgons (*Kh.* 1048-1050). As O' Neill remarks in his article "Aeschylus, Homer, and the Serpent at the Breast," the Chorus, by calling Aigisthos and Klytemnestra two snakes after their murder, reaffirms Orestes' humanity whereas Klytemnestra is dehumanize once more (O' Neill 223; *Kh.*

1044-1047). In her work *The Goddess and the Warrior*, Nannó Marinatos discusses the function of the Gorgon in myth and ritual and argues that, although in myth she is Perseus' opponent, in ritual, she initiates Perseus to maturity; "thus Gorgo is the hero's foster mother as well as his adversary" (62-63). Correspondingly, in *Khoephoroi*, Klytemnestra who is compared to the Gorgon is Orestes' opponent toward his maturity. However, Orestes is stuck in the middle of a process: by killing his mother, on the one hand, he escapes his mother's /viper's coils (*Kh.* 247-250). On the other hand, the danger from his mother's snake-like Erinyes still exists and threatens to negate his process toward maturity by keeping him stuck in his bloody past. On this, in her article "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Oresteia," Zeitlin poignantly observes that in fact Orestes is unable to play Perseus. Although he kills his mother, he cannot separate himself from her since her Erinyes pursue him. Only when he returns from Athens, exiated and released from charges of matricide he completes his initiation process toward maturity (171-174).

In Euripides' *Orestes*, the eponymous hero does not get away with his mother's murder by dealing only with her Erinyes. Euripides offers a more realistic scenario, if we may say so, by turning the whole city against the hero. Aiskhylos' liberator of Argos is Euripides' isolated hero (*Or.* 46-48). Unlike Aiskhylos' Orestes who reaffirms his humane qualities at the end of *Khoephoroi*, Euripides' character carries the title 'mother-killer *drakōn*' that defines him from now on until the end of the play (*Or.* 479-480, 1424). To avenge his father's death was supposed to bring glory to Orestes—yet it has led him and his sister close to death. Six days after his crime, Orestes physically and mentally collapses and is entrapped in Argos: on the one hand, his mother's Erinyes attack him and drive him mad, and on the other hand, the citizens of Argos are about to decide whether he and Elektra live or die for their mother's murder. In addition, Orestes' difficulty to

stand upright does not only signify his weak physical condition, but also his symbolic transformation into a beast (*Or.* 34-45, 215-236, 387). However, Orestes is not dangerous anymore since after his mother's death, he feels and looks as dead as his parents (*Or.* 385).

Orestes feels abandoned by gods and humans, and this feeling intensifies his despair. In retrospect, Orestes thinks that he killed his mother in vain; if his father could talk, he would avert him from Klytemnestra's murder since this would not bring him back to life (*Or.* 46-51, 288-293). The only thing that still connects him with Apollo, who ordained Klytemnestra's death, is his bow with which Orestes keeps the Erinyes away—or is it just a hallucination (*Or.* 253-287)? Moreover, the only family members that could support Orestes and Elektra, Tyndareōs, their grandfather by their mother, and Menelaos, their father's brother, are unwilling to help. On the contrary, Tyndareōs, enraged with Orestes, declares that he will do anything to make the citizens vote for the siblings' death (*Or.* 479-480, 607-621). As for Menelaos, although he promises to influence the citizens not to vote against Orestes and Elektra, he in fact aims at Argos' throne and Tyndareōs' approval (*Or.* 691-714, 752, 1660-1663). Only Pylades, Orestes' best friend and outcast himself, stands by him, resolving to die with the two siblings as he actively took part in Klytemnestra's murder (*Or.* 763-767, 1069-1099). For the three young people, there is no way out metaphorically and literally, since they are encircled with guards so that they will not escape (*Or.* 759-762). This situation evokes the image of Klytemnestra compared to a viper, in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi*, threatening Orestes and Elektra with her coils (*Kh.* 246-249). In Euripides' *Orestes*, the whole city takes Klytemnestra's place and threatens the three heroes' lives.

Euripides' *Orestes* has not just one, but two *drakontes*, Orestes and Pylades, both ready to take revenge from Menelaos by slaughtering Helen, his wife, and by taking

Hermione, his daughter, as hostage in order to force Menelaos not to kill them after Helen's death (*Or.* 1097-1152, 1183-1203). Following Aiskhylos, Euripides uses the snake as symbol of retributive justice and cunningness, and he presents his heroes using double language in order to gain access to their victims: Orestes and Pylades approach Helen by pretending to be suppliants, whereas Elektra turns Hermione into her fellows' hands by persuading her to get into the house and take part in the so-called supplication (*Or.* 1206-1224, 1337-1345). How much Elektra resembles her mother when she entraps Hermione and calls her a prey (*Or.* 1346)! Were she holding a knife, she would be called a *drakōn* like her brother. Helen's Phrygian slave who reports Helen's entrapment in the house uses vocabulary that alludes to hunting and calls Orestes by his earned title, mother-slayer *drakōn*, and Pylades by his newly acquired title, *drakōn*, as well (*Or.* 1403-1424). Once more, the former victims have become victimizers. As Karelisa Hartigan correctly notes in her article "Euripidean Madness: Herakles and Orestes," when people are pushed to the limits, they do not become noble, but vengeful and ready to do anything to survive (131). Even so, acting without any god's order, the three young heroes turn against innocent victims; at this stage, little do they differ from beasts.

Euripides removes from Orestes the terror and the grandeur that a comparison with a monster or with a hero slaying a monster might cause. When Orestes threatens to slay the Phrygian slave with his sword, Orestes makes fun of him asking the slave if he feels that he will turn to a stone like one who has seen a Gorgon. The slave though rejects Orestes' indirect comparison of himself with the monster, saying that he knows nothing about the Gorgon and that he fears death like any other (*Or.* 1519-1523). The slave does not share the same culture with Orestes, but the audience who knows who the snake-haired Gorgon is may see that Euripides tries to present murder as it is, avoiding



comparisons that connect Orestes with glamorous monsters. In contrast, Orestes' attempt to second his crime makes him no more than a mother-slayer *drakōn*.

Like Aiskhylos, Euripides is against retributive justice. With *Orestes*, though, he shows its consequences clearer than Aiskhylos. The hatred with which the characters turn against each other resembles the venom of Aiskhylos' Erinyes with which they threaten to destroy Athens (*Eum.* 780-787). Retaliation either ordained by a god or not leads to uncontrollable situations that only divine intervention can restore.

#### Rapes, Murders, Snakes, and the Athenian Lineage in Euripides' *Ion*

In Euripides' *Ion*, the snake imagery abounds, conveying the notions of both treachery and autochthony, which are intertwined. The play evolves at two levels, human and divine. It takes place at Delphi, where, according to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, the god killed the *drakōn* Pytho and built his oracle (*HH3* 300-304, 356-374). All around the oracle there are representations of monsters with serpentine features, such as the gorgons around the naval stone and the depiction of Herakles slaying the Hydra, which convey a sense "of serenity, order, civilization, or control and taming of what is wild and primitive," as Mastronarde notes in his article "Iconography and Imagery in Euripides' *Ion*" (Mastronarde 165; *Ion* 191-192). Upon Kreousa's arrival, one more time, Apollo is summoned to resolve a disorder that he himself caused in the life of the woman whose ancestors relate closely to snakes, and, thus, to ensure the continuity of the Athenian autochthonous lineage.

Proud for being earth-born, indigenous, the Athenians maintain close relationship with snakes, earth's children. However, according to the myth, their lineage starts and

continues marked by being marked by two violent actions, two rapes, which signify the struggle toward a passage from wild nature to the creation of city and civilization. First, Hephaistos unsuccessfully attempts to ravish Athena; from his seed that falls on the ground, Earth begets Erichthonios, whom Athena nurtures secretly. She places two snakes to guard the baby and hands him to the three daughters of Kekrops, half-man and half-snake king of Athens (*Ion* 20-24, 268-274, 1163-1164). Kekrops too emerged from the earth; both Erichthonios and Kekrops mark the Athenians' autochthony twice. As Robert Parker notes in his "Myth of Early Athens," while with Erichthonios "differentiation and progress are revealed," Kekrops represents "an intermediate stage between wholly earthy and wholly human" (193-194). The second rape takes place again in Athens, according to Euripides. Apollo manifests himself in all his glory and beauty to Kreousa, the last child of the Athenian king Erekhtheus and granddaughter of the earth-born Erichthonios; nevertheless, Apollo rapes her (*Ion* 8-13, 855-896). Kreousa secretly gives birth to a boy and abandons it in the very cave where she was raped, hoping that his divine father will take care of his child (*Ion* 897-901). Ion, Kreousa's son by Apollo, is destined to be the Athenians' and the Ionians' ancestor in Asia Minor—yet only the gods and the audience knows it.

Kreousa's bestial side related with her lineage's connection to snakes takes the upper hand when her old Tutor persuades her that her husband, Xouthos, intends to bring home Ion, his alleged son according to the oracle, in order to pass on to him Kreousa's house and patrimony, whereas she will remain childless (*Ion* 761-828). Enraged with Apollo's indifference toward her son and herself, and with her husband's treachery, Kreousa plots to poison Ion at the sacrificial meal that Xouthos offers for his son (*Ion* 1029-1038). As in *Alkestis*, Euripides again exploits the motif of the evil stepmother whose cruelty and guile connects her to a snake (*Ion* 607-617, 1302, 1329-1330; *Alk.*

309-310).<sup>36</sup> When Kreousa's plot is disclosed, Ion's initial sympathy for the childless Kreousa is reversed into terror and anger (*Ion* 618-620). He calls her a viper and a *drakōn* with a fiery glance and equates her with the drops from the Gorgon's vipers with which she has planned to kill him (*Ion* 1262-1265).

Kreousa's comparison to a snake is far from being only metaphorical since the poison that she uses comes indeed from the blood of the Gorgon's snakes —Athena's gift, which she had passed onto Kreousa through her ancestor, Erikhthonios (*Ion* 812-831, 1019-1026). One drop of blood from the monster's vein could heal, and one drop from the Gorgons' snakes could kill (*Ion* 987-1015). To use each drop wisely, though, requires a calm state of mind, which Kreousa lacks under her circumstances. In her article "Kreousa the Autochthon," Loraux remarks Kreousa's identification with the dark side of the autochthony that relates with barrenness: "The daughter of Erechtheus is not *apais* [childless] only because she has exposed Ion, thereby depriving her *oikos* of any chance of survival, but also because, trapped in a night of terror, she comes to resemble a creature of Night" (198). Now again, although Kreousa tries to protect her lineage, she puts it in danger by attempting to kill her only heir assuming that he is a stranger. Her story alludes to the story of the Theban *Spartoi*, who are also earthborn, snake-related, and they also kill each other. Earth may bring up life, but relates closely to death as well.

Ultimately, the Tutor who takes on Ion's murder fails to kill him since the wine for libations is spilled on earth due to a profane word that a slave says. Doves drink it, and the dove that drinks from Ion's cup dies (*Ion* 1177-1225). Now, it is Ion's turn to put Apollo's shrine in danger of pollution, despite the fact that he has grown up there. He wants to kill Kreousa who takes refuge in Apollo's altar; in this way, Ion proves himself a true child of Kreousa (*Ion* 1275-1281). Moreover, his desire to slay the snake / Kreousa at Delphi alludes to his father's, Apollo's, slaying of Pytho at the same place.

Mastrorade points out that Ion suspends his usual morality when he encounters an enemy and he acts like his attackers: “the expected traces of primitive animality flare up in his soul” (170). Like Aiskhylos’ Orestes, Euripides’ Ion has to fight against his own Gorgon / mother, even though he does not know their relationship yet. For Ion too, this fight marks the end of innocence and the beginning of his maturity. In “Misogyny,” Zeitlin notices that Aiskhylos’ Orestes returns home instead of moving away from it, as the puberty rites would require. By following the opposite direction and killing his mother Orestes fails to play Perseus’ role and, therefore, he fails to become mature (171-174). Similarly to Orestes, Ion is about to return home, by following his alleged father to Athens. Unlike Orestes, though, Ion does not negate his passage to maturity—but only because of Apollo’s intervention since Ion does not know that Kreousa is his mother.

Instead of Kreousa’s murder, the recognition between mother and son takes place and the snake as symbol of the Athenians’ autochthony dominates the scene. Apollo’s priestess hands to Ion objects that have accompanied him since his exposure in the cave and now connect him with his roots: a crown made of ever-green olive-tree branches, a weaving depicting a Gorgon edged with snakes like a shield, and an amulet of golden snakes, which every Athenian child wears imitating Erichthonios’ raising and his guarding by snakes (*Ion* 1412-1434). The story has come in full circle; on the one hand, Kreousa gets the answer for which she came to Delphi: her child is alive and stands before her. On the other hand, by discovering his past, Ion finds his place not only in his ancestors’ house, but also in Athens’ history. Ion had to go through this ordeal in order to be qualified for the glorious future that Apollo has prepared for him (*Ion* 1571-1594). Loraux highlights the significance of Ion’s basket with the tokens of his lineage and connects it with the Delphic naval stone, the “primordial womb,” which receives Ion from a metaphorical death and delivers him as an Athenian (204-205). In his *Art of*

*Euripides*, Mastronarde sees Ion's ordeal as an adolescent's *rite de passage*: "Ion moves from being a slave . . . to free, from non-citizen living in Delphi to citizen living in Athens, from anonymous orphan to legitimate heir of the rulers of Athens through his living mother, Creusa" (290). Apart from symbol of autochthony, the snake imagery conveys the meaning of rejuvenation. As Kreousa says, "Erekhtheus is young once more. The house of the earthborn race . . . recovers its sight in the rays of the sun" (*Ion* 1463-1467). Eventually, as Carl Ruck observes in his article "On the Sacred Names of Iamos and Ion," Apollo, who slew the serpent, begot a child who renews the serpent's lineage (247).

Kreousa's ordeal from the time that she hears that she remains childless until the time she recognizes Ion as her son changes her too. In "Recognition and Identity in Euripides's *Ion*," Naomi Weiss argues that by reliving the past Kreousa goes through a therapeutic process that ends when mother and son are reunited. In her analysis, Weiss applies Freud's notion of the 'compulsion to repeat,' according to which a patient in order to deal with his trauma tends to repeat the distressing incident that caused it instead of remembering it as a past event. As a hypothetical patient, Kreousa relives her rape by Apollo and Ion's abandonment, but also Ion's rebirth after his recognition (34, 36, 38). As healer god, Apollo has healed Kreousa's secret disease and erased her shame. Now, Kreousa is officially a mother (*Ion* 944, 1524). By deceiving Xouthos that Ion is his son, Apollo establishes Ion in his ancestors' house and secures the continuity of Erikthonios' lineage not only in Athens, but also in Asia Minor. In the end, Athena who protects the Erechtheidai brings Apollo's oracles into conclusion and restores him in Kreousa's mind (*Ion* 28-51, 67-75, 1569, 1609-1615). Regarding the disquieting issue of Kreousa's rape, Parker suggests that, although frightening, a mortal's rape by god signifies also rare intimacy between the two worlds, which benefits both the victim's family and

community (205). Consequently, although Apollo appears as trickster, his plots in fact benefit the royal family of Athens, the Athenians, and the Ionians who may claim his protection due to their special relationship with him.

The recognition scene, however, is important for the Athenian audience as well since it becomes part of Ion's history due to its origin from Erekhtheus. In her article "Athens in a Basket," Melissa Mueller also remarks that the recognition scene closes the gap between public and private and the audience is invited to share Ion's and Kreousa's secret that Xouthos is not Ion's father (397-398). The Athenians may feel proud of being so dear to the gods. However, the royal family's connection to serpents indicates a primitive energy that the Athenians must control in order to avoid possible disasters. The golden snake amulet that every Athenian child wears signifies divine, human, and bestial energies that need to stay separated and balanced.

The Snake's Double Tongue and Odysseus in Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Sophokles' *Philoktetes*

In Greek tragedy, Odysseus is portrayed as the personification of cunning intelligence; either he is connected directly to a snake or not. To his enemies, Odysseus is a merciless, ungrateful man, but to his friends, he is the one who foresees the future and saves them from future troubles. In an untitled tragic fragment assigned to Sophokles, Odysseus brags about this quality that his name denotes: "I am rightly called Odysseus, after something bad; for many enemies have been angry with me" (Fr. 965).<sup>37</sup> In certain tragedies, although Odysseus is not compared directly to a serpent, there are hints that allude to his connection with it. For example, in Euripides' *Orestes*, when Orestes and

Pylades attempt to murder Helen, her Phrygian slave conveys Pylades' cunningness by comparing him first to Odysseus and then he calls Pylades a *drakōn*: "a guileful fellow like Odysseus, silently crafty, but loyal to friends, bold for the fight, skilled in war, and a deadly snake" (*Or.* 1403-1406). Since Pylades is compared to Odysseus and to a *drakōn*, then Odysseus is like a *drakōn* himself.

Odysseus' main characteristic is his persuasive skill and his tendency to be inconsistent, adjusting his words to the occasion in order to serve his interests. These two qualities are indicated symbolically with the double tongue, a snake's feature. Such an example can be found in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, where Hekabe mourns for her bad luck of having been assigned as slave to Odysseus: "a treacherous foe I hate, a monster of lawlessness, one that by his double tongue has turned against us all that once was friendly in his camp, changing this for that and that for this again" (*Tro.* 282-287). Moreover, in his older tragedy, *Hekabe*, Euripides portrays Odysseus as a "wily knave" and "honey-tongue demagogue" when he persuades the Greeks to sacrifice Hekabe's daughter, Polyxene, at Achilles' tomb according to the hero's demand, despite the fact that once Hekabe spared Odysseus' life when he was caught captive during the war (*Hek.* 107-140, 239-331). Odysseus' description as speaking double evokes Klytemnestra's description as *ἀμφίσβαινα*, in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon*. Odysseus shares this quality with Athena, the goddess who favors him. Hekabe's description of Odysseus alludes to Poseidon's comment in the prologue regarding Athena's changed attitude toward the Greek army: "But why do you leap about so, now with one character, now with another? Why hate and love whomever you chance to so excessively?" (*Tro.* 67-68) Both the mortal Odysseus and his patroness goddess may change sides according to their interests.

In *Trojan Women*, Odysseus never appears on stage, but he strikes through the herald Talthybios, who executes his ideas. Euripides portrays Odysseus detached from

the pain that he causes, keeping his mind clear from emotions. Thus, Odysseus is able to foresee that if little Astyanax, Hektor's son, survives, he may become a dangerous enemy for the Greeks; therefore, he orders the child's execution (*Tro.* 701-705, 719-725). As Mastronarde comments on Odysseus, in *The Art of Euripides*, although the hero conveys patriotic ideals, eventually the means that he uses are questioned (300). Judging by Apollo's mouthpiece, Cassandra, the gods do not approve of Odysseus' means. Alluding to Athena's words in the prologue that she will give a bitter homecoming journey to the Greeks for their impiety, Cassandra pronounces ten years of wandering away from home for Odysseus (*Tro.* 65-86, 431-443). By losing all his comrades through his encounters with monsters, barbarous people, and the stormy sea, Odysseus will taste the pain and the despair that he now inflicts on his enemies. In such conditions, his persuasive skills will not suffice anymore.

In Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, Odysseus is portrayed again as the man who says and does everything in order to accomplish his goals. Ordered by the leaders of the Greek army and as instructed by a prophecy, Odysseus has to bring Philoktetes and his bow to Troy, after having persuaded him with words; otherwise, the Greeks cannot conquer Troy (*Ph.* 68-69, 611-613). However, the mission is not easy since Philoktetes hates the Greeks who abandoned him in Lemnos because he interrupted the rituals with his groans and cries after a snake bit him (*Ph.* 4-11). Odysseus knows a priori that Philoktetes hates him, but he only cares for the bow (*Ph.* 46-47). As Philoktetes confesses later, he finds it more bearable to listen to the viper that has made him incapable of walking than to hear Odysseus, who is capable of saying and doing anything (*Ph.* 631-634). Apart from hatred, Philoktetes' statement reveals his fear that Odysseus' cunningness will find a way to manipulate him and to accomplish his goal. Philoktetes feels weaker when encountering



Odysseus than when facing a snake. Nevertheless, Odysseus cannot approach Philoktetes directly for he fears “his inescapable arrows that convey death” (*Ph.* 105).

Odysseus puts his double tongue at work even before he reaches Philoktetes. In order to overcome his resistance, Odysseus cooperates with young Neoptolemos, whose father’s reputation creates a sense of trust (*Ph.* 242-243). However, since Neoptolemos abhors lies, Odysseus needs to corrupt him first, “for only few hours” (*Pl.* 83-84, 86-89). Odysseus breaks Neoptolemos’ resistance to lie, by telling him that he will conquer Troy with the help of Philoktetes and the bow. If Neoptolemos gets Philoktetes by his side, he will be called clever and noble (*Ph.* 108-120). However, the kind of fame that Odysseus promises has nothing to do with courage and bravery, Achilles’ qualities, but with cleverness and valor, traits that Odysseus is known for (*Ph.* 119). As Hall notes in *Greek Tragedy*, since Neoptolemos is fatherless, Odysseus now — and Philoktetes later — stands like a surrogate father to him (321). As such, Odysseus teaches him his personal values, namely, that ends justify means and that being deceitful sometimes is not shameful, but honorable—principles totally opposite to Achilles’ (*Ph.* 86-95, 108-109).

As in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, Odysseus does not appear on stage, unless it is necessary, and plans for the future both of the Greeks and the Trojans. Like snakes, he knows how to hide himself well and from the backstage he pulls the others’ strings. As Mastronarde correctly observes in *The Art of Euripides*, “Odysseus is the model of an ambitious politician, not aspiring to the highest position, but pleased to serve the army and its leaders in any way that will reflect well on his intelligence and fame” (300). Still, the words that Odysseus uses, *σόφισμα, ἐκκλέψεις, κλοπέυς, κακά*, show an “unprincipled politician,” as Philip Whaley Harsh notes in his article “The Role of the Bow in the Philoctetes of Sophocles” (409). Odysseus puts Philoktetes’ animosity toward him to work for his own purpose by exhorting Neoptolemos to say the most extreme insults

against him in order to gain Philoktetes' trust (*Ph.* 64-66). Moreover, Odysseus' double tongue suggests a plausible story: Neoptolemos gets angry with Odysseus because the Greeks gave Achilles' weapons to Odysseus instead of giving them to him, who is Achilles' son. The story has all the proper elements: Neoptolemos' anger that alludes to Achilles' temper, Odysseus' manipulative speech, and the fact that Achilles' weapons should be inherited to his son (*Ph.* 359-390). Of course, Philoktetes believes the story since he recognizes the pattern that Odysseus uses: "he lends his tongue to every evil speech and every villainy that can help him compass a dishonest end" (*Ph.* 403-409). But even without the story, Philoktetes could align himself with Neoptolemos as long as he seems angry with the Greek leaders and Odysseus (*Ph.* 317-321, 429-430).

Odysseus' cunningness pervades his relationship with gods too. Odysseus is as pious as he needs to be to serve his purpose. Although Odysseus claims that he executes Zeus' will when he wants Philoktetes to come to Troy, in fact he aims at acquiring more fame by tricking Philoktetes (*Ph.* 989-992, 1048-1052). In *Sophocles' Tragic World*, Charles Segal argues that Odysseus' gods are "victory," "deceit," and "safety"—reflections of his own character (100). War demoralizes humans for the sake of survival and for the hope of glory. Odysseus cannot accept the fact that Philoktetes denies his own future glory and, of course, negates the others' glory as well (*Ph.* 994-1003). Thus, when Neoptolemos fails his mission and despite the prophecy that requires Philoktetes' consent to return to Troy, Odysseus does not hesitate to force him to sail with the bow and threatens to abandon him again to die without his bow if he does not do so (*Ph.* 1003, 1055-1062). In the end Odysseus and Neoptolemos change places and prove their true dispositions: toward Philoktetes Odysseus is ready to use violence whereas Neoptolemos, not yet corrupted by the war, uses words (*Ph.* 1074-1080, 1296-1298).

Not only has Odysseus the snake's cunningness, but also he has the cruelty of this predator. Odysseus' indifference for Philoktetes, his threats, his impatience, and his loss of control show his bestial side. Although Odysseus is known for his speaking skills, he lacks discretion and empathy. As Heath argues, "successfully controlling speech often means controlling oneself, one's desires, appetites, as well as speech. Odysseus must learn when to lie and when to tell the truth" (117). Odysseus fails his mission regarding Philoktetes because he uses lies to approach him whereas, in order to go to Troy, Philoktetes needs to feel safe with the Greeks. Because of the means that Odysseus has used, divine intervention is necessary to confirm Zeus' will, to overcome Philoktetes' fears, and to put things in motion again. Herakles' manifestation to hinder Philoktetes' and Neoptolemos' departure toward Philoktetes' fatherland proves that Odysseus is right, but only regarding the gods' plans (*Ph.* 1409-1444). According to Sophokles, eventually, Troy will fall because of Zeus' will. No human intelligence or power can stand above this.

#### A Snake in Panic: Hermione in Euripides' *Andromakhe*

In *Andromakhe*, Neoptolemos' relationship with both Hermione, his legal wife, and Andromakhe, his spear-won slave, causes a conflict between the two women. Hermione takes advantage of her husband's absence at Delphi, and with her father's help she tries to get rid of Andromakhe planning to kill her and her son by Neoptolemos. Andromakhe hides her son and then takes refuge in Thetis' shrine (*Andr.* 122-125, 177-180, 465-470). She claims that although gods have given to mortals remedies against the wild snakes, no one has found a remedy against a bad woman, which is worse than a snake or fire (*Andr.* 269-273). Hermione's comparison to a snake and her moral

inferiority to it because she is a bad woman coincides with Andromakhe's general idea about the role of men and women in society in the rest of the play. A good woman is a submissive one and Hermione does not fit in this category. In contrast, in Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, Odysseus' moral inferiority to a snake in malevolence proves that this quality applies to both sexes (*Ph.* 631-634). Regarding the snake-fire correlation, Ogden argues that it is based on the extreme pain that both the venom and the fire may cause (220). Hermione combines both: apart from being metaphorically venomous toward Andromakhe, she also threatens to burn her alive, although Andromakhe is still in Thetis' shrine (*Andr.* 253-257). Snakes are often presented as dangerous and fiery guards, and Hermione takes on this aspect as well. Her rigid guarding, so that no appeal for help will reach Peleus, terrifies both her slaves and the free women of Phthia (*Andr.* 61,79-86, 141-146). However, Hermione's personality does not elicit fear; instead, she attains fear through her social status as the ruler's wife.

Hermione has all the features that qualify her as an arrogant character who takes on aspects of snakes – yet, her schemes and plots distinguish her from the arrogant tragic heroes that we have seen in the previous chapter. Euripides portrays Hermione as a plotter in the making. She is cunning—but not so much so that she can foresee the consequences of her actions. Her plan is based mainly on her father's support—no comparison with her aunt, Klytemnestra (*Andr.* 39-40). Hermione introduces herself as a powerful and rich young woman, but her wealth is in fact her father's wealth (*Andr.* 147-154). Hermione is too young to know the twists and turns of life, unlike her opponent, Andromakhe, who is fully immersed in them: the former princess of Troy, and Hektor's wife is now a slave and concubine of the man whose father killed her husband (*Andr.* 1-19). Since Hermione has not experienced much pain yet, she is unable to sympathize with Andromakhe's sufferings, in contrast to the Chorus of the Phthian women who stand by

her (*Andr.* 117-146). Andromakhe's arguments that she is forced to sleep with Neoptolemos do not persuade Hermione (*Andr.* 37-39, 245). She assigns Andromakhe's relationship with Neoptolemos, the son of the man who killed Hektor, to her barbarian customs (*Andr.* 170-176). Hermione's speech is a good example of what the psychologists would call projection since she attributes all her unacceptable qualities, feelings, and motives to Andromakhe. Although Hermione hates Andromakhe and wants her dead, she accuses Andromakhe of plotting against her so that she will remain childless and Andromakhe will take her place in the house (*Andr.* 155-162).

Despite her pride of her royal origin and her wealth, Hermione is like any other married woman who depends completely on her husband, good or bad. Hermione feels insecure because although she is the legal wife, when she came to Neoptolemos' house as bride, she encountered the already established situation of her husband having a son with Andromakhe. Even the Chorus refers to Andromakhe not as Neoptolemos' concubine, but as his second wife who shares her husband with Hermione (*Andr.* 24-31, 123-125). Hermione holds Neoptolemos responsible for this domestic disruption: "it is also not right for one man to hold the reins of two women." The Chorus, who does not sympathize with Hermione, admits that double marriages bring strife and pain, and later Orestes, a man, expresses the same idea (*Andr.* 177-178, 465-470, 909). As Belfiore also notes, Neoptolemos' relationship with Hermione and Andromakhe under the same roof is ambiguous and problematic since the roles of friends and enemies are confused. Even without Hermione, Neoptolemos' union with Andromakhe would be wrong since his father, Achilles, killed her husband, Hektor. Moreover, Neoptolemos dishonors his wife by sharing his house with her rival (Belfiore 84-85, 959). On this issue, Hall notes in *Greek Tragedy* that although male adultery was tolerable in ancient Greece, a man would better keep his wife away from his mistress. To support her argument, Hall refers to a

legal speech assigned to Demosthenes, where a man is praised for respecting his wife and his mother by keeping his mistress away from them (Hall 252). This could be a preventive measurement for Neoptolemos' case since, according to the Chorus in *Andromakhe*, "The mind of a woman is a jealous thing and always ill-disposed toward rivals in marriage" (*Andr.* 181-182). Hermione, however, does not turn against her husband, as Klytemnestra did; instead, because she is afraid of Neoptolemos, she transfers her anger onto Andromakhe, who cannot hurt her—a good example of *displacement*, according to the psychoanalytic theory.

Hermione's violent and cunning reaction against Andromakhe at Neoptolemos' absence resembles snakes. In a speech contest Andromakhe points out Hermione's irrational and bestial energy. First, Andromakhe implies that Hermione is foolish for not taking advantage of her positive qualities, such as her wealth, her origin, and her young and strong body (193-203). Second, in her marriage, Hermione behaves as an untamed beast. Instead of complying with the model of an obedient and silent wife, every time that Hermione is vexed, she defies her husband by saying that his place of origin is nothing compared to Sparta, and that she, a rich woman, lives with the poor (*Andr.* 205-214). Third, Andromakhe tries to portray Hermione as lustful as her mother, Helen, claiming that when a man has extramarital affairs, his wife must tolerate it; otherwise, she proves her own insatiable lust (*Andr.* 215-221). Rademaker notes that female *σωφροσύνη*, moderation, in Euripides' *Andromakhe*, means absence of jealousy and possessiveness (157). Andromakhe portrays Hermione as having both these negative qualities. Even when Andromakhe encounters Hermione's father, Menelaos, she insists on Hermione's lust by identifying Hermione with her mother. Allan suggests in *The Andromache and Euripidean Tragedy* that Andromakhe's ambivalent term *man-loving* implies that Hermione demands strict monogamy from her husband as compensation for her mother's

licentious behavior (Allan 99-100; *Andr.* 229-230). From my reading, though, I do not see Hermione correlating her mother's behavior with that of Neoptolemos. Rather, when Andromakhe uses the term *man-loving*, she suggests that Hermione's difficulty to adjust to her marriage conditions might be a pretext to change many men as her mother did, and her father, Menelaos, simply pretends that he does not see it as he did with his wife, Helen (*Andr.* 338-351). Nevertheless, Hermione does not share with Andromakhe the same definition for female lust. Andromakhe's advice to suffer in silence the pains of love and to tolerate the fact that her husband will sleep with Andromakhe does not work for Hermione; instead, Hermione prefers her opponent dead (*Andr.* 177-180, 240, 245).

Like father like child. By staging Menelaos, Euripides suggests that Hermione has become as evil as snakes because her parents taught her to be and her marriage environment encouraged her to develop. Hermione's mindset complies perfectly with her father's; indicatively, Andromakhe compares both of them to vultures, signifying their bestial energy (*Andr.* 74-75). Like Hermione, Menelaos behaves sneakily and turns against a slave instead of turning against his son-in-law. Furthermore, Menelaos tricks Andromakhe to abandon Thetis' shrine in order to save her son, whom Menelaos got already; however, he intends to kill her (*Andr.* 309-318, 409-415, 427-429). Most important, he hands Andromakhe's son to his daughter in order to kill him (*Andr.* 431-432, 442). To Menelaos' face, Andromakhe condemns all the Spartans as treacherous plotters and masters of lies (*Andr.* 445-452). Yet, when Peleus intervenes decisively to save Andromakhe and her son, Menelaos abandons his daughter with the excuse that he does not have time and Peleus is so old anyway to be engaged in a fight (*Andr.* 706-716, 730-746, 854-855). Similarly, Hermione abandons her marriage and escapes with Orestes, who suddenly appears, so that she will not face the consequences of her actions (*Andr.* 921-928).

Youth may be responsible for Hermione's snake-like behavior as well. Like Aiskhylos' Xerxes in *Persians*, and Euripides' Orestes in *Orestes*, who are also compared to snakes, Hermione is inexperienced and vulnerable and thus easily influenced by other people. As wicked counselors influence Xerxes, and Pylades and his sister influence Orestes, Hermione too claims that bad women persuaded her not to share her husband with her slave and to get rid of Andromakhe (*Andr.* 930-938). All these young tragic heroes are "at a key-life transition" — term that Mastronarde uses in *The Art of Euripides* (285). All three of them turn their bestial energy signified by snake imagery against innocent people and, ultimately, they fail: Xerxes returns *home* defeated, Hermione runs home with Orestes, and Orestes who never manages to leave home is about to die there. These heroes/snakes fail to leave their old skin behind them. Neither their environment nor their personal extreme choices promote Xerxes', Orestes', and Hermione's successful passage to maturity, but . . . this is what gods are for.

In the end, Apollo restores both Hermione and Andromakhe. With his contribution and without Orestes staining again his hands with blood Neoptolemos dies at Delphi after Orestes' slanders to the citizens of Delphi (*Andr.* 1090-1157). Thus, Orestes takes revenge on Neoptolemos for calling him his mother's murderer and for refusing to quit Hermione, whom Menelaos had promised to Orestes before the Trojan War (*Andr.* 966-981). Simultaneously, Apollo facilitates Hermione's return to Sparta and heals her disease, as she names her strife with Andromakhe (*Andr.* 906). Moreover, Andromakhe will marry a Trojan man, Helenos, and her son from Neoptolemos will start a new lineage in the land of Molossos, as Thetis proclaims appearing as *dea ex machina* (*Andr.* 1243-1250). This lineage will be a fusion of the noblest Trojan and Greek blood.

Cunning or desperate, dangerous snake or human in panic, Hermione fails to pass the maturity test that requires patience and submission in marriage, and she goes back



home. However, she has a second chance in Sparta, where she belongs and should be. She is not destined to continue Achilles' line, perhaps because as a Spartan, her mentality is incompatible with his or anyone else's mentality other than Spartans, as Andromakhe claims (*Andr.* 445-452). Euripides' Apollo bestows to a Trojan woman the last branch of Achilles' lineage, for the so-called noble Greeks have proved themselves lower than slaves.

## Chapter IV

### Snakes, Poison, and Mad Heroes

In Greek tragedy, there is no other animal more closely related with severe pain than snakes. The snakebite, and consequently the poison, might produce such an unbearable pain that the afflicted person loses self-control. The tragic poets use human experience with snakes in their plays and portray certain characters suffering from diseases caused by a snake's poison, such as Sophokles' *Philoktetes* and Herakles. Most commonly, though, in Greek tragedy the snake relates to madness. The tragic poets portray female anthropomorphic figures with serpentine traits, such as Aiskhylos' *Erinyes* and Euripides' *Lyssa* and *Kêres*, who attack the heroes and goad them with madness. Padel, in her work *In and Out of Mind*, notices many instances where poison and loss of control meet in tragedy. She assumes that poison might be a source of the heroes' madness since it can alter one's mental condition (122). Jouanna remarks on the interaction between medicine and tragedy regarding the demonstration of madness. Comparing tragedies where madness appears with the Hippocratic *The Sacred Disease* that deals with epilepsy, Jouanna spots the common symptoms as they occur in both genres: "rolling eyes and frothing from the mouth. . . . loss of reasoning . . . agitations and shaking." The only difference between epilepsy and madness in tragedy is that the epileptics lose their voice in contrast to the tragic heroes who cry out their terror (72-73). The tragic poets demonstrate the excruciating pain from a snake's poison and the seizure of madness to trigger fear and to inspire empathy.

The gods in tragedy use snakes as punitive tools either for a crime that a tragic hero commits, like Orestes in Aiskhylos and Euripides; or for a hero's carelessness and subsequent transgression of limits, as in case of Sophokles' Philoktetes; or to re-establish the limits between divine and human for a hero that might forget them, like Herakles in Sophokles and Euripides; or, for more obscure reasons, as in the case of Euripides' Kadmos and Harmonia who are the only characters that are going to be transformed literally into snakes. The physical and mental suffering of the divine punishment is so intense that it challenges the relationship between the gods and the heroes, who find it unreasonable, or too harsh, or too prolonged. On a macrocosmic level, though, the tragic heroes' suffering establishes institutions, like the Areopagus court in Athens in Aiskhylos' *Eumenides*, founds cities, like the Oresteion in Euripides' *Orestes*, and establishes cults, like the Herakles' cult in Athens (*Eum.* 681-684; *Or.* 1643-1647; *Her.* 1331-1333). Above all, of course, the literal or metaphorical poison of snakes transforms the heroes' mentality, leads them to their destiny, and secures the heroes' immortality after death through the means of tragedy.

Perhaps the most interesting representations of suffering related to snake imagery are the anthropomorphic figures that take on snake traits and cause madness, because these figures interact with the tragic heroes. Since they are imagined to dwell under earth, they share with snakes some features and chthonian qualities (*Eum.* 72). The tragic poets highlight their counterproductive energy by portraying them as maidens (*Eum.* 67-73; *Her.* 854). Based on depictions of the Erinyes on vases, Taplin in *Pots and Plays* argues that Aiskhylos must have been the first one who portrayed them with human form. Studying depictions on Greek vases, he finds that there is no such representation of the Erinyes before the *Eumenides* in 458 B.C.E. In vases, the Erinyes, and other figures that resemble the Erinyes but are named as Madness and Punishment, are female figures with

snakes in their hair or around their arms. Unlike Aiskhylos' description of the Erinyes as wingless, ugly, black-skinned female creatures, the Erinyes on vases are beautiful, winged figures.<sup>38</sup> Taplin concludes that, as in tragedies, such figures' presence signifies retaliation or mental disorder (41, 55-59).

Regarding the female gender of these punitive creatures that inflict madness, Zeitlin in "Playing the Other" explains that since the female body is perceived "as more fluid, more permeable, more open to affect and entry from the outside," the irrational aspects of life are culturally associated more with women than with men. At the same time, since it is more difficult to be controlled, it can become a source that inflicts madness on men (65). Moreover, in *Mortals and Immortals*, Vernant observes that the feminine representations of disease and death encompass the horror of the unknown "other." The female "otherness" is dangerous and acts like death by attracting men to itself with an irresistible force. By contrast, the male representation of death is called *Thanatos* and he is closer to the heroic ideal of "beautiful death" and immortality (96-101).

In this chapter, I will explore the way that the snake imagery relates to physical pain and madness and the special notions that it may convey. I revisit Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi*, Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, and Euripides' *Orestes* and *Bakkhai* and I examine for the first time Aiskhylos' *Eumenides*, Sophokles' *Trakhiniai*, Euripides' *Elektra*, and *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*.<sup>39</sup>

Snakes and Punishment in Sophokles' *Trakhiniai* and *Philoktetes*, and in Euripides'  
*Bakkhai*

In Sophokles' *Trakhiniai*, the serpent as symbol conveys the harsh difficulties that Herakles has to overcome in order to gain immortality. Not only do most of Herakles' labors that are reported in this play relate to snakes<sup>40</sup>, but also the drug that leads Herakles toward his destiny comes from the bile of the Lernean Hydra that once Herakles killed. At the end of the play, the tragic hero suffers extremely due to a so-called love charm that his wife Deianeira has used to keep him, which is a mixture of the Centaur Nessos' blood and the Lernean Hydra's poison.

In *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, Vernant notes that sexual promiscuity relates with wild beasts (151-152). Herakles is by nature extreme and he brings this quality into his relationship with others. He sleeps with many women and has acquired many children who do not live with him. As Deianeira says, all that Herakles knows about his children is "when he sows and when he reaps" (*Tr.* 151-152, 459-460, 1151-1154). His relationships with many women mirror his father's, Zeus, infidelities. However, Herakles is still mortal and his excessive sexuality becomes hybristic not only toward Hera, the goddess of marriage, but also toward Aphrodite, especially when he uses violence to impose his will (*Tr.* 856-861).

Herakles has become as violent and outrageous as the monstrous river Akhelōios with whom he fought for Deianeira and the Centaur Nessos<sup>41</sup> he once killed for attempting to rape his wife (*Tr.* 9-26, 557-565). As Charles Segal notes in *Sophocles' Tragic World*, in spite of the monsters that Herakles has killed, the monstrous world exists inside him (37). During the course of his life, having acquired fame through his deeds, Herakles has become arrogant and he does not take a "no" for an answer. Thus,

when Eurytos, ruler of Oichalia, refuses to consent in giving his daughter, Iole, as Herakles' secret love, Herakles conquers his city, kills men, and enslaves women (*Tr.* 352-368, 431-433, 476-478). Then, Herakles sends Iole to live under the same roof with Deianeira, presenting her as a slave when in fact Iole will be his new wife (*Tr.* 365-369, 427-428). Perhaps, Herakles has to become a monster in order to fight monsters or, by dealing with monsters all the time, Herakles' bestial side took the upper hand and he ends up being one of them.

It seems that not only Nessos takes revenge for his death, but Hydra<sup>42</sup> as well avenges her own death since Herakles dies with this snake's poison. In order to make Herakles love her again, Deianeira, who considers her husband sick, smears Herakles' robe with the love-charm, which Nessos secretly gave to Deianeira years ago as he was dying. The love-charm contains his blood poisoned with the bile of the Lernean Hydra, in which Herakles had dipped his arrows as soon as he killed the monster (*Tr.* 441-448, 490-491, 572-587). However, when Herakles wears his new robe while he offers sacrifice to Zeus for conquering Oichalia and the flame from his offerings and the pine blazes up, the robe sticks on his body and "a biting pain came, tearing at his bones; then a bloody poison like that of a hateful serpent fed upon him" (*Tr.* 765-771). As the Chorus sings, Herakles is gripped in Hydra's ghost (*Tr.* 831-840). The verb *ἐχόλωσεν*, poisoned, with which Herakles describes Deianeira's act, relates to the word *χολή*, bile, and alludes to Hydra, in whose bile Herakles dipped his arrows that once killed Nessos, who now kills him (*Tr.* 572-574, 1035).

Sophokles portrays Herakles' disease like a savage beast that bites, leaps up to destroy him, and transforms him metaphorically into a beast too (*Tr.* 987, 1026-1030). Herakles' ever-growing pain is so excruciating that it leads him to madness: the pain hurls Herakles to the ground and again drags him upwards; his eyes are rolling and he

screams out of agony and suffering (*Tr.* 786-787, 789-790, 794-795). Herakles seems to wrestle with a monster, but this time he is defeated. In his madness, Herakles seizes Likhas who brought him Deianeira's gift, hurls him onto a rock, and kills him; thus, he turns an animal sacrifice into a human sacrifice and pollutes himself with one more murder, which adds onto those of Iole's relatives (*Tr.* 775-782). Because of his pain, Herakles has become like an uncontrollable beast that cannot distinguish between killing and sacrifice. Herakles is shocked by what happens to him, but most of all, he is humiliated. He cannot even imagine how a woman did overpower him without even using a sword after all these monsters he had tamed and killed (*Tr.* 1062-1063). This is the first time that Herakles finds himself in such situation and he does not know how to react: on the one hand, he wants to be transferred to a place where people do not see him crying like a girl and on the other hand, he invites everyone to see the disease's afflictions on his body (*Tr.* 779-800, 1071-1084). Herakles' tortured body evokes the other characters' and the audience's pity for his suffering. Most important, it becomes a device in Sophokles' and the gods' hands to show that all mortals invariably are limited by sickness and death. Despite his origin from Zeus and his excellence, Herakles is not excluded from the common fate for mortals. The more Herakles elevated himself to gods because of his divine origin, the more bestial he has become; as such, he tastes the fate of the beasts he once killed. Yet, by experiencing pain and being able to reflect on it, demonstrate it, and talk about it, Herakles realizes his mortal self again. As Zeitlin suggests, male tragic heroes become aware that they have bodies when they find themselves in a condition of weakness (69).

The love-charm that activates its poison when it comes close to fire and devours its victim's flesh symbolizes both Deianeira's and Herakles' passion, which inflamed by love consumes them and their beloved ones: Iole's country and family are already

destroyed, Deianeira commits suicide, and Herakles orders his son to carry his body to the mountain of Oita, make a pyre, and burn him. Deianeira sacrifices herself on the altar of Love, Herakles' bed, whereas Herakles offers himself as a sacrificial victim to his father Zeus, since the mountain Oita is dedicated to him (*Tr.* 874-891, 915-931, 1191-1199). The fire will complete the process of Herakles' purification that started with Hydra's poison and Nessos' blood and continued through excruciating suffering. Ultimately, Iole becomes an Erinys for Herakles' house, an avenging spirit that through Deianeira's garment envelops Herakles and destroys him (*Tr.* 893-895, 1050-1052). Unlike Aiskhylos and Euripides, Sophokles does not describe this Erinys as snake-like; however, through Deianeira, the avenging spirit uses Hydra's poison in Nessos' blood to cause death.

In tragedy, gods predict, inflict, and heal a disease. With his death, Herakles fulfills Zeus' oracles, which ordained that, in a defined time, Herakles would go through an ordeal that would release him from his labors and that his death would be caused by one already dead (*Tr.* 79-81, 821-830, 1159-1173). Although Herakles is well-informed about the prophecies, he cannot escape disaster, for as Herakleitos says, "Poor witnesses for men are their eyes and ears if they have barbarian souls" (qdt. in Graham: IEP). Despite his extreme physical strength, Herakles is not mentally or spiritually qualified to interpret the prophecies correctly. The happy end to which he aspires comes only through death, which releases mortals from their sufferings. Although Zeus' will seems responsible for Herakles' horrible end, the fragmentary and incomplete communication between Herakles' family members and their own passions fulfill in fact the oracles. Herakles discloses to Deianeira only one of the two prophecies regarding the time that the crucial ordeal will take place, but not the other that predicts Herakles' death from a dead (*Tr.* 44-48); therefore, Deianeira cannot make any connections between the prophecy she



knows and the dead Nessos' blood, which she keeps so carefully in her house. Nor do Deianeira and her son, Hyllos, communicate between each other effectively: Deianeira does not know where her husband is, but she knows about the prophecy, and Hyllos knows where his father is, but he has no idea about the prophecies regarding his father's life (*Tr.* 73-87). Moreover, the very fact that Herakles is Zeus' child creates the wrong expectation that he will always be lucky. This idea by itself is dangerous—yet everyone shares it, including Herakles himself (*Tr.* 88-89, 112-121, 1105-1106). Herakles treats himself and is treated as if he were already deified. In “What is a Greek God,” Henrichs points out the ambivalence in Herakles' existential status and characterizes the hero as the archetype of the human aspiration to become immortal (31). However, immortality for humans comes only through suffering and from this fate not even Herakles is excluded, in spite of his glorious deeds.

Herakles appears again, deified now, in Sophokles' *Philoktetes* to confirm Zeus' will and lead the play to a closure. His protagonist, Philoktetes, has many things in common with Herakles, whom he helped to die by lighting the pyre on the mount Oita. Like Herakles, who suffers through Hydra's poison, Philoktetes suffers from the poison that the guardian snake of Khryse's temple injected him. Moreover, both these heroes suffer by the gods' will and because of two female characters, Deianeira and Khryse. Philoktetes' suffering is as unexpected as Herakles' because Khryse's temple was unmarked and Philoktetes could not know that he transgressed its limits (*Ph.* 1326-1328). Herakles, however, dealing with more beasts than humans, acquired a bestial attitude before his fatal ordeal. Philoktetes, in contrast, loses his humanity starting from the moment that his comrades abandon him seriously wounded in Lemnos Island because his groans interrupt their rites. Now, Philoktetes has only Herakles' bow and its invincible arrows to survive (*Ph.* 4-11, 165-166). As Penelope Biggs notices in “The Disease Theme

in Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, and *Trachiniae*," the island itself becomes the symbol of Philoktetes' self-sufficiency, loneliness, and isolation (231). Away from humans, Philoktetes regresses into a primitive stage: he lives in a cave, he sleeps on a bed of leaves, and he rubs one stone against another to make fire; he survives, eating whatever he hunts with his bow and he drinks water from stagnant pools (*Ph.* 33, 16-21, 287-289, 707-717). Although Hydra's poison helps Herakles to realize his mortality and gathers people around him before his death, in Philoktetes' case the snake's poison distances him from the humans and brings him closer to the animals.

As in *Trachiniae*, Sophokles describes Philoktetes' disease as an insatiable wild beast that grows up and eats him up little by little; since a snake bit Philoktetes, we may assume that this disease-beast is an imaginary snake too (*Ph.* 257-259, 265-267, 311-313). The symptoms also appear like a beast approaching Philoktetes, attacking him, devouring his flesh, and abandoning him exhausted: first, Philoktetes stands silent and numb, like one who comes face-to-face with a beast; then, the pain increases gradually like a beast coming closer and closer. After the disease's attack, a vein of dark blood bursts out from Philoktetes' heel. Finally, Philoktetes, exhausted, falls asleep (*Ph.* 782-788, 821-826).

Every time that Philoktetes has seizures, he revives his accident with the snake and his feelings of agony and despair for his inability to heal his wound. This repetitive experience, his forced isolation, and the idea that his enemies mock him increase Philoktetes' anger against the leaders of Greece and Odysseus, who abandoned him helpless to die (*Ph.* 257-258, 791-795, 1021-1024, 1028). As an excellent psychologist, Sophokles shows the role of emotions in body healing: Philoktetes' disease cannot be healed because he feeds his mind continuously with anger and fear (*Ph.* 186-187, 705-706). By becoming bitter and dangerous like the snake that bit him, Philoktetes becomes his sickness. Like a wild beast, he does not trust anyone. Neoptolemos criticizes him for

becoming savage and perceiving as enemies even those who want to help him (*Ph.* 1321-1323, 1354-1361). Philoktetes does not hesitate to turn his poisonous arrows against anyone whom he perceives as enemy, like Odysseus (75-76, 1299-1303). However, the more he maintains the mindset of hatred and retribution, the more he remains unhealed. This very wound hinders Philoktetes from changing, despite the fact that Neoptolemos offers him the mercy that he needs (*Ph.* 470-506, 755-759, 965-966).

Although Philoktetes' suffering seems unreasonable, it fits perfectly in Zeus' big picture: through it, Philoktetes becomes uniquely qualified for his life's mission to conquer Troy with Herakles' bow together with Neoptolemos (*Ph.* 1425-1428). Since the adverse winds and Philoktetes' seizure cannot nail him down and Philoktetes' interaction with the Greeks fails, the deified Herakles appears to change Philoktetes' course and redirect it toward Troy, by promising that Asklepios himself will heal Philoktetes when he gets there<sup>43</sup> (*Ph.* 635-640, 742-749, 1437-1440). Herakles' intervention restores Philoktetes' trust in gods and humans and gives him back his passion for life (*Ph.* 1445-1447, 1465-1468). By referring briefly to his personal sufferings and the glory that followed them, Herakles becomes a role model for Philoktetes to imitate so that he will be glorious through his own sufferings (*Ph.* 1418-1422). Eventually, the snake's poison transforms the defeated Philoktetes to a strong character, confident in gods. As Biggs observes, Philoktetes' measure of greatness is that he can exist in an immoral world without losing his own moral standards (235).

Overall, in both *Philoktetes* and *Trakhiniai*, Sophokles initially uses the snake imagery to convey divine punishment demonstrated physically with extreme pain, for reasons that seem incomprehensible to the two heroes; however, ultimately, the snake signifies the heroes' spiritual transformation through suffering and seals the heroes' glory and immortality.

In Euripides' *Bakkhai*, though, Dionysos punishes Kadmos, the founder of Thebes, and his wife Harmonia by transforming them literally into snakes after Pentheus' dismemberment by his own mother and a band of Theban maenads (*Bak.* 1330-1332). Kadmos acknowledges that Dionysos had been wronged; he makes a plea for mercy, but Dionysos is pitiless—they should have known better before the Thebans insult the god. As a response to Kadmos' complaints that Dionysos is too harsh in his punishment resembling mortals in temper, the god answers that Zeus decreed it long ago (*Bak.* 1341-1349). Kadmos' punishment seems irrational especially because Kadmos and Teiresias are the only Thebans who willingly take part in the god's rites dressed like bacchants (*Bak.* 178-196). However, when Kadmos advises Pentheus to spread a lie about Semele's impregnation by Zeus, he insults both Dionysos and Zeus, since Zeus *is* Dionysos' real father (*Bak.* 333-336). By trying to manipulate Dionysos' personal story and suffering, Kadmos thinks more like a politician than like a true worshipper. Kadmos' transformation into an animal is not out of the Dionysiac context, though. In the play, Dionysos' followers invoke him to manifest himself as a bull, as a many-headed *drakōn*, and as a lion whereas Pentheus, under Dionysos' spell sees the god as bull (*Bak.* 920, 1018-1019). As Segal notes in *Tragedy and Civilization*, Dionysos is the god that breaks down the barriers between humans and beasts and between humans and gods" (Segal 48-49). Kadmos' transformation into a serpent will take place after his participation in a rite of Dionysos; however, after the barriers that Dionysos' rite broke between animals and humans, and because of his mistake, Kadmos will never return into his human qualities.

Kadmos' transformation specifically into a snake alludes to Kadmos' murder of the Theban *drakōn*, Ares' son, under Athena's instructions in order to found Thebes (*Phoin.* 1060-1066). It seems that Kadmos pays now for a crime that he committed years ago. Moreover, Dionysos' prophecy that after becoming a serpent Kadmos will be

involved in wars alludes directly to Ares. Finally, not Dionysos, but Ares will establish Kadmos and Harmonia in the Island of *Makares*, the Blessed (*Bak.* 1333-1339, 1354-1360). Gilhus argues that when the gods punish a mortal by transforming him or her into an animal, their transformation usually stresses their evil characteristics; eventually, only the essential qualities of the person remain (79, 81). Kadmos' transformation into a *drakōn* makes him equal to his victim and signifies his regression into a primitive stage of the human evolution. Thebes has its *drakōn* again and together with Kadmos the city regresses into a primitive stage where violence dominates in human relationships and gods are not revered. In "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," Zeitlin sees Kadmos' transformation as a regression toward his barbarian origins since Kadmos is originally a Phoenician and he will lead a foreign army to invade Greece (153-154).

Despite his suffering, Euripides secures a happy ending for his hero since Kadmos will live forever in the *Makares* Island, where only special mortals are qualified to live. As the band of Dionysos' followers sings, "Blessed (*μάκαρ*) is he who keeps his life pure, with a good *daimōn* and knowing the rites of the gods, and who has his *psukhē* initiated into the Bacchic revelry" (*Bak.* 72-75). Kadmos fulfills these requirements, because he purifies his life through his constant struggle with a snake, either as a monster, or as himself and through his initiation into the Dionysian rites.

#### Possessed by Lyssa: Herakles in Euripides' *Herakles*

In *Herakles*, Euripides presents Herakles killing his children and his wife while possessed by Lyssa, personified madness, and after having killed Lykos, the usurper of

Thebes' throne and Kreon's murderer. Vindictive Hera has planned Herakles' punishment long ago, but Zeus allows it to happen only after Herakles completes Eurystheus' tasks (*Her.* 825-842).

The Chorus describes Lyssa as the Night's Gorgon since her "head gleams with the open mouths of a hundred snakes" (*Her.* 880-885). Iris addresses her as the Night's maiden daughter with a merciless heart (*Her.* 833-834). Yet, this destructive maiden hesitates to harm Herakles, who restored order on earth by taming monsters and saving gods' worship from godless people. As a minor goddess though, Lyssa yields to Hera's orders (*Her.* 847-854, 864-866). In *Interpreting the Symptom*, Holmes points out the paradox of reasonable Madness and unreasonable gods, such as Hera, and wonders whether "this Lyssa *sōphronousa*, as Wilamowitz called her," is a Euripidean joke or not (259). If Lyssa did not inflict madness on Herakles, though, the course of events would never lead to Herakles' establishment as a cult-hero in Athens. Unlike the Erinyes who are obvious only to the kin-murderer, Lyssa is visible to the Chorus and to the audience, but Herakles and his family cannot see her invading Herakles' house (*Her.* 815-824, 874). Her invisibility and her unexpected attack resemble snake attack.

Possessed by Lyssa, Herakles becomes Lyssa, and at the moment of his seizure he acquires serpentine qualities: he inflicts the Hydra's poison in his children and wife with his arrows "dipped in the hundred-headed hydra's blood." Also, he turns his Gorgon's gaze toward another son and smashes his head with his club (*Her.* 969-1000, 1188). As the offspring of Night and Heaven, Lyssa inflicts into Herakles' breast dark and vast madness that surpasses cosmic powers, such as the sea's roaring waves, the earthquake, and the lightning bolt (*Her.* 861-863). By comparing madness with natural phenomena, Euripides denotes Hera's rage against Zeus' child, but also Herakles' transformation into a destructive cosmic force, demonstrated through physical symptoms: agitation, eyes

rolling out of their sockets, disquieting breathing, hallucinations, and foam dripping. Euripides' Herakles, though, does not suffer Philoktetes' and Orestes' agony, but he laughs maniacally (*Her.* 867-870, 928-971).

Although Dionysos does not manifest himself in *Herakles*, almost all the characters allude to his bacchic rites. Even the snake-haired Lyssa alludes to the image of Dionysos crowned with wreaths of serpents in *Bakkhai* (*Bak.* 100-102). The physical symptoms of Herakles' madness connote bacchic frenzy: Herakles shakes his head and breathes like a bull ready to charge (*Her.* 867-869). In "Euripides' Tragic Muse," Peter Wilson highlights the significance of Dionysian music through the instrument of *aulos*, pipe, in the induction of madness to Herakles (433-438). Under the spell of the *aulos*' music, Herakles kills his children and wife (*Her.* 871-872, 889-890, 895-897). In "Madness and Bestialization in Euripides' *Heracles*," Antonietta Provenza notes that Herakles' madness represents a "harmful subversion of Dionysiac *enthousiasmos*" and distinguishes 'just' violence from the 'unjust' violence, which imposes the law of the jungle in the human society (69). Moreover, as Seaford in *Dionysos* observes, Dionysos inspires kin-killing frenzy, a pattern that Euripides fully exploits in his *Bakkhai*, again as means of punishment (96).

Nagy translates the word Lyssa as 'wolfish rage' and connects it with *lykos*, which means 'wolf,' and with Ares, the god of war; as such, Lyssa denotes martial fury with which the warriors are possessed in the battlefield (161). By killing Lykos and proclaiming an extended bloodshed that will "fill the whole of the Ismenos River with the gore of dead bodies, and redden the clear spring of Dirke with blood" Herakles brings from the battlefield into the city his excessive aggressiveness and animalistic qualities (*Her.* 565-582, 622-636). As Heath argues, "The beast must be given its own place – in the fields and as victims to maintain harmony between man and god, community and

cosmos” (249). In order to avert the proliferation of violence through an extended civil strife, Zeus allows the serpentine-haired Lyssa<sup>44</sup> to inflict madness on the hero so that he will channel and limit his martial fury into his family. By sacrificing his own family, Herakles resembles Lykos who was ready to kill Herakles’ family at his absence like sacrificial victims as well (*Her.* 451). As René Girard argues in *Violence and the Sacred*, in Greek tragedy, violence erases the differences between antagonists and, in the end, each combatant mirrors the other (47).

Herakles’ seizure leaves him transformed into a vulnerable, desperate, and humiliated man who resembles female tragic characters more than his previous self. Herakles wants to become invisible and to hide his shame for his tragic mistake: the hero who once tamed monsters now fears the people’s tongues’ bitter stings (*Her.* 1158-1162, 1285-1290). Herakles’ extreme psychological pain disrupts his relationship with gods and makes him question their practices. On the one hand, Herakles realizes that his divine origin has brought him only problems so far, and he imagines Hera celebrating her triumph over him with dances (*Her.* 1263-1265, 1302-1310). On the other hand, trying to find a rational cause for his fall, Herakles attributes his suffering to his mortal family’s bloodstained past (*Her.* 1258-1262). Ultimately, Herakles wants to commit suicide on the altars in order to pollute them and take revenge for his suffering (*Her.* 1240-1245, 1301-1302).

Herakles’ friend, Theseus, who suddenly appears in Thebes to help him deal with Lykos, heals Herakles’ despair and insecurity with his friendship. By offering him a new place to live, Athens, where he will be purified, Theseus restores Herakles in the people’s and gods’ eyes. Moreover, Herakles will have a cult with sacrifices and temples after death (*Her.* 1311-1333, 1340-1346, 1410-1412). Thus, the hero will not bring only glory to Athens as Theseus suggests, but also protection through his cult (*Her.* 1334-1335). We



see an analogous integration of a polluted foreigner in Athens, in Sophokles' *Oidipous at Colonus*. In the preface of *Wounded Heroes*, Marina Berzins McCoy argues that Oedipous' incorporation in Athens and his elevation as the city's protector "displays the Athenian ideal of the *πόλις* as the dwelling of 'all together', in which receptivity to the outsider and even to weakness becomes constitutive of the city's good" (xi). Similarly, by integrating Herakles into Athens, Theseus turns the hero's bestial energy to a protective power for the citizens.

After passing from superhuman to subhuman, now Herakles starts feeling like any other mortal who becomes "slave of circumstance" (*Her.* 1356-1357). Through Herakles' madness, the audience realizes that every mortal, even the most qualified one with special physical or intellectual power, is vulnerable. Whenever the gods decide so, the snake-haired Lyssa may sting the mortals with her goad and make them unable to control even their own minds; humbleness is the lesson again.

Avenging Spirits in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi* and *Eumenides* and Euripides' *Elektra*,  
*Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, and *Orestes*

At the end of *Khoephoroi*, Orestes has already fulfilled Apollo's orders and killed Aigisthos and his mother Klytemnestra to avenge his father's death. Despite his loyalty to the god, Orestes neither avoids the encounter with the horrible visions of his mother's hound-like Erinyes, as Klytemnestra warned him, nor the exile from his city (*Kh.* 924, 1044-1047). The paradox is that Orestes has killed his mother in order to avoid punishment from Apollo and from his dead father's Erinyes. Had Orestes not acted so, ulcers would eat up his flesh and madness and terrible nightmares would rule his mind.

He would be in exile and, isolated from all social and ritual events, eventually he would die and his body would turn into a mummy (*Kh.* 269-296). Now, though, his mother's Erinyes come in troops against him, driven by her blood in his hands.

The Erinyes aim at the human mind; by conquering it, they dominate one's whole existence. Orestes realizes the Erinyes' approach by the gradual alterations in his consciousness: he feels like a charioteer driving beyond his course and his mind whirls him away without him being able to control it. Orestes describes his heartbeats as if Fear, personified, sings and dances a tune of wrath next to his heart (*Kh.* 1022-1042). Finally, Orestes sees them: Gorgon-like, entwined with swarming snakes, with eyes that drip blood, stirred by his mother's wrath, the Erinyes terrify Orestes to death and drive him out of the city (*Kh.* 1048-1058). Since Orestes is the only one who sees them, the Chorus questions their existence—yet, Orestes makes it clear that the Erinyes are not just visions of his imagination. Ultimately, the only sign of relief for Orestes is that if he makes it to Apollo's precinct at Delphi as a suppliant, the god will purify him (*Kh.* 1048-1062).

Aiskhylos discloses Apollo's plans for Orestes in the last tragedy of his trilogy, *Eumenides*. The plot develops first at the Apollo's shrine in Delphi and later in Athens. Rehm suggests that Orestes' movement in different settings works "as a symbolic cure, a means of removing Orestes' pollution." Moreover, it signifies the lapse of time from the mythic past of Argos toward democratic Athens. In *The Play of Space*, Rush Rehm points out that *Eumenides* is the only Greek tragedy in which the citizens take decisions for themselves without being represented by a king (91, 93). By creating a spatial and temporal distance, Aiskhylos prepares the ground in order to show the transition from vengeful Justice that the Erinyes represent to lawful Justice assigned after trial. This transition, however, is so difficult that it requires divine intervention.

Elder than the Olympian gods, the Erinyes represent an older kind of Justice based on retaliation. Their Fate orders them to hound the traces of the kin-murderers and especially the matricides (*Eum.* 208-210, 321-323, 334-340). For the Erinyes, Orestes is their sacrificial victim, “fattened and dedicated” to them, “a living feast” that will not be slaughtered at an altar (*Eum.* 301-304). Goldhill in *Oresteia*, points out that the Erinyes corrupt the ordered killing of sacrifice since they bind their victim with a spell and consume him alive (63). As such, these goddesses are more closely related to beasts than to gods. Although Pythia is unable to define them, Klytemnestra’s ghost calls them as female *drakōn* (*Eum.* 34-59, 128). Thus, the snake as symbol conveys the notion of the murdered ones’ unappeased anger. Heath notes that Klytemnestra may refer to herself, who has been called a serpent in the previous two plays of the trilogy (238). However, as we have seen in the first chapter, the others see Klytemnestra as snake and not Klytemnestra herself, whereas she identifies her son with it. Now, though, she may identify herself with the snake because it symbolizes revenge. As punitive chthonian goddesses, the Erinyes live under the earth, in Tartaros, a Greek version of Hell, and the blood’s smell stirs them up to chase the murderers, to drink their blood while they are still alive, and to drag them under the earth where “they chop off heads, gouge out eyes, slit throats, and where young men’s virility is ruined by destruction of their seed, where there are mutilations and stonings, and where men who are impaled beneath the spine moan long and piteously” (*Eum.* 185-190, 247-254, 264-267). The Erinyes’ dark world is in sharp contrast with the god of light and life, Apollo. Thus, he threatens to shoot an arrow, “a flying, winged, glistening snake” against the fearsome female *drakōn*, the Erinyes, because they pollute his shrine (*Eum.* 128, 179-197).

Apollo and Athena restore patriarchy by defending Orestes and by helping him to be acquitted in the trial in Athens (614-673). Although the Erinyes consider that Apollo

deprives them of their honors and he himself defiles his own shrine by protecting matricide Orestes, Apollo accuses them for partial justice—therefore, no justice—because the Erinyes do not punish those who kill each other in a marriage (*Eum.* 162-174, 217-223, 323-327). Apollo takes on himself the full responsibility for Klytemnestra's murder and clarifies the importance of a man over a woman in a family (*Eum.* 222-223, 658-666). Athena supports Apollo's argument regarding the male superiority in a family since she has been born without a mother, directly from Zeus' head (*Eum.* 734-740). This is something new for the Erinyes. They realize that Orestes' acquittal indicates the failure of Justice that they represent, where fear plays a major role since it averts evil deeds. From now on, children will kill parents without having any fear for punishment (*Eum.* 490-565). Athena does not reject fear, but next to it she also places reciprocal respect between the citizens and the council of judges that she has just established and respect for the gods (*Eum.* 681-706). Based on these principles, Athena votes pro Orestes' acquittal. At last, Orestes is free to return to Argos and to restore himself in the city and in his house. He expresses his gratitude to the two gods and Zeus the Savior, and he swears that his city will never turn against Athens (*Eum.* 753-777). The case is closed—is it?

The Erinyes' power is not limited only to the kin-murderers. Athena knows from the beginning that if they do not win, their venom from their wounded pride will inflict on her city an intolerable, perpetual plague (*Eum.* 475-479). And indeed, angry and dishonored as a result of Orestes' acquittal, the Erinyes declare that they will let their heart's venom destroy every living creature in Athens from plants to humans (*Eum.* 778-823). Rehm imagines them dancing around Athena while singing their spell against Athens and cursing the land (97). In fact, this is the Erinyes' second binding song since they addressed the first one against Orestes aiming at maddening him before his trial (*Eum.* 328-333). In his article “‘Why Should I Dance?’: Choral Self-Referentiality in

Greek Tragedy,” Henrichs remarks that the Erinyes’ invocation of Night, their mother, indicates how sinister their song is and how destructive their power is. Moreover, the Erinyes’ reference to their feet, which perform an “angry dancing,” manifests the Erinyes’ choral identity, but also their feet’s “function as instruments of destruction that physically perform the incantation in an act of sympathetic magic” (Henrichs 63-64; *Eum.* 368-371). Still, neither of the Erinyes’ two binding songs brings the results they wish. As the goddess of wisdom, Athena sets the power of Persuasion against the Erinyes’ violence and tries to restore the Erinyes’ trust in the gods’ new order (*Eum.* 869-880, 891). Athena restores their honors promising the first fruits from the harvest, sacrifices before childbirth and marriage, and an adobe close to Erekhtheus’ house; now the Erinyes fall under her spell (*Eum.* 824-836, 854-857, 886-900). As soon as the Erinyes accept her offer, they transform into Beneficial Spirits, *Eumenidai*, and their venom turns into medicine that heals and protects the city. Their curses for ulcers that cause sterility in both humans and nature and for pollution become blessings for fertility, prosperity, civilian concordance, and unanimity, the remedy for many ills (*Eum.* 780-790, 922-926, 938-948, 956-967, 976-987). Aishlylos conveys the goddesses’ transformation from harmful to healing deities by using medical terminology, such as the words *λειχήν*, *βλάβη*, *νόσος* and *ἄκος* (815, 938, 943, 987). Athena’s victory over the Erinyes conveys the civilization’s victory over wild nature and the law of jungle.

At the end of the *Oresteia*, the statement of the Chorus in *Khoephoroi* that Orestes has to suffer because he committed a loathsome murder is proved right (*Kh.* 1007-1009). As Martha Nussbaum argues in *The Fragility of Goodness*, although Orestes acts out of necessity, he needs to be punished in order to avoid feelings that would urge him to kill again, such as enthusiasm and feelings of self-congratulation. However, his guilt should not last forever, nor should it be transmitted to the next generations (41-43). This change

in Justice cannot happen unless the powers that have dealt with Justice so far change. The Erinyes' transformation into Eumenides signifies this moment of transition from an arbitrary and retributive Justice to a Justice based on laws that apply to everyone. The Eumenides still maintain their wild energy—yet, instead of turning it against the citizens, they will preserve it to protect them from the city's enemies. As for the citizens, it suffices to remember how fearful these goddesses really are in order to restrain themselves from violent actions.

About forty-two years after Aiskhylos' *Oresteia*, Euripides deals with the same myth of the Atreidai house. His Orestes, though, is more rebellious and impatient than Aiskhylos' Orestes and dares to question the gods for his suffering. Like Aiskhylos' Orestes, Euripides' hero is pursued by female, snake-like, punitive deities after his mother's murder (*El.* 1250-1253, *IT.* 77-85, *Or.* 401-402). However, Euripides does not stage them, but their presence is reported. He keeps the basic characteristics that Aiskhylos gave them, but he adds wings. Moreover, Euripides does not name them only *Erinyes*, but in his *Elektra*, he names them *Kêres*, Dead Spirits, without changing their traits (*El.* 1252). Unlike Aiskhylos, who aims at producing fear with his Erinyes, in his plays Euripides focuses more on his tragic hero's suffering by these creatures and less on triggering the audience's fear, echoing the intellectual movements of his era. In the following paragraphs, I will analyze the role of these punitive deities in Euripides' plays mentioned above.

In Euripides' *Elektra*, both mortals and minor divinities succumb to Apollo's will and to Destiny: with Elektra's help Orestes kills his mother and Klytemnestra's two deified brothers cannot do anything to avert Kêres, the Dead Spirits, from the house. Although Orestes followed divine orders, he must be punished because his deed is bad (*El.* 1243-1248, 1298-1307). However, since Apollo ordered Klytemnestra's murder,

Orestes is not considered polluted, as Kastor, Klytemnestra's brother proclaims—an idea that contrasts Aiskhylos' notion of pollution (*El.* 1292-1297). Still, Kêres, will inflict on Orestes a wandering madness and will hound him up to Athens, where in a trial at Areopagus Apollo will take full responsibility for Klytemnestra's murder and Orestes will be free of charges (*El.* 1254-1269).

Despite their different name, Kêres resemble the Erinyes: they are dreadful goddesses too, with snakes for arms, dog-faced and black-skinned, and they bring forth a terrible woe (*El.* 1252-1253, 1342-1346). Their terrifying sight and their serpentine features allude to the serpentine-haired Gorgon with the lethal glare with whom both Aigisthos and Klytemnestra are connected directly and indirectly. Elektra repeatedly reports that, while Aigisthos was alive, she avoided looking him in the eyes, because she was afraid of him. After his murder, her eyes are free at last; looking at his decapitated head that is compared to a Gorgon's head she tells him in his face what she was thinking of him (*El.* 855-857, 866-868, 910-913). Moreover, taking Perseus' role, Orestes avoids looking at Klytemnestra when he is about to kill her. He covers his eyes with his garments so that he will not restrain himself from killing his mother, who manages to paralyze him for a moment by exposing her breast that nurtured him (*El.* 1206-1209, 1218-1223). Now, the anger of his Gorgon-like mother is personified by the dreadful Kêres who pursue Orestes and drive him mad. However, Kastor proclaims that Athena will repel the Kêres by holding over Orestes' head her Gorgon shield, thereby protecting him (*El.* 1254-1256). Even before Klytemnestra's murder, the Chorus' song about Achilles' shield depicting Perseus holding the Gorgon's head foreshadows the course of events and alludes to Athena's shield (*El.* 452-462). As we have seen in other cases, monsters beat similar monsters. Thus, the depiction of the snake-haired Gorgon on Athena's shield will repel the snake-armed Kêres.

Unlike Aiskhylos' Erinyes, Euripides' Kêres will never become beneficial spirits for Athens, but they will not be dangerous for the city either. Euripides wants them to sink into a cleft in the earth, where there is an oracle, after having been struck by grief at the verdict that frees Orestes of charges for his mother's murder (*El.* 1270-1272). Apollo and Athena defeat the Kêres, who have to succumb to necessity and, perhaps, serve Apollo through his oracle.

About three years later, in 413 B.C.E., Euripides stages his *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*. In spite of Orestes' acquittal for his mother's murder in a trial at Athens, some Erinyes who did not accept the verdict still goad him with madness (*IT.* 1439-1440, 1455-1456). In order to be healed, Apollo orders Orestes to go to the land of the Taurians to bring Artemis' wooden statue back to Greece (*IT.* 85-91, 930-986). As if this is not enough, Orestes, always with his friend Pylades, face the danger of being sacrificed to Artemis by the locals if they are caught (*IT.* 38-41, 77-102). Their fear comes true when in a cave next to the sea herdsmen watch Orestes falling into delirium, goaded by the Erinyes: he shakes his head up and down, he groans aloud, his hands tremble, and he shouts (*IT.* 282-284). When his seizure stops, Orestes falls down and foam drips from his chin (*IT.* 307-308). Orestes reports three Erinyes that do not share the same appearance: one is hound-faced, another is a she-*drakōn* from Hades who wants to kill him with her terrible vipers, and the third breathes fire and gore and threatens to hurl at him his mother, a mass of stone. Orestes takes the animals' sounds for the Erinyes' voice and starts stabbing them thinking that he attacks the Erinyes (*IT.* 284-300). When Orestes' seizure stops, the herdsmen take the Erinyes' place and throw stones at him. The Erinyes who has threatened to kill Orestes hurling at him his petrified mother foreshadows the herdsmen's repetitive attack with stones (*IT.* 308-310, 318-319, 326-327). Through these images Euripides finds an innovative way to allude to the motif of the snake-haired Gorgon who



petrifies her victims and to connect the Erinyes with her and with Orestes' imminent death by stoning. Right after the Erinyes' goading of madness, Orestes faces the danger of becoming like his mother, a mass of stone.

In this play, Euripides uses the Erinyes more as a device that develops the plot, than as a device to create fear. Euripides decreases the significance of Orestes' delirium under the Erinyes' attack by presenting a messenger reporting this incident. Still, Euripides triggers the audience's fear of the Erinyes and pity for Orestes' suffering. Unlike Aiskhylos who targets on stirring fear by presenting the Erinyes in front of his audience's eyes, Euripides focuses rather on the results of the Erinyes' attack on his already beaten up hero. Furthermore, because of the Erinyes' attack Orestes and Pylades are captured and Orestes meets with his sister Iphigeneia, whom Artemis had brought miraculously to this land and made a priestess in her temple (*IT.* 10-34, 35-41, 77-84, 961-978). When the two siblings recognize each other, they conspire together with Pylades to steal Artemis' wooden statue and escape to Greece, where Orestes must build a temple at Halai for Artemis Tauropolos. In the end, both Orestes and Iphigeneia are rewarded with the establishment of rites that evoke their sufferings (*IT.* 1446-1467). Again, the Erinyes become the new gods' instruments that eventually lead the tragic heroes to immortality.

In *Orestes*, Euripides works again on the problem of human / divine responsibility and Justice. Euripides stresses again the protagonists' confusion toward Apollo's purposes and the paradox of obeying the god and yet suffering: since Apollo is a god, he cannot be unjust—yet, a matricide is not a murder to boast about (*Or.* 28-31). Likewise, Orestes is holy for avenging his father's death and unholy at the same time for his mother's murder (*Or.* 546-547). Moreover, not all the characters share the same idea about Orestes' pollution and, therefore, guilt. Klytemnestra's sister, Helen, totally

charges Apollo for the murder and does not consider Orestes as polluted (*Or.* 75-76). Menelaos considers Apollo's orders as unwise but Orestes' suffering as natural consequence for the monstrous deed he has done. In contrast, Klytemnestra's father, Tyndareōs, fully charges Orestes for the murder and considers Orestes' suffering from madness and terror as proof that the gods hate him and punish him (*Or.* 412-417, 530-533). Elektra feels that she and her brother have become Apollo's sacrificial victims by killing their mother – an idea that evokes Aiskhylos' Erinyes who see Orestes as their sacrificial victim too (*Or.* 191-194).

In contrast to Aiskhylos, Euripides suggests that the Erinyes may be just products of Orestes' imagination and creations of his guilty feelings for his mother's murder. When Menelaos asks Orestes what kinds of visions make him sick, Orestes answers that in his imagination he sees three Erinyes. The verb that Orestes uses is ἔδοξε, "it seemed to me" (*Or.* 407-408). However, in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi*, Orestes uses the derivative of the same verb, δόξαι, in a negative sentence to argue that the Erinyes he sees are not just visions (*Kh.* 1051-1054). Furthermore, in Aiskhylos' *Eumenides*, the Erinyes appear on stage as the Chorus of the play. In contrast, in Euripides' *Orestes*, on the one hand, everyone talks about the Erinyes and feels scared to mention even their name, but no one has seen them. On the other hand, Orestes, who claims that he sees the Erinyes, mistakes Elektra, who stretches her arms to restrain him from his leaping, for an Erinyes who wants to hurl him into Tartaros (*Or.* 262-265, 335-339, 407-408). Moreover, when Menelaos discusses Orestes' condition with him, he asks Orestes what disease destroys him and Orestes answers: "Understanding: the awareness that I have done dreadful things" (*Or.* 395-396). His answer implies that had he not realized what he did, he may not be suffering now and that the Erinyes might not manifest themselves at all. Also, as we have noticed in the previous chapter, the more Orestes comes out of his depression and

becomes active again, the less he thinks of the Erinyes. As long as Orestes sees that his relatives betrayed him and voted for his death and Elektra's, the wanderings of his mind stop and he becomes once more the snake that kills, as his grandfather called him, identifying himself with the Erinyes (*Or.* 479, 1421-1424). Euripides plays with the audience's mind, which knows the relevant myth but tries to figure out Euripides' point of view until the end of the play, where Apollo manifests himself to restore order.

Unlike Aiskhylos, Euripides does not bother with the Erinyes' name and their ultimate transformation into beneficial spirits. During *Orestes*, the Erinyes are referred to by both their names (*Or.* 37-38, 238, 264, 321, 582, 836, 1650). Orestes reports three Erinyes and describes them again as bloody-faced maidens, a winged fusion of snakes and dogs. Moreover, Euripides uses the word *γοργῶπες*, fierce-eyed, and connects them to the Gorgon, but also alludes to Athena, whose shield that protects Orestes is also *γοργωπός* as we have seen in *Elektra* (*Or.* 255-261, 276-277, 408; *El.* 1257). As in Aiskhylos' *Eumenides*, Klytemnestra stirs up the Erinyes to attack Orestes, but it is not clear whether Orestes sees the ghost of his mother in action or assumes that she instigates them (*Or.* 255). The Erinyes manifest their attack through the symptoms of Orestes' madness. He easily passes from depression to agitation and vice versa without realizing it and his disturbed eyes signal the seizure's beginning (*Or.* 253-254, 277-279). In Aiskhylos' *Eumenides*, Orestes is about to become "a gruesome drink" for the Erinyes, who order him to allow them suck his blood from his live limbs (*Eum.* 264-266). In Euripides' *Orestes*, it seems that that the Erinyes do consume him, because after their attack, Orestes' limbs cannot hold him. Furthermore, his memory abandons him and he looks dead (*Or.* 200, 213-216, 227-228, 385). After a short break caused by Orestes' outbreak of anger, which almost led to unjust violence, the Erinyes follow Orestes in his

exile and in his trial in Athens, named as Eumenides will be Orestes' prosecutors (*Or.* 1643-1647).

All in all, Euripides portrays the Erinyes as dreadful, snake-like, punitive goddesses, but he is interested more in presenting his hero's suffering because of them and Apollo's orders than in stirring fear by staging them. The demonstration of Orestes' suffering body may be a more persuasive argument for the audience to avoid retributive justice, because it does not only evoke fear, like Aiskhylos' Erinyes on stage, but also it appeals to the audience's pity.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

In my thesis, I have argued that in Greek tragedy, serpent imagery signifies disease, which manifests itself as a character's weakness, such as arrogance and deceitfulness, and as physical suffering and loss of control through poison and madness. The physical strength of big snakes, not necessarily poisonous, indicates arrogance manifested as violent behavior and impiety. For instance, in Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi*, Klytemnestra and Aigisthos are called *drakontes* because they rule tyrannically the citizens of Argos (*Kh.* 1046-1047). Moreover, images with hissing serpents and with snakes' fiery eyes convey certain heroes' cruelty, such as Aiskhylos' Xerxes in the *Persians* and Tydeus in *Seven against Thebes* (*Pers.* 81-82; *Seven* 380-381). In addition, the tragic heroes' correlation to monsters with serpentine features, such as the Gorgon and the Typhōn signifies their outrageous behavior. Regarding deception, the tragic poets draw images from the snakes' meandering movement, their adjustability to their environment, and their hiding skills to denote their heroes' cunningness. For example, in Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon*, Klytemnestra's luxurious welcome to Agamemnon is, in fact, a trap that leads him to death. Also, the snakes' double tongue signifies the treacherous heroes' double language that they use to accomplish their purpose. To illustrate, Odysseus' enemies loathe him for his double tongue and his tendency to adjust his words according to his interests (*Tro.* 282-287). Furthermore, the tragic poets employ the human experience related with snakebite and poison to portray their heroes' loss of control and excruciating pain, which often resembles an attack of a beast that wrestles with them and

devours them. Finally, the tragic poets portray anthropomorphic creatures with serpentine features, such as the Erinyes, who inflict madness on certain heroes, such as Euripides' Herakles and Orestes.

The physical strength of snakes which indicates arrogant disposition demonstrated through violence, is attributed more as quality to male characters than to female ones because traditionally men are considered physically stronger than women. Aiskhylos' Klytemnestra is an exception—yet, even she has a male's mindset, as the Watchman says (*Ag.* 10-11). In contrast, the tragic heroes who are portrayed as snakes and resort to deceit are men and women, mature and young ones at the liminal state of maturity. Regarding physical disease, the afflicted characters are male whereas the agents that inflict the disease are female, either portrayed as female beasts, such as Hydra, or as female punitive deities with serpentine characteristics, such as the Erinyes, Lyssa, and Kêres. In "Playing the Other," Zeitlin has shown that the female body is perceived as more fluid, therefore more difficult to be controlled. As such, the female gender is considered more irrational, but also as source that may inflict madness on men (65). In addition, in *Mortals and Immortals*, Vernant argues that the female representations of disease convey the fear of the female "otherness," which is irresistibly attractive and dangerous at the same time (96-101).

Snake imagery conveys divine punishment and is demonstrated through literal transformation into a snake, as in Kadmos' case in *Bakkhai*; through extreme physical suffering caused by a snake's poison, as in the cases of Sophokles' Philoktetes in *Philoktetes* and Herakles in *Trakhiniai*; and through madness, as in Euripides' *Herakles*. In human level, snake imagery conveys retaliation, which proliferates violence. For example, in Aiskhylos' trilogy *Oresteia*, Klytemnestra, who is compared to a snake, kills Agamemnon. In turn, Orestes, who is also compared to a snake, avenges his father's

death by killing his mother. Finally, the snake-like Erinyes, the personification of the anger of Orestes' dead mother, threaten to kill Orestes. In Greek tragedy, proud heroes who are not compared to snakes attract divine punishment, but many of them survive just to see and live with the results of their mindset, such as Kreon in *Antigone* and Jason in *Medea*. My findings, though, show that arrogance and snakes is a lethal combination, which usually leads to heroes' death. In contrast, the deceitful characters who are compared to snakes are punished too, but only with suffering. In any case, divine punishment reminds the heroes of their mortal limits. Beyond the tragic heroes' ordeals, though, the gods see the heroes' potential for immortality and glorification through cult and by the medium of tragic poetry. Thus, the snake imagery does not convey only suffering but also transformation and elevation to a divine level.

The tragic heroes who are compared to snakes create fear with their terrifying disposition. Some of them deliberately present themselves as snakes to terrify their enemy, like Hippomedon, whose shield depicts snakes and the Typhōn (*Seven* 380-381, 489-496). Other heroes, such as Odysseus, do not need to try hard to earn the title *snake*, since their disposition and actions trigger their comparison to serpents. The audience feels fear by watching those heroes and witnessing their eventual downfall. Ultimately, through empathy, not only certain tragic heroes relate to snakes, but also the audience that watches the heroes' suffering. The spectators may not be as excessive in their disposition as the characters on stage, but, certainly, they can identify themselves with the heroes' arrogance, deceitfulness, and impatience in difficulties—all universal human flaws. The tragic poets exploit the snake as symbol to teach humility as a way to keep balance and avoid gods' punishment.

At the end of my thesis, I feel that this uncanny creature, the Snake, has allowed me merely to touch it. There are still more things to say about the snake imagery in Greek

tragedy regarding disease and healing, for example its suspicious interplay with dog imagery. I hope that I will be able to revisit this topic in the future and that my thesis will invite more scholars' analyses and interpretations to illuminate aspects that I did not see. After all, it is in the snake's nature to hide itself.



## Notes

1. For Aiskhylos' *Seven against Thebes* and *Persians* I follow Herbert Weir Smyth's translation, unless indicated otherwise (*Aeschylus*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1926. N. pag. *The Annenberg CPB/Project*). For Aiskhylos' *Agamemnon*, I follow Smyth's translation, revised by Gregory Crane, Craeme Bird, and Gregory Nagy (*The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours: Sourcebook*. Ed. Gregory Nagy). For Euripides' *Phoinissai*, I follow David Kovacs' translation (Euripides. *Helen, Phoenician Women, Orestes*. Vol. 5. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002).

2. Such an example is the snake that guards Khrysa's temple, in Sophokles' *Philoktetes* (lines 1327-1328).

3. By contrast, in Sophokles' *Antigone*, where the action is supposed to take place after the war with the Argives, the word *drakōn* stands for the Thebans who defeated the Argives (line 125).

4. For *Prometheus Bound*, I follow Alan H. Sommerstein's translation. *Aeschylus. Persians, Seven Against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.

5. Parallel to Parthenopaios' terrifying gaze is Xerxes' snakelike terrifying gaze, in Aiskhylos' *Persians* (lines 81-82).

6. According to Lissarrague, a research in Beazley Archives reveal that snakes and the *gorgoneion* are depicted most often on warriors' shields as the shields are portrayed on vases (*Vases Grecs* 240). Some examples from literature: Athena's and Agamemnon's shields in Homer's *Iliad* (2.34-37, 5.739-742).

7. Zeitlin, Froma, I. *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes*.

8. For the idea, I am indebted to Naomi Weiss.

9. Rohde mentions Thebes and Oropos in Greece as the main places for Amphiaraios' worship (92).

10. Here, I follow Alan Sommerstein's translation. *Aeschylus. Persians, Seven Against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.

11. I follow Herbert Weir Smyth's translation. *Aeschylus*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1926. N. pag. *The Annenberg CPB/Project*.

12. The translation of the word as *ἀνάνδρους* “the man-shunning,” is Sommerstein’s whereas the translation of the word *κρεοβότους* as “flesh-devouring” belongs to Smyth. I preferred to combine them in one sentence since they convey more effectively an aspect of the Danaids’ attitude, as Pelasgos sees them.

13. Sommerstein assigns the lines 836-841, 847-853, and 859-865 to the Chorus of Aigyptos’ sons (Sommerstein 397). Regardless of the character/s that sing these lines, the content is indicative for the agent/s violent and terrifying disposition.

14. Here, I follow Sommerstein’s translation.

15. In Homeric epic poetry the word gold is used in descriptions of gods and things related to them, as for example the description of Poseidon’s palace, clothes, horses with gold manes, and his golden whip (*Iliad* 13.20-26). Aiskhylos’ depiction of the Persians’ association with gold and with divinity aligns with Herodotos’ tradition about the Persians; according to him, the Persians descend from Perseus, born from Danae and Zeus’ seed, which came upon her as golden shower (Hdt. 7.61.3, 7.150.2).

16. Here, I follow Smyth’s translation.

17. Sommerstein’s translation.

18. Aiskhylos alludes to the eyes depicted often on each bow of a ship, as Smyth observes. Cf. Aiskhylos’ *Suppliants*, 716: “καὶ πρῶρα πρόσθεν ὄμμασιν βλέπουσ’ ὀδόν”. Also, Aisk. *Sup.* 743-744.

19. Aiskhylos does not mention these wicked counselors’ names, but as we know from Herodotos, Mardonios, Xerxes’ cousin and brother in-law, encouraged the historical Xerxes to invade Greece hoping that he would be the Satrap in the conquered territory (Hdt. 7. 5-6).

20. Aiskhylos may have drawn this picture from Homer’s *Iliad*. Hektor is compared to a snake while he waits for Akhilles to fight in an one-to-one battle: “As serpent in its den upon the mountains, full fed with deadly poisons, waits for the approach of a man- he is filled with fury and his eyes glare terribly as he goes writhing round his den” (22.90-97).

21. In her article “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Mythmaking in the Oresteia,” Zeitlin parallels Aigisthos with the barbarian Paris who also commits adultery with Helen, Klytemnestra’s sister, and he frequents Helen’s room more than the battlefield (163-164).

22. In his *Elektra*, Euripides who works on the same myth retains Klytemnestra as an awful mother who keeps away not only Orestes, but Elektra as well. For fear that if Elektra marries to a noble man she may give birth to children who will avenge Agamemnon’s death, she is forced to marry a farmer (*El.* 19-36). Moreover, Klytemnestra’s motivation for murder is not her daughter’s death but Agamemnon’s treachery to bring Cassandra home (*El.* 1020-1034).

23. See Pausanias, *Description of Greece* (9.5.3) and Apollodoros, *Library* (3.4.1)

24. I follow David Kovacs' translation. Euripides' *Bacchae*, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, *Rhesus*. Vol. 6. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.

25. In Euripides' *Phoinissai*, the snake that guards the waters of Dirke is Ares' son (lines 657-661, 940-941). As such, the snake correlates sometimes with aggressiveness, as in *Bakkhai*, and other times with bravery, as in Sophokles' *Antigone* (line 125).

26. Aristotle. *Politics*. Tr. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005. Print.

27. Here, I follow T. Buckley's translation, revised by Alex Sens and Gregory Nagy. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours: Sourcebook*. Ed. Gregory Nagy. n. pag. EdX.

28. Not all the maddened characters end up dying, e.g. Orestes in Euripides' homonymous play. Perhaps, death is an indication that one's case is incurable.

29. In *Dionysos*, Seaford describes the process of initiation that recalls Pentheus' experience: "The initiand chooses to undergo a secret and frightening ritual that consists of a transition from the anxious ignorance of the outsider, through an experience that might be like death and that involves revelation (sometimes of sacred objects), into a new blissful state as an insider (initiate). As a pre-enactment of death, it might remove (as do modern near-death experiences) the fear of death" (49).

30. For Aiskhylos' *Khoephoroi* I follow Smith's translation, revised by Jim Erdman and Gregory Nagy (*Culture and Belief 22. The Heroic and the Anti-Heroic in Classical Greek Civilization. Sourcebook*. Ed. Gregory Nagy and Soo-Young Kim. Vol. 2. N.p.: n.p., 2009. Print). For Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, I follow Hugh Lloyd-Jones' translation (Sophocles. *Antigone, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Print). For Euripides' *Trojan Women*, I follow Coleridge's translation (*The Plays of Euripides*. Vol. 1. London: George Bell and Sons, 1891. *The Annenberg CPB / Project*). For Euripides' *Andromakhe*, I follow David Kovacs' translation (Euripides. *Children of Heracles, Hippolytus, Andromache, Hecuba*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. Print).

31. In their article "Detecting the snake," Vanessa LoBue and Judy S. Deloache assume that the snakes' particular nature triggers human alertness (288-289). Drawing upon various studies, in "Snakes: Objects of Religion, Fear, and Myth," Jonathan W. Stanley argues that humans tend to feel more threatened with snakes than other animals, and the fear of snakes is "partially innate" and "partially learned" (42, 47-49).

32. Sommerstein, Alan H., ed. and trans. *Aeschylus: Fragments*. Vol. 3. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.

33. In *Greek Hero Cults*, following Lykophron and Athenagoras, Farnell notes that the Lacedaemonians worshipped Zeus-Agamemnon (321-322). However, in her article “The Heroic Cult of Agamemnon,” Gina Salapata argues that Agamemnon’s identification with Zeus was probably Lykophron’s invention, who viewed the heroic honors toward Agamemnon “as an *apotheosis* in the Hellenistic manner” (39-60). Based on Burkert’s reports in *Greek Religion* regarding depictions on seals and rings from Mycenae, we may infer that there might have been a tradition where the gods were supposed to ordain the kings; as such, Agamemnon may relate to Zeus (Burkert 39, 46).

34. In a lecture entitled “Frameworks, Empathy and Sustainability,” Lakoff defines morality as well-being. He argues that metaphors are formed early in life when two parts of the human brain are active together and relate with satisfaction, which is well-being, and dissatisfaction, which is ill-being. A pure food, for example brings satisfaction whereas a rotten food makes us feel disgusted. Later, these correlations create the metaphor that morality is pure and immorality is rottenness. This is how we have metaphors such as: “that was a rotten thing to do,” or “there is something rotten in the kingdom of Denmark,” etc. Perhaps, Orestes’ comparison of his mother with a snake that rots anyone whom it touches may imply that Klytemnestra destroyed her family’s well being. However, judging by Klytemnestra’s self-righteousness, morality is relevant since whatever satisfies Klytemnestra dissatisfies the rest.

35. Vermeule argues that the mutilation of the murdered body is a magical function and ensures that a revenant ghost will be helpless (49).

36. It seems that evil stepmothers created a tradition in Greek tragedy. In Sophokles’ lost play *Aigeus*, Medea attempts to poison Theseus. As Lloyd-Jones reports, Medea tries to poison Theseus before Aigeus recognizes him as his son; of course, Aigeus recognizes him just in time (Lloyd-Jones 18-19). Although we expect this from Medea since she is famous for her witchcraft, the pattern’s repetition may reflect a stereotype—or a reality—in the Athenian society of 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

37. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, edited and translated Sophocles’ III *Fragments*. Loeb Classical Library 483.

38. Regarding the Erinyes’ wings, I suggest that the artists might have followed Euripides’ description since in his *Orestes* he portrays the Erinyes with wings (*Or.* 316-317). His figures are closer to the equivalent winged figures that appear on many 4<sup>th</sup> century vases that depict the Erinyes threatening Orestes at Delphi, which Taplin presents in his *Pots and Plays* (39-59).

39. For Sophokles’ *Trakhiniai*, I follow Hugh Lloyd-Jones’ translation (Sophocles. *Antigone, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994. Print). For Euripides’ *Herakles*, I follow Kovacs’ translation (Euripides. *Suppliant Women, Electra, Heracles*. Vol. 3. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Print).

40. Three of the five labors that Herakles reports, have to do with snakes: the Lernean Hydra, Hades' guardian Kerberos, Ekhidna's son, and Ladon, the guardian *drakōn* of the Hesperidai golden apples (*Tr.* 1094, 1097-1098). Moreover, one of the three forms that river Akhelōios takes when he claims Deianeira is that of a *drakōn* (*Tr.* 9-14). Herakles' origin from Perseus, Medusa's slayer, bequeathed Herakles a legacy to fight with serpentine monsters (*Tr.* 509).

41. In *Centaur and Amazons*, Page duBois notes about the Centaurs that as hybrid monsters, they were considered as the bestial alternative to what was considered as norm in Greek culture. They were overly masculine and to their human virility was added the horses' violence and sexuality (31). In Sophokles' *Trakhiniai*, Herakles shares these qualities as well.

42. In *Greek Religion*, Burkert names Hera as the Hydra's nurturer (134). Thus, we may infer that Hera eventually wins Herakles over through the monster that she once set against him.

43. Although Neoptolemos promises Philoktetes that the sons of Asklepios will heal him, Herakles promises that he will send Asklepios himself (*Ph.* 1333-1334, 1437-1438). Perhaps, in this way, Herakles expresses his personal interest for his friend's healing and his gratitude since Philoktetes lit Herakles' pyre and released him forever from his pains and ultimately helped him to be deified.

44. Lyssa's affliction of madness alludes to rabies, whose scientific name is *Lyssavirus* from the Greek word *lyssa*, 'frenzy,' and the Latin *virus*, 'poison.' The disease's scientific name conveys exactly Euripides' description of Lyssa with the serpentine hair. Read more in *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 15.8 (2009): 1184. Web.

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