Gender Wars and Snake-Lore in Nikander's *Theriaka*

Nicander's of Colophon's *Theriaka* contains several passages in which a snake's female gender is said to be the primary indicator of the its danger to the human victim. Male snakes are described as having predictable motivations for attacking, and their bites are less dangerous when they are inflicted. Female snakes, conversely, are given no reason for attacking, are said to turn on their own mates, are blamed for causing greater pain and suffering to their victims, and requiring substantially different and more extreme cures. Nicander foregrounds gender in order to use nature to essentialize norms already present in his cultural and mythological tradition, thus making the *Theriaka* a text aimed at warning not only against the dangers of venomous creatures, but against the venomous sex.

With the recent renewal of interest among scholars in Hellenistic medicine has also come an interest in other works of Hellenistic sciences and intellectual history. Nicander of Colophon is beginning to be read for his own sake, and not merely as a source of antiquarian curiosities, due in large part to the very recent appearance of the newly established Budé text by Jean-Marie Jacques. Within the past year Enrico Magnelli has argued for the reading of the *Theriaka* and *Alexipharmaka* as a Hesiodic diptych expanding the horizons of didactic poetry. This paper would press that reading in a slightly different direction, this time focusing on Nicander's combination of scientific and mythological traditions to create a new sort of poetic authority to support Hesiod's view of the evils of women.

Nicander clearly relies on Aristotle for some of his information about the world of poisonous creatures, but he introduces key differences. Take, for instance, Aristotle's discussion of vipers giving birth (*H.A.* Bekker 490b) which describes in neutral terms the 'live' birth as the viper merely laying her eggs internally. No mention is made of the infant vipers eating their way out, or of sex differences in venom potency, or of violence between mating pairs. Contrast with *Theriaka* 128-136 in which the mother viper rips off the father viper's head during the act of coitus, then the children take revenge (οἱ δὲ πατρὸς λώβην μετεκίαθον αὐτίκα τυτθοί/γεινόμενοι ἐχιῆες) by ripping their way through their mother's abdomen. Likewise, a female snake's bite occurs simply because one encounters her (118-

120), whereas a male viper's bite is ascribed to his being maddened after a near-death experience at the hands of a female viper's deadly embrace (130).

Helen of Troy also makes an appearance in the middle of a discussion of the greater danger of the female αἱμορὸς, or hemorrhage-causing snake (310) – and she is called not just "Helen" but "Αἰνελένη" by the poet! In this story, a female αἱμορὸς had bitten Helen's helmsman in Egypt, and so she crushed its spine, thus forcing it to move via its distinctive side-winding slither. This story evokes the version of Helen from the *Odyssey* who had spent her time in Egypt learning the art of*pharmaka*, an art closely identified with the lore of both plants and venomous creatures. Her control of this snake doesn't cure her helmsman *or* the snake; rather, she engages in the same level of reflexive cruelty that the female snakes show throughout the *Theriaka*. Helen forms the mortal link between snake women and human women, and through her Nicander perfects his implied argument; it is the essential nature of the female to embody harm and violence, particularly to the male. She can't be avoided because offspring must be produced, but she is dangerous and not ever to be trusted. Therefore, a man must arm himself with knowledge of nature in order to blunt the threat that nature has pitted against him.

Put that way, Nicander sounds downright Hesiodic, and his snakes a great more like Pandora than scientific curiosities tangential to the study of literature and culture.

Jacques, Jean-Marie. Nicandre, Oeuvres. Tome II: Les Thériaques. Fragments iologiques antérieurs à Nicandre. Texte établi et traduit par Jean-Marie Jacques Paris: Les Belles lettres, 2002 (Collection des Universités de France, série greque 421).

Magnelli, Enrico. 'Nicander.' In: James J. Clauss & Martine Cuypers (edd.). A Companion to Hellenistic Literature. Chichester & Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 211-23.