

Family and Political Vipers: *ἔχιδναι* in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Philoctetes*

In the Greek imagination, vipers (*ἔχιδναι*) are connected with familial violence. In Book 3 of the *Histories*, Herodotus describes a species of winged viper whose females kill the males during mating and in turn are destroyed by their offspring during birth. This behavior is used as a metaphor for familial violence in the *Oresteia* and *Suppliants* of Aeschylus and the *Andromache*, *Alcestis*, *Ion*, *Iphigenia Taurica*, and *Phoenissae* of Euripides. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Antigone*, however, the playwright deviates from the standard connotations of vipers to connect Philoctetes' suffering at the hands of Odysseus and Creon's perceived betrayal by Antigone to political violence.

In line 1135 of the *Phoenissae*, the ecphrasis of Adrastus' shield describes the heads of the hydra as “*ἔχιδναις*”, and in doing so, reframes the conflict between Polynices and Eteocles as a personal conflict which has spread beyond the familial and into civil war. Conversely in *Antigone*, Creon accuses his nieces of being vipers, plotting to destroy his family and, as a consequence, the entire kingdom. Antigone's rejection of Creon's edict that Polynices remain unburied places is at once both a public and private refutation of his authority. (Holt 1998) In publicly challenging her uncle's authority, Antigone threatens the destruction of both Creon's household and the Theban state. In making the conflict between Antigone and Creon both personal and political, Sophocles demonstrates Creon's paranoia and weakening grasp of the city's political climate.

In *Philoctetes*, the *ἔχιδναι* in question are both metaphorical and literal. Philoctetes, wounded by a venomous snake, is abandoned on Lemnos by Odysseus. In doing so, Odysseus inflicts social and mental wounds upon the unfortunate Philoctetes that are as reluctant to heal as

his physical maladies. By abandoning him on Lemnos, Odysseus has removed Philoctetes from the political life of the Greek army at Troy, denying him the closest facsimile to civic participation.(Biancala 2005) In addition, when Neoptolemus confesses Odysseus' treachery to Philoctetes, the titular character proclaims that he would sooner hear the words of a viper than those of Odysseus. In this statement, Philoctetes claims that Odysseus' corruption of Neoptolemus' noble character, and metaphorically, the character of the Athenian youth, is more destructive than the wound that has kept him in exile on Lemnos.

Works Cited

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