

The Genesis of the Centaurs: The Breach of Marriage, Ecocriticism,
and Hybridity in Pindar's *Pythian 2*

The figure of Ixion is perhaps best known as one of the archetypal sinners in the Underworld, fated to remain bound to an ever-spinning wheel for eternity. For a character who does not feature heavily in the extant literary corpus, Ixion has an impressive *curriculum vitae*; He attempted to seduce Hera, and thereby sought to destabilize the marriage of Zeus and Hera, and by extension, the divine sphere. Zeus, however, set a trap, and fashioned a likeness (εἶδος) of his wife; it was this image with which Ixion then had sexual relations. His attempt to disrupt Zeus' *oikos* cemented his fate as an eternal inhabitant of Tartarus. However, Ixion's transgression of Zeus' marriage had another result; namely, it led to the genesis of the Centaurs. The tale of Ixion's misdeeds and the origin of the Centaurs remains in its fullest form in Pindar's second Pythian ode, which was written sometime during the 470s B.C.E.. A race of half-man, half-horse hybrids, the Centaurs were omnipresent in Greek literature and iconography. Page DuBois characterizes the Centaurs as animals who "marked the limit between animal and being, between *anthrôpos* and *thêrion*" (1991, 27); Patricia Cox-Miller describes Centaurs as 'hyper-icons', or paradoxical figures in which human and animal forms both exist yet conflict (1996, 25). David Johnson discusses Xenophon's likening of the Persians to Centaurs in Xenophon, claiming that the Persians have the physical attributes of Centaurs but reasoning capabilities of humans (2005, 178). Xenophon, therefore, utilizes ethnocentric rhetoric to point to the 'barbarity' of the Persians while still conceding elements of humanity. Each of these characterizations of Centaurs zeroes in on their hybridity, and emphasizes that by their very form they are simultaneously neither human nor animal.

This paper argues that the representations of the Centaurs in literature and on monuments suggest that there was a constant tension within the Athenian collective consciousness about the precariousness of their own identity. In a political sense, their savage representation on the Parthenon frieze, fighting the human Lapiths, showcases the Greek patriotic sentiment that resulted from the Persian Wars. From a human perspective, these hybrid creatures embody the tension between human and animal and the effects of blurring these two categories. Studies with ecocritical perspectives focus on the human exploitation of nature at all levels; the Centaurs, therefore are ‘bodies at the border’ (Taylor 2017: 195); they personify man’s constant struggle with nature, and ultimately, their inability to fully control it. Furthermore, animals are used as a foil to humans in order to define humanity (Kinniburgh 2016: 90; Hansen 2010: 17; *et al.*), and are conceived of by humans as working in the human interest (Huang 2011: 130-1; *et al.*). By casting Centaurs as ‘the other’, the Athenians attempt to disassociate themselves from Centaurs’ actions; at the same time, the Greeks’ failure to fully tame the Centaurs reflects the human inability to bend nature to the human will. As I demonstrate further, the representations of the Centaurs, especially in their origin story in Pindar’s *Pythian 2*, are framed in a way that shows the threat of both hybridity and nature to the Greeks during the post-Persian War reality that existed in the 470s B.C.E.. The Centaurs, borne of an act of divine, adulterous seduction, which the Athenians would have considered threatening to marriage and destructive to society; therefore, their propagation suggests that the Athenians considered impurity, in marriage, society, and with reference to nature, to have wide-ranging effects. Ixion’s willful disregard of domestic purity resulted in a new race of beings that were represented as having disastrous effects on Athenian society.

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