

Snake Oil Salesmen:  
Snake Imagery and the Sophistic Movement in Sophocles'  
*Trachiniae*

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By Samuel Jacob Brakebill  
Dr. Theodore Tarkow, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the Associate Vice Chancellor of the Office of Research and Graduate Studies, have examined the thesis entitled Snake Oil Salesmen: Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and the Sophistic Movement, presented by Samuel Brakebill, a candidate for the degree of master of arts, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Theodore Tarkow

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Professor Sean Gurd

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Professor Carrie Duncan

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## Introduction

In the *Trachiniae*, Sophocles plays on the audience's expectations of a murderous Deianeira to demonstrate the dangers of misinformation. He subverts the traditional role of the centaur Cheiron as a healer and teacher in his treatment of Nessus. One could argue that in placing the emphasis on Deianeira's reckless decisions on Nessus' role as a teacher of *pharmaka*, Sophocles turns a skeptical eye towards the early Sophistic movement. Sophocles' use of Nessus as a proxy opens his audience to the possibility that the sophists may not have taught for the best interest of their pupils. Deianeira's desire to preserve the established order within the *oikos* draws parallels between the *Oresteia* and the *Trachiniae*. The use of serpent imagery in the *Trachiniae* echoes the dual associations with serpents in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Through Nessus' manipulations of Deianeira's fears, which are made manifest through snake imagery, Sophocles enables his audience to question the intent of the Sophistic teachings.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Sophocles performs an *epideixis* on the duality of knowledge as both beneficial and harmful to the recipient.

Material evidence and other literary sources Deianeira show Deianeira as an active participant in the murder of Herakles. Deianeira is shown in the *Trachiniae*, however, to be a passive figure. Deianeira's passivity is the defining characteristic of Sophocles' version of the myth, as the shift from active to passive presents Deianeira as a more sympathetic figure and manifests itself in the character's fatal flaw, her fear of losing her place in the *oikos*. In the alternate version presented by

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of this argument, I am adhering to G.B. Kerferd's definition in *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 1981). A sophist is one who teaches wisdom and virtue in exchange for money, to individuals with the means to pay regardless of social strata.

Bacchylides, the plan is fully devised by Deianeira. The use of material evidence is crucial to support the argument that Bacchylides and Sophocles deviated from an already established tradition, as literary evidence for the warrior Deianeira is scarce before the fifth century B.C.E. By using material evidence, a more accurate view of the evolution of Deianeira's character can be seen.

In addition, Sophocles' Deianeira, through her lack of prior knowledge of the lethality of the *philtion* provided by Nessus, has a reasonable legal case for acquittal by fifth century standards. The parallels to Antiphon's *Against the Stepmother for Poisoning* show that there is ambiguity in the Athenian legal system with concerns to premeditation. In the version presented by Bacchylides, Deianeira very distinctly commits premeditated murder, whereas in Sophocles' version Deianeira is horrified to discover that she has erred and killed her husband by accident. Furthermore, Deianeira's perpetual fear of changes in status in the *oikos* drive both her passivity and her eventual actions against Herakles. Deianeira's tragic flaw is that her fear of loss of status in the *oikos* results in its complete destruction.

Sophocles also exploits the association of Cheiron with knowledge and healing to present Nessus as his antithesis. The association of Cheiron with civilization and education is well established through material evidence from the tenth century B.C.E. forward and elicits certain expectations from Sophocles' audience. Sophocles subverts Cheiron's association with education, and particularly the *paideia* of heroes, in his characterization of Nessus. Where Cheiron is a positive source of genuine knowledge, the Sophoclean Nessus provides deliberate misinformation to

Deianeira. In doing so, Nessus resembles Medea, particularly as she would likely have been portrayed in Euripides' *Peliades*. By examining artistic depictions, as well as other accounts of the Peliades episode, Medea purports to teach the Peliades the means to restore youth to their aging father. In a similar fashion to Sophocles' Nessus, Medea preys on the emotions and desires of the Peliades for her own benefit. By emphasizing Nessus' benefit at Deianeira's expense, Sophocles poses the question whether the teachings of the sophists are beneficial or harmful to the recipient. In addition to his direct characterization of Nessus, Sophocles also makes clear distinctions between genuine knowledge and misinformation. Sophocles directly associates correct information with vision and light, and misinformation or incomplete information with hearing. Moreover, by beginning the play with a prooimion, Sophocles uses the tragedy to perform his own *epideixis* to demonstrate the duality of knowledge.

By examining the serpent imagery in the *Trachiniae*, connections to other tragedies become apparent. Serpent imagery does not only include the words *δράκων*, *ἔχιδνα*, *ὕδρα*, and *λόζ*, but should also be associated with a serpent's means of locomotion. To this end, I have included an examination of the uses of *ἔρπω* in the *Trachiniae*. Sophocles applies the word *ἔρπω* to characters who either are or have acted treacherously or without knowledge. Through Sophocles' associations between light and knowledge, the audience is meant to see the relationship between darkness and the lack of knowledge. By continuing the association between snakes and Deianeira, Sophocles also recalls Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Like Clytemnestra, Deianeira also

subverts the established order of the *oikos*.<sup>2</sup> Deianeira, however, is meant to be a sympathetic character, resembling Orestes. The imagery of Orestes as a snake is tied not only to the fact that he must become a murderer like his mother, but also to the fact that he deceives Clytemnestra by telling her that Orestes has died. Moreover, Orestes is portrayed as the defender or restorer of the established order of the *oikos*. By combining traits of Clytemnestra and Orestes, Sophocles creates a Deianeira whose primary goal is the preservation of the status quo in the face of a usurper. By placing Deianeira as passive figure, but also the defender of the *oikos*, Sophocles makes Iole's arrival the turning point of the play, as Deianeira can no longer be passive in the face of this immediate threat, and so must resort to the centaur's gift as her only means of staving off her fears. Sophocles portrays Deianeira in such a way that she can be considered innocent of intentional murder, as killing Herakles destroys the entirety of the *oikos*. By casting Deianeira as innocent, or perhaps even a victim herself, the blame for Herakles' death shifts to the intentionally incorrect teachings of Nessus. Using Nessus as an archetype, an alternate narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> Clytemnestra does so by slaying her husband through treachery. Deianeira does so by committing suicide with a sword, a unique act for a Sophoclean woman.

## When a Man (horse) Loves a Woman: The Development and Characterization of Nessus and Deianeira in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

In the *Trachiniae*, Sophocles deviates from the established version of Deianeira to present her as morally sympathetic. Sophocles transforms Deianeira from a fierce, quasi-Amazon into a passive female figure to place Nessus in the role of an instructor in *pharmaka*. By making Deianeira a passive figure, Sophocles shifts much of the blame for the death of Herakles to Nessus and questions whether Deianeira acted with the intent to murder Herakles.

Earlier versions of Deianeira show her to be an active participant in Herakles' activities. Apollodorus says that Deianeira "ἠνιόχει καὶ τὰ κατὰ πόλεμον ἤσκει".<sup>3</sup> In addition, art historical evidence also suggests that Deianeira had an active role, as a Proto-Attic amphora depicts Deianeira driving a chariot during the Nessus episode. In this vase the proximity to Herakles prevents Nessus from instructing Deianeira, as Herakles is not killing Nessus from a distance with his bow, which completely removes the hydra venom component from Deianeira's philtion. In fact, Dio Chrysostom reports:<sup>4</sup>

φασὶ γὰρ οἱ μὲν τὸν Ἀρχίλοχον ληρεῖν,  
ποιοῦντα τὴν Δηιάνειραν ἐν τῷ βιάζεσθαι  
ὑπὸ τοῦ Κενταύρου πρὸς τὸν Ἡρακλέα  
ῥαψωδοῦσαν, ἀναμιμνήσκουσιν τῆς

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<sup>3</sup> Apollodorus 1.81.

<sup>4</sup> Dio Chrysostom 60.1

τοῦ Ἀχελῷου μνηστείας καὶ τῶν τότε γενομένων· ὥστε πολλήν  
σχολήν εἶναι τῷ Νέσσω ὅ,τι ἐβούλετο πράξει·

For some say that Archilochus was foolish when he made Deianeira  
rhapsodizing in being overpowered by Nessus against Herakles, having  
recalled Acheloös' wooing and the things that happened at that time. Nessus  
had much leisure with respect to whatever he was planning to do.

This quotation suggests that in providing Nessus and Deianeira so much time before  
the intervention of Herakles Archilochus deviated from the established tradition.  
Moreover, the use of ληρεῖν suggests that there is a cultural reason for Herakles to  
contend with Nessus in hand to hand combat. During the Archaic period, there is a  
shift from earlier traditions depicting of centaurs as passive figures, associated with  
paideia or ephebes, to a representation of a heroic foe.<sup>5</sup> The Lefkandi Centaur figure  
of the tenth century B.C.E. suggests that Cheiron or a Proto-Cheiron centaur had  
ritual significance to the occupants.<sup>6</sup> The figure was found split into two pieces, one  
among the grave goods of a female child the other among the grave goods of what  
appears to be a shaman or other spiritual leader.<sup>7</sup> The other grave goods associated  
with the adult burial include a fibula and an ivory handled knife, of which the

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<sup>5</sup> Langdon 2007.

<sup>6</sup> **Figure 1.**

<sup>7</sup> Langdon 2007. The grave goods associated with the female child include gold earrings, a faience necklace, and a pair of child-sized bronze bracelets.

material composition and sickle-shaped blade suggest a ritual or sacrificial use.<sup>8</sup> The division of the figure between these two assemblages seems intentional, and suggests that there is a ritual connection between the shaman, the child, and the centaur imagery. Langdon suggests that the composite nature of the centaur and the liminality between civilized and uncivilized creates a ritual representation for the transition from child to adult. This argument is supported by the interpretation that the adult burial containing the centaur's body is the burial of a shaman or other spiritual leader of the community. The Lefkandi Centaur is comparable to an earlier, also broken figure of what is likely a centaur from Phylakopi. The rear portion of this figure and the head have not been found, though its fragmentary nature may be at least partially intentional, just as the Lefkandi Centaur.<sup>9</sup> This liminal role is also demonstrated on a terracotta shield from Tiryns.<sup>10</sup> This shield, depicting an Amazonomachy on the exterior, shows a centaur surrounded by deer on the interior.<sup>11</sup> This shield was likely ceremonial in use, as terracotta would be an impractical material for a functional shield. In addition, the placement of the centaur in a liminal position between the Amazonomachy, as a display of martial prowess, particularly so for the central figure, who is in the process of dragging an Amazon by her helmet crest. This central figure is perhaps representative of the bearer, creating

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<sup>8</sup> Langdon 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Langdon 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See Langdon 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Langdon 2007.

a liminal space as the bearer, likely an ephebe, interacts with the pedagogical centaur as a transitional figure into an adult warrior. This liminal sense begins to disappear in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, however, as shown by a bronze statuette showing an adult male figure, possibly a proto-Herakles or Jason, standing opposite a centaur.<sup>12</sup> This statuette displays the figures in heroic nudity, and it is unclear from the positions of the figures' arms, the left arm of each grasping the other's right, whether the figures are engaged in a friendly embrace or in an agonistic struggle. This suggests a transition from the warrior-pedagogue model of the Late Geometric period to a symbolic demonstration of martial skill.<sup>13</sup> This transition continues, and the Nessus episode becomes an archetype for this contest. This is shown by the large number of paintings and pottery from the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries B.C.E. that show Herakles and Nessus in combat.<sup>14</sup> Of these examples, only a plate by the Tityos Painter from the late sixth century shows Herakles with his bow drawn.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on close-range combat in this tradition shows that this contest, in which Deianeira's presence is regularly omitted from artistic representations, was meant to be read as a struggle of strength and martial skill and not a battle of wits. Archilochus, however, creates a somewhat lengthy gap between Deianeira's abduction and the arrival and victory of Herakles. This deviation

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<sup>12</sup> **F**The figure lacks the clear iconography of Herakles, but it is an adult figure. Other reasonable possibilities would include Achilles, Asklepius, or one of the Lapiths.

<sup>13</sup> Langdon 2007.

<sup>14</sup> For examples, see **Figures 3 through 5**.

<sup>15</sup> **Figure 6**.

suggests the beginnings of a shift in attitude toward Deianeira as a less vindictive figure. This gap in time between the abduction and the arrival of Herakles says only that Nessus “had much time in respect to whatever he was wishing to do”. It is unclear what Nessus was intending to do here. While certainly the violation of Deianeira can be implied, it is also possible that here Nessus plants the seeds of Herakles’ demise, though the hydra venom would not be included in this love charm, as Herakles still engages in hand to hand combat with Nessus. Dio Chrysostom’s reference to this poem of Archilochus suggests that it held a transitional place in the development of the Nessus episode.

The version of Herakles’ contained in Bacchylides 16 likewise suggests a continuing evolution and refinement of the encounter with Nessus. Bacchylides lays the blame solely on Deianeira, saying that she devised the plan herself.<sup>16</sup> This explanation fits with the prior tradition but Bacchylides goes on to say that “she received an ominous portent from Nessus”.<sup>17</sup> This inclusion of this gift and the idea that Deianeira received the means from the centaur Nessus prior to the execution of her plan suggest that Bacchylides either derived his version of the episode from a source similar to Sophocles or from Sophocles himself. In addition, this shows that there is a gradual shift in the early to middle fifth century B.C.E. from a dynamic Deianeira to

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<sup>16</sup> Bacchylides 16.30. οἶον ἐμήσατο.

<sup>17</sup> Bacchylides 16. 35. δέξατο Νέσσου πάρα δαιμόνιον τέρας.



ἐκλύεταί με: καὶ τρόπον μὲν ἂν πόνων  
οὐκ ἂν διείποιμ': οὐ γὰρ οἶδ': ἀλλ' ὅστις ἦν  
θακῶν ἀταρβῆς τῆς θεάς, ὄδ' ἂν λέγοι:  
ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤμην ἐκπεπληγμένη φόβῳ  
μή μοι τὸ κάλλος ἄλγος ἐξεύροι ποτέ. 25.

For I had a river as a suitor, Acheloös, who sought me from my father in three forms:  
Coming to and fro as a savage bull, another time as a glittering, coiled serpent,  
another time as a bull's head on a man's body; from his bushy beard fountains of spring  
water flowed forth. Wretched I, having awaited such a suitor, prayed that I die  
before I ever be brought near this marriage. But at a later time, to my relief, the  
renowned son of Zeus and Alcmene came, who clashing with this one in contests of  
battle saved me. I could not fully say the manner of their struggles- for I do not  
know. But whoever was sitting there, unafraid of the spectacle, this man could say.  
For I was stricken with fear lest beauty ever discover pain for me.

This passage represents the first heroic contest for which Deianeira was a prize.  
Deianeira by her own admission "could not say...for she was stricken by fear". In this  
passage, we see a Deianeira who is quite unlike the quasi-Amazon described by  
Apollodorus. While certainly Acheloös is a monstrous figure, unlike previous  
variants this Deianeira cannot even bear to watch the contest "lest beauty find a  
sorrow" for her. This pain can be interpreted as a marriage to the monstrous river  
god, as Deianeira had previously stated in that she was frightened of marriage

because Acheloös was her suitor.<sup>21</sup> While Deianeira expresses her relief at Herakles' victory, she further enumerates her continual fears in his prolonged absences.<sup>22</sup> Deianeira is presented here as almost immobilized by fear. Any trace of the previous tradition of a warrior maiden or huntress has been subverted by Sophocles. Furthermore, Sophocles chooses to emphasize this sense of helplessness by echoing it in the second stasimon. Here, the chorus repeats the events of the contest, at last referring to Deianeira as a "lost calf".<sup>23</sup> This description echoes the punishment of Io, as Deianeira is now removed from her father's home and helpless. This continued interpretation of Deianeira as a helpless figure is intentional as Sophocles wants the audience to see Deianeira not only as sympathetic, but as a helpless woman pushed to the limits of what she can endure. Carawan argues that Deianeira was not construed as an innocent figure by ancient audiences, and he is partially correct in his argument.<sup>24</sup> Deianeira is partially to blame for her actions. Carawan argues that the version of Deianeira preserved in fragments of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* shows a Deianeira of questionable intent presenting a robe laced with *pharmaka* to Lichas.<sup>25</sup> Carawan's assertion that Sophocles singlehandedly transformed Deianeira into a passive figure is perhaps too bold. As the dating of the *Trachiniae* is presently insoluble, though an earlier date is preferred, the prevailing idea is that there is a

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<sup>21</sup> *Trach.* 6-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Trach.* 28-31.

<sup>23</sup> *Trach.* 530. πόρτις ἐρήμα.

<sup>24</sup> Carawan 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Carawan 2000.

relationship between Bacchylides 16 and the *Trachiniae*. Carawan's rejection of what he has named "Stoessl's theory" that the semi-passive Deianeira in Bacchylides was a response to Sophocles' *Trachiniae* relies on material evidence that in the earliest traditions Herakles killed Nessus in close quarters.<sup>26</sup> This argument that Sophocles was the source of Herakles' use of the bow in this episode is refuted by a sixth century B.C.E. depiction of Herakles pursuing Nessus with both bow and club drawn.<sup>27</sup> While this interpretation fits with the previously established, athletic Deianeira, as Carawan states, this also suggests that the originality of Sophocles' Nessus may be questionable. If the interpretation of fragments from the Argive Heraeum are correct, there is a seventh century prototype for the archer Herakles model. In addition, the episode as described by Bacchylides shows a Deianeira who, by Carawan's interpretation, learns from afar that Herakles is planning to take Iole as a bride.<sup>28</sup> The episode in Bacchylides is vague, as the person from whom Deianeira learns this is not identified. It is entirely possible that Deianeira learns in person, but the use of indirect statement here, particularly with the optative *πέμποι*, is meant to emphasize the distance from Deianeira.<sup>29</sup> As Carawan argues, Deianeira's discovery of Iole in person and through her own inquiries places makes

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<sup>26</sup> Carawan 2000.

<sup>27</sup> **Figure 6.**

<sup>28</sup> Carawan 2000. As Carawan also notes, Diodorus Siculus 4.37.5-38.2 and Apollodorus 2.7.7 also show this version.

<sup>29</sup> Bacchylides 16.29.

her an active character again.<sup>30</sup> While this is true, Deianeira continues to be a sympathetic character, as she accepts Iole into her household. In addition, Sophocles' choice to make Deianeira take an active role at this point in the tragedy creates a more immediate threat to her status in the household. The immediacy and urgency of the threat posed by Iole serves to galvanize the previously passive Deianeira into action. Deianeira does not devise her plan to send Hyllus after his father on her own. Instead, her nurse questions why Deianeira has not already thought to send one of her children to seek news of Herakles after 15 months.<sup>31</sup> In Deianeira's own recounting of the tale, she clarifies to the chorus that she "hates daring women".<sup>32</sup> The theme of a woman employing erotic *pharmaka* to win back a lost love is well attested. As Faraone notes, these *pharmaka* were given in a dosage that was not lethal and their use was not itself illegal by the standards of fifth century Athens. As is seen in the Antiphon 1, *Against the Stepmother for Poisoning*, the prosecution argues that the stepmother's *kurios* claimed that she did not poison her husband with the intent to kill, but in administering a love charm.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the prosecution also alleges that the stepmother had been caught many times previously attempting to poison her husband. This implies that she has repeatedly attempted to apply this love charm, without prosecution. This case, in fact a double

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<sup>30</sup> Carawan 2000.

<sup>31</sup> *Trach.* 54-56.

<sup>32</sup> *Trach.* 583. τὰς τε τολμώσας στυγῶ.

<sup>33</sup> *Against the Stepmother* 1.9. πλὴν οὐκ ἐπὶ θανάτῳ φάσκουσιν δίδοναι ἀλλ' ἐπὶ φίλτροις.

homicide, shows another striking similarity to the *Trachiniae*. The second woman, the mistress of Philoneus, a friend of the stepmother's husband, not only participated, but increased the dosage of her poison, thinking that by giving him more of the *philtron* she would be proportionally more loved by him.<sup>34</sup> According to Antiphon, Philoneus died instantly, and the prosecution's father died 20 days later. This deviation from the prescribed amount may have directly resulted in the death of Philoneus, but the second victim's death is not as clear. In addition, the mistress of Philoneus participates in this attempt because her status is threatened by Philoneus. According to Antiphon, Philoneus had decided to rid himself of his mistress by placing her in a brothel. This extreme loss in status and privilege echoes Deianeira's loss of status. The "Aristotelian" *Magna Moralia* provides anecdotal support for what would likely have been the stepmother's case:<sup>35</sup>

οἷόν φασι ποτέ τινα γυναῖκα φίλτρον  
τινὶ δοῦναι πιεῖν, εἶτα τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀποθανεῖν ὑπὸ  
τοῦ φίλτρον, τὴν δ' ἄνθρωπον ἐν Ἀρείῳ πάγῳ  
ἀποφυγεῖν· οὗ παροῦσαν δι' οὐθὲν ἄλλο ἀπέλυσαν  
ἢ διότι οὐκ ἐκ προνοίας. ἔδωκε μὲν γὰρ φιλία,  
διήμαρτεν δὲ τούτου· διὸ οὐχ ἐκούσιον ἐδόκει εἶναι,  
ὅτι τὴν δόσιν τοῦ φίλτρον οὐ μετὰ διανοίας τοῦ

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<sup>34</sup> *Against the Stepmother* 1.19 ἴσως <ὡς>, εἰ δοίη πλέον, μᾶλλον φιλησομένη ὑπὸ τοῦ Φιλόνεω.

<sup>35</sup> *Magna Moralia* 16. The defense for this case does not survive. By Antiphon's own admission that she was attempting a love charm rather than premeditated murder, it can be surmised that her defense at least in part addressed this distinction in motive. See MacDowell 1978.

ἀπολέσθαι αὐτὸν ἐδίδου. ἔνταῦθα ἄρα τὸ ἐκούσιον  
πίπτει εἰς τὸ μετὰ διανοίας.

“They say that a certain woman once gave a man a *philtion* to drink, and that when the man died from the *philtion*, the woman was acquitted on the Areopagus, where they acquitted her when she came on account of nothing other than because she did not (act) from malicious intent. For although she gave it to him for affection, she missed her mark; on which account it seemed to be involuntary, since she gave a dose of the *philtion* not with the intent of killing him. Here indeed “voluntary” belongs to the class “with intent”.

These cases demonstrate that the defining mark of Deianeira’s guilt is not that Herakles died as a result, but that she intended to supply the robe as *philtion*. Hyllus’ defense of Deianeira to Herakles demonstrates this type of acquittal:<sup>36</sup>

Herakles: δεινοῦ λόγου κατηῆρξας: εἶπε δ’ ἦ νοεῖς.

Hyllus: ἅπαν τὸ χρῆμ’, ἤμαρτε χρηστὰ μωμένη.

Herakles: χρήστ’, ὦ κάκιστε, πατέρα σὸν κτείνασα δρᾶ;

Hyllus: στέργημα γὰρ δοκοῦσα προσβαλεῖν σέθεν  
ἀπήμπλαχ’, ὡς προσεῖδε τοὺς ἔνδον γάμους.

Herakles: You begin with a strange phrase. But speak how you know.

Hyllus: In the whole affair, she erred although she meant well.

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<sup>36</sup> *Trach.* 1135-39.

Herakles: She does well by killing your father, you most wretched child?

Hyllus: For when she looked up your (new) marriage inside, she expected to cast a love charm upon you, but failed horribly.

It is clear from this passage, then, that Hyllus has forgiven his mother, as she has not acted with murderous intent, but has rather erred in what was an acknowledged custom of the time.<sup>37</sup> Instead, Deianeira has simply furnished Herakles with the incorrect dosage. In addition, Faraone correctly makes the distinction that the blood mixture consists of an anointed *φάρμακον*. There is a further distinction that must be made in this case. When describing the provenance of the love charm, Sophocles does not refer to the hydra's venom with "*φάρμακον*", but rather "*ἰὸς*".<sup>38</sup> A distinction must be made between "*φάρμακον*" and "*ἰὸς*". "*ἰὸς*" is the only word used by Deianeira to describe the toxic qualities of the hydra's venom. By contrast, Antiphon and Plutarch use "*φάρμακον*" to describe the ingested poisons used in love charms. In addition, in Euripides' *Medea*, the messenger uses "*φαρμάκων*" for the poison used in the crown and *peplos* presented to Creon and his daughter.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, I interpret *ἰὸς* to have a similar technical meaning as "venom" in English, a toxin that must directly enter the bloodstream to have an effect. Therefore, Deianeira's use of "*ἰὸς*" to describe the effects of her *philtion* after discovering that it destroyed the scrap of wool with which she anointed the robe should be interpreted

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<sup>37</sup> Faraone 1999.

<sup>38</sup> *Trach.* 715.

<sup>39</sup> *Med.* 1126

as shock. The other cases which Sophocles directly provides for the destructive power of the venom are both cases of “injection”, as these cases are the deaths of Nessus, who is shot with an envenomated arrow by Herakles, and Cheiron, who accidentally injures himself with handling one of the arrows.<sup>40</sup> By using *ἰός*, Sophocles gives Deianeira a reasonable expectation that toxic capabilities of the hydra’s venom would be inert. Sophocles demonstrates that Deianeira is a passive figure who is only roused to action by Herakles himself overstepping social custom to bring Iole into his household and subvert Deianeira’s position in the *oikos*.<sup>41</sup> In doing so, Deianeira is left with no other recourse than to use the *philtron* which Nessus provided for her. Deianeira’s admission of the use of the *philtron* as a love charm is a sign of her benign intent, as is Hyllus’ defense of her actions to Herakles. Sophocles makes Deianeira an innocent figure, if not a model Athenian woman<sup>42</sup>, to demonstrate the dangers inherent in trusting a *pharmakeus* or other self-proclaimed expert of such a skill. This distinction is echoed in Antiphon 1, as Philoneus’ mistress overdoses Philoneus, as she was furnished the *philtron* by the stepmother, who, if Antiphon’s claim that she had attempted to use this *philtron* on her husband previously is true, had some knowledge in the craft. Nessus, for his part, becomes a twisted version of Cheiron, teaching Deianeira to be a slayer of heroes in stark

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<sup>40</sup> *Trach.* 715.

<sup>41</sup> Faraone 1999.

<sup>42</sup> In that she manages the *oikos*, weaves the peplos, and raises her children in her (very much alive) husband’s prolonged absence.

contrast to Cheiron's role in *paideia*, which is consistent as far back as the tenth century B.C.E.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Nessus as a parallel for Cheiron will be discussed in a later chapter.

## Backing the Wrong Horse: Nessus and Knowledge in the *Trachiniae*

The themes of learning and education are crucial to the *Trachiniae*. These themes have often been interpreted as the consequences of learning too late. Although Deianeira learns too late the truth of the prophecies about Herakles' return, her *hamartia* is her deliberate miseducation by the centaur Nessus. In Nessus, Sophocles creates an inverted Cheiron, who uses his knowledge of *pharmaka* to intentionally mislead Deianeira for his own benefit. In addition, the use of a *φάρμακον* in the death of Herakles leads the audience to consider Medea. The prevailing theory for the date of ca. 450 B.C.E. for Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is of course two decades before Euripides' *Medea*, which strains the credibility of a direct connection between the two texts.<sup>44</sup> The first play produced by Euripides, however, was the now fragmentary *Peliades* in ca. 455. This tragedy is in close enough proximity to the *Trachiniae* for the audience to recall similar devices, primarily the malevolent teacher. In addition, the instruction offered by Nessus and Medea will be compared to that of Cheiron to demonstrate that the instruction in magic and *pharmaka* itself is not to blame, but the instructor.

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<sup>44</sup> For a concise argument for the early date of the *Trachiniae*, see Hoey 1979. If the later proposed date of ca. 430 is correct, an association between the *Trachiniae* and Euripides' *Medea* is certainly possible.

Nessus deliberately misleads Deianeira when he tells her to collect his venom-tainted blood. This is best demonstrated by Deianeira's recollection of the Nessus episode:<sup>45</sup>

ἦν μοι παλαιὸν δῶρον ἀρχαίου ποτὲ  
θηρός, λέβητι χαλκῆω κεκρυμμένον,  
ὃ παῖς ἔτ' οὔσα τοῦ δασυστέρνου παρὰ  
Νέσσου φθίνοντος ἐκ φονῶν ἀνειλόμην,  
ὃς τὸν βαθύρρουν ποταμὸν Εὐήνον βροτοῦς 560  
μισθοῦ 'πόρευε χερσίν, οὔτε πομπίμοις  
κώπαις ἐρέσσω οὔτε λαίφεσιν νεώς.  
ὃς κάμει, τὸν πατρῶον ἠνίκα στόλον  
ξὺν Ἡρακλεῖ τὸ πρῶτον εὖνις ἐσπόμην,  
φέρων ἐπ' ὤμοις, ἠνίκ' ἦ μέσῳ πόρῳ, 565  
ψαύει ματαίαις χερσίν: ἐκ δ' ἦυσ' ἐγώ,  
χῶ Ζηνὸς εὐθὺς παῖς ἐπιστρέψας χεροῖν  
ἦκεν κομήτην ἰόν: ἐς δὲ πλεύμονας  
στέρνων διερροίζησεν. ἐκθνήσκων δ' ὁ θῆρ  
τοσοῦτον εἶπε: παῖ γέροντος Οἰνέως, 570  
τοσόνδ' ὀνήσει τῶν ἐμῶν, ἐὰν πίθη,  
πορθμῶν, ὀθούνεχ' ὑστάτην σ' ἔπεμψ' ἐγώ:  
ἐὰν γὰρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἶμα τῶν ἐμῶν

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<sup>45</sup> *Trach.* 556-578

σφαγῶν ἐνέγκη χερσίν, ἧ̃ μελαγχόλους

ἔβαψεν ἰοὺς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας, 575

ἔσται φρενός σοι τοῦτο κλητήριον

τῆς Ἡρακλείας, ὥστε μήτιν' εἰσιδῶν

στέρξει γυναῖκα κεῖνος ἀντὶ σοῦ πλέον.

Long ago I had a gift from an ancient beast, concealed in a bronze cauldron, which I took from shaggy-breasted Nessus when he was dying from bloodshed, who used to convey mortals for hire across the deep-flowing Evenus River with his hands, neither rowing with conveying oars nor with the sails of a ship. And when I followed my father's sending for the first time as a wife with Herakles, he (Nessus) carrying me on his shoulders, when we were in the middle of his conveyance, he stopped with his impious hands. I cried out, and the son of Zeus immediately turned about and took a feathered arrow in his hand. And it flew through his chest into the lungs. And as he was dying the centaur spoke this: 'Child of old Oeneus, you will have such a profit from my passage, if you should obey, since I ferried you last. For if you gather in your hands the clotted blood from my wounds where he dipped the black-biled arrows into the growth of the Lernaean hydra, you will have a charm for the heart of Herakles, so that having gazed upon a woman that man will love no one more in your place.'

In Deianeira's recollection, Nessus has merely provided her with a *philtion* to ensure that she never loses the affections of Herakles. The Greek does not say that Herakles will love no other after Deianeira, but simply that he will love no other more in her place. While an audience with knowledge of the story would interpret this as foreshadowing, there is no reason for Deianeira not to interpret it literally. In Deianeira's recollection here, she has been given instructions in the creation of a *philtion* to be used later. The creation of a *philtion* is a practical use of the *technē pharmakeusis*, which is at once both mystical and medical. In the *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle uses *φάρμακον* for both ingested poisons and for remedies.<sup>46</sup> Galen also uses *φάρμακον* to mean a remedy from a medical perspective. In this case, Nessus can be shown to misinform Deianeira deliberately in the pursuit of a *technē*. By misleading Deianeira, Nessus obtains an opportunity for revenge that would otherwise be missed. In fact, Hyginus asserts that Nessus knew that the effects of his "love potion" would be highly toxic to Herakles.<sup>47</sup> Deianeira discovers this deception beginning at line 680, when she tells the chorus about the scrap of wool with which she anointed the peplos for Herakles. Deianeira claims that "of the things which the centaur taught me before, I failed in none of these."<sup>48</sup> In fact, she has remembered the details as clearly as if she had engraved them on a bronze tablet. It is only too late to avoid the repercussions that Deianeira learns that she has been deceived. In

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<sup>46</sup> See *Historia Animalium* 604b, 607a and 612a.

<sup>47</sup> Hyginus 34.

<sup>48</sup> *Trach.* 680-2. ὧν ὁ θήρ με Κένταυρος...προυδιδάξατο παρῆκα θεσμῶν οὐδέν.

addition, Deianeira speculates that Nessus has done this to exact revenge on his killer.<sup>49</sup> The theme of learning and misinformation shows itself again when Deianeira says that she has “achieved understanding, when it is no longer sufficient.”<sup>50</sup> The repetition of teaching and learning in the passage from 680 to 713 emphasizes the misinformation perpetrated by Nessus. Deianeira even goes so far as to say that Nessus bewitched her.<sup>51</sup> Sophocles’ choice of the verb *ἔθελγέ* here can even be taken in the sense of cheated. This implies that in the transaction between Nessus and Deianeira, Nessus has intentionally misrepresented his gift of the *philtion*. Furthermore, to a modern audience this passage should call to mind Socrates’ admission that he was spellbound after hearing Protagoras speak.<sup>52</sup>

The late discovery by Deianeira has a parallel in the Peliades episode. While Euripides’ *Peliades* is fragmentary, Apollodorus and Hyginus give similar accounts.<sup>53</sup> In both accounts, Medea persuades the Peliades to assist in the murder of their father by first providing an *epideixis* of her abilities and then intentionally misleading the Peliades by excluding a portion of the spell. By performing an *epideixis*, Medea demonstrates that she has a *technē* that allows her to restore youth to the aged. Medea then manipulates her role as a teacher to kill Pelias for Jason

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<sup>49</sup> *Trach.* 709.

<sup>50</sup> *Trach.* 711. ὄτ’ οὐκέτ’ ἀρκεῖ, τὴν μάθησιν ἄρνημαι.

<sup>51</sup> *Trach.* 710.

<sup>52</sup> *Prot.* 328d. πολὺν χρόνον κεκληγημένος.

<sup>53</sup> Apollodorus G5. Sophocles also had a tragedy concerning the *Peliades* called the *Rhizotomoi*, which regrettably is too fragmentary to be of use.

benefit, and through their marriage her own benefit. The scene of Medea's *epideixis*, in which she cuts up and boils an old ram to turn it back into a young lamb, is well attested in art. In a red figure stamnos dating to ca. 470 B.C.E., Medea can clearly be seen performing her renewal spell on a ram before the eyes of an astonished Pelias. In addition, a series of vases attributed to the painter of Heidelberg 209 are portions of a sequence of vase paintings showing the entire episode.<sup>54</sup> Further, another stamnos dating between 500 and 475 B.C.E. shows Medea performing her *epideixis* before the Peliades. The prominence of this episode supports the inclusion of this episode in the *Peliades* of Euripides.

Nessus finds another parallel in the Jason saga. The role of the centaur Cheiron providing instruction to youths is well attested. Cheiron's depiction in art as early as the sixth century shows him fully clothed. In addition, he is depicted with a young hero, shown as a miniature adult, whom Cheiron is educating. Furthermore, the child is sitting in the palm of Cheiron's hand, conveying that Cheiron has taken the child into his tutelage. The Nessus episode in the *Trachiniae* is almost a parody of this display. Deianeira states that at this time she is still a child, being carried across the river on the shoulders of Nessus. Like the centaur, with its dual nature of man and animal, the river is also a liminal marker between the maiden Deianeira who departed with Herakles as a bride and the adult Deianeira recalling the events. In this way, Nessus provides a *paideia* to Deianeira that resembles the *paideia* provided by Cheiron, in that he teaches Deianeira about *pharmaka*. This is twisted

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<sup>54</sup> These paintings date to the middle to late fifth century B.C.E.

by the fact that the entire lesson has been performed for Nessus' benefit and at Deianeira's expense. From the beginning of the episode, Nessus profits from the encounter, as he conveys passengers across for hire.<sup>55</sup> Not only is the expectation that he will profit from the agreed upon payment, he also intends to profit sexually by his attempted rape of Deianeira, and finally when that is no longer possible he intends to profit through intentionally incorrect teaching when Deianeira inadvertently kills his own killer.

In the second line of the *Trachiniae*, Deianeira states that "You could not know the life of mortals until one dies". This *prooimion* begins a quasi-philosophical argument by Sophocles in which the lives of Deianeira and Herakles are used as mythological exempla to prove Sophocles' premise. Even when Deianeira is a young girl, her expectations, often informed by her immediate circumstances, guide her actions. She is horrified by the shapeshifting river god Acheloös until Herakles appears as a suitor for her. Deianeira recalls the prophetic tablets Herakles has left with her, which say that his labors will either end or he will die.<sup>56</sup> Deianeira is unable to know which of these will occur until Herakles has died. Deianeira then proceeds to take Nessus' proclamation that his *φάρμακον* will make Herakles love no woman more than Deianeira. Although her life up to the arrival of Lichas and Iole has been passive, she must suddenly shift drastically into a daring woman, whom she herself hates. In fact, the arrival of Iole upsets the entire established order of the

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<sup>55</sup> *Trach.* 561. μισθοῦ.

<sup>56</sup> *Trach.* 79-80.

*oikos*, as Herakles, had previously kept whatever mistresses he had taken separate from his family as an Athenian audience would expect. When he sends back Iole, however, Herakles upsets the *oikos* and Deianeira's established place in it, which she had expected to hold for the rest of her life. Sophocles then demonstrates one last time that Deianeira does not know what the sum of her life will be. Thinking that she will win back Herakles through her sudden shift in personality and usage of the *φάρμακον* which Nessus furnished to her years earlier, Deianeira sends the poisoned robe to Herakles, which brings about the end of not only Herakles, but Deianeira and the established *oikos*. Through his use of ring composition, in which Deianeira's expectations for the course of her life are continuously challenged, Sophocles provides a demonstration that his premise is clear, which echoes the first line "λόγος μὲν ἔστ' ἀρχαῖος ἀνθρώπων φανείς". In doing so, Sophocles himself has structured the work as an *epideixis*, as he sets out to prove the validity of his statement before the audience. Sophocles' *prooimion* also echoes the *prooimion* of Protagoras preserved in *Theaetetus* 152A, that "man is the measure of all things". In echoing this principle, it is possible to infer a relationship between Sophocles' text and Protagoras. In addition, by proposing a version of the Herakles myth in which Nessus has intentionally deceived Deianeira to get his revenge, creates a mirror image of Protagoras, who professes that he teaches virtue, defined as the ability to discern what is beneficial and what is harmful in exchange for money.<sup>57</sup> Nessus

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<sup>57</sup> *Prot.* 328b.

ὧν δὴ ἐγὼ οἶμαι εἶς εἶναι, καὶ διαφερόντως ἂν τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων ὀνησαί τινα πρὸς τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι.

instead teaches Deianeira a harmful *φάρμακον* instead of what Deianeira intends to be beneficial (from her perspective at least), for his own profit.

Furthermore, the thematic focus on education is shown not only through Sophocles' subversion of the myth, but also through Sophocles' consistent use of words for education. Sophocles' uses words for learning and teaching in the *Trachiniae*. In addition, Sophocles uses the interplay of light and dark as a metaphor for knowledge and ignorance. Deianeira describes her nightly fears of Herakles' absence.<sup>58</sup> The darkness of night is terrifying to Deianeira because it is by its very definition the absence of light, more precisely the absence of the sun, the personification of which the chorus asks where Herakles is, calling it the "κρατιστεύων κατ' ὄμμα".<sup>59</sup> Sophocles further advances the metaphorical contrast between light and dark by further associating the light with sight, which is in turn related to knowledge.<sup>60</sup> Sophocles performs a separate *epideixis* in his exploration of the theme of absolute knowledge. Sophocles demonstrates that the only true knowledge is what one can see and understand from one's own experiences. Lawrence posits that the "αίόλα νύξ" can be read as "the shimmering instability of mere information".<sup>61</sup> Lawrence is quite insightful in this position, as the stars of the night are pinpoints of light that break up the darkness of night, but do not dispel it

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<sup>58</sup> *Trach.* 94

<sup>59</sup> *Trach.* 101

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence 1978.

<sup>61</sup> *Trach.* 131-32.

as the sun does. This idea is further supported when one considers the distinction between seeing and hearing a report. Deianeira is so stricken by fear for Acheloös that she cannot bear to have true knowledge of the fight.<sup>62</sup> Deianeira is perhaps less frightened of Acheloös' divinity and fierce appearances as she is of his shapeshifting abilities. If Acheloös can change forms, which form is seen as his true form by mortal interpretations? Deianeira cannot know, as his form is as mutable as the river over which he presides. When faced with this Deianeira, still a passive figure, prays for death. Deianeira similarly assumes the worst when no one knows where Herakles is, assuming he has been injured. As Lawrence points out, when Deianeira, in her crippling fear, is finally reminded that she can send her son Hyllus for news of his father, Hyllus does not reveal factual knowledge, but rather brings the report of his father's actions. Furthermore, Hyllus himself is unsure of the credibility of his own report.<sup>63</sup> In lines 68 through 74, Sophocles uses the word *κλύω* three times, *φασί* twice, and *ἀγγέλλεται* once. The rapid repetition of hearing and the repeated third person verb *φασί*, and particularly the impersonal passive, emphasize the inherent vagueness of Hyllus' report, namely that Herakles has either sacked Oechalia or is about to do so.<sup>64</sup> The vagueness here is echoed by the prophecy which Deianeira relates to Hyllus. This prophecy, like the reports of Herakles's current whereabouts, has two possibilities: that Herakles will either die or he will have a happy remainder

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<sup>62</sup> *Trach.* 22. *οὐ γὰρ οἶδ'.*

<sup>63</sup> *Trach.* 67.

<sup>64</sup> *Trach.* 74-75.

of his life.<sup>65</sup> Certainly “happy remainder of his life” can be read as death, but Sophocles intentionally says “or”, suggesting that these possibilities are meant to be distinct. In addition, the word Sophocles uses for the prophecy in line 78 is “λόγον”. Sophocles obscures the meaning of the prophecy and its accuracy by using *λόγον* in Hyllus’ response to his mother’s mention of the “μαντεῖα πιστά”.<sup>66</sup> Sophocles also contradicts the word “πιστά” here. The prophecy was perhaps trustworthy and credible when it was delivered the first time, but when Deianeira repeats the prophecy to Hyllus it becomes less credible. The emphasis on personal experience in obtaining true knowledge is shown again when Deianeira tells the chorus that they cannot know because they have not experienced it.<sup>67</sup> Deianeira here reasserts her interpretation of her life, which she has attempted to calculate (ἐκμαθεῖν) before her time based on her previous experiences. In doing so, Sophocles of Protagorean doctrine: that man is the measure of all things.<sup>68</sup> As Plato preserves this doctrine in the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras uses “*χρημάτων*”, which must be distinguished from “*όντων*”. By using “*χρημάτων*”, Protagoras means that man is the measure of all things which may be of benefit to himself. This is echoed in Sophocles’ use of *χρηστός*, literally beneficial or useful, in line 2 of the play. Deianeira attempts to judge her life as bad due to her passive nature and paralyzing fear of the unknown.

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<sup>65</sup> *Trach.* 80-81.

<sup>66</sup> *Trach.* 76-78.

<sup>67</sup> *Trach.* 143

<sup>68</sup> *Theaet.* 152a

When Deianeira begins to take an active role, throwing aside her compassion and understanding for Herakles and Iole, Deianeira puts her trust in the unknown, as demonstrated by the *philtion* which Nessus said (εἶπε) would make Herakles love no other woman more than her, even when he had full knowledge of that woman (εἰσιδών).<sup>69</sup> Deianeira here chooses to trust in Nessus' deceptions, despite never having seen the effects of his *philtion* herself. Deianeira has let her ultimate fear of the unknown, made manifest in the usurpation of her role in the *oikos*, push her to the use of the untested *philtion*. In addition, Herakles was commanded by Eurytus to serve Omphale for a year because he slew his son Iphitus by stealth (δόλω).<sup>70</sup> This slaying an unknowing victim resonates with Deianeira's use of a *philtion*, which has been kept hidden (κεκρυμμένον) inside Deianeira's house for many years. Sophocles intentionally connects the interior of the house with the dark and the dangers of the unknown here to show the consequences of Deianeira's misplaced trust in the centaur. The information for which Deianeira is present to learn is determined through her judgment to be true until another experience contradicts this. Deianeira's original belief that Herakles' contest with Acheloös granted her a release from her fear is proven incorrect when she is struck by nightly fears in his absence. Likewise, Deianeira's belief that Herakles must have been injured dissolves when the report comes that Herakles has sacked or is sacking Oechalia. In addition, her position in the *oikos* was secure until Lichas revealed Iole's identity. As shown by

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<sup>69</sup> 574-575.

<sup>70</sup> *Trach.* 279.

Deianeira's words of acceptance towards Iole, Herakles has had many lovers in the past, but none was ever a replacement for her. The silence of Lichas and Iole (*σιγῆ*) shows an understanding that knowledge can be both a boon and a ruin.<sup>71</sup> Like the tuft of wool when exposed to the light, and by association true knowledge, Nessus' age-old deception is revealed too late for Deianeira to prevent Herakles from putting on the poisoned peplos. Deianeira's choice to enter the house to commit suicide brings full circle the spatial relationship between darkness and ignorance. The end which Deianeira once prayed for as a release from her fear has come after she has acted against her husband by stealth, having deliberately ignored the lesson in Herakles' servitude to Omphale.<sup>72</sup>

As Gagarin shows, the representation of Protagoras preserved in Plato reaches a point of agreement with Socrates that all things depend on knowledge.<sup>73</sup> Socrates and Protagoras decide *arete* is a *metrike techne* through which all evaluations of beneficial and harmful must be made. The individual estimation of what is beneficial to the given individual is the tragic flaw in Deianeira's character. In her fear, which caused her to understand the arrival of Iole and her own loss of status in the *oikos* as harmful to her, Deianeira judged incorrectly that the centaur Nessus had gifted her a beneficial thing, the means of deliverance from her fear of losing her social position. Furthermore, Deianeira judges that her previous passivity will not be a benefit for

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<sup>71</sup> *Trach.* 319.

<sup>72</sup> Lawrence 1978.

<sup>73</sup> Gagarin 1969.

her now, as she fears the unknown circumstances which shall result from her loss of status more than she fears the consequences of applying the centaur's *techne*. By demonstrating Nessus as a mockery of a teacher to Deianeira, Sophocles examines whether the teaching offered is truly a benefit to the student.

## Serpent Imagery in the Trachiniae

Serpent imagery has a special prominence in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. Sophocles associates the imagery of serpents with the unknown and false knowledge. I will also demonstrate that this association is continued in other media to show that Sophocles uses serpent imagery to reflect the interplay of knowledge, ignorance, and misinformation in the *Trachiniae* to further show that the acquisition of knowledge can be both beneficial and harmful.

Sophocles first mentions a serpent in Deianeira's recollection of the river god Acheloös.<sup>74</sup> Sophocles refers to him as "glittering", which the chorus later uses to describe the night.<sup>75</sup> By using the same word to describe both the starry night, which Lawrence identifies with false knowledge, and the serpentine form of Acheloös, Sophocles creates an association between him and darkness, which is contrasted by the association between sight and knowledge.<sup>76</sup> Deianeira was, by her accounting, more fearful of marriage than any woman. Sophocles shows Deianeira to be paralyzed with fear as an expression of her passive nature. In addition, the *αἰόλος δράκων* returns in line 834, when the chorus sings about the fulfillment of the prophecy. This time the hydra is identified with the glittering of the night sky, as the

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<sup>74</sup> *Trach.* 11-12. *αἰόλος δράκων*.

<sup>75</sup> *Trach.* 94.

<sup>76</sup> Lawrence 1978.

hydra has long been slain. As Herakles recounts to Hyllus, Zeus once sent him a prophecy that told him no living person would kill him.

έμοι γὰρ ἦν πρόφαντον ἐκ πατρὸς πάλαι,                    1160  
τῶν ἐμπνεόντων μηδενὸς θανεῖν ὕπο,  
ἀλλ' ὅστις Ἄιδου φθίμενος οἰκίτηρ πέλοι.  
ὄδ' οὖν ὁ θῆρ Κένταυρος, ὡς τὸ θεῖον ἦν  
πρόφαντον, οὔτω ζῶντά μ' ἔκτεινεν θανών.

For it was revealed to me long ago from my father that I would die by no one of the living, but by someone who having perished became a dweller of Hades.

This prophecy reveals the unexpected means of death for Herakles, which Sophocles' inclusion of the gleaming serpent, and its direct association with death in line 834 makes more emphatic. Herakles perishes not only by the venom of the serpent he killed, but also by the machinations of a previously slain foe, enacted by a woman who has already gone off stage to commit suicide. In addition, in juxtaposition to the gleaming serpent, the sun, previously associated with genuine knowledge, also appears. This sun, which Herakles will never see, provides a clear distinction between ignorance – associated with darkness, serpents, and death--and knowledge, associated with the light of the sun and life.

Sophocles uses the verb *ἔρπω* when a character is confronted by the unknown or has been accused of deceit. The literal meanings of *ἔρπω*, “to crawl” or “walk slowly” both accurately describe the motion of serpents and represent the motion of one

stumbling about in the dark, which Sophocles has already associated with ignorance. In its first use in line 160, Deianeira uses it to say that Herakles had previously “gone out intending to accomplish something, and not about to die”.<sup>77</sup> In the following lines, however, Deianeira reveals that when Herakles departed fifteen months ago, he revealed the prophetic tablets that he had kept unknown to her for years. This prophecy, which provides two possibilities for Herakles’ fate, is a crucial point in the play. Deianeira recounts that Herakles will either reach the end of his labors after fifteen months away, or he will die:<sup>78</sup>

τότ’ ἢ θανεῖν χρεΐη σφε τῷδε τῷ χρόνῳ  
ἢ τοῦθ’ ὑπεκδραμόντα τοῦ χρόνου τέλος  
τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη ζῆν ἀλυπῆτῳ βίῳ.

Then it is necessary for him either to die at this time or having escaped this end to still live for the remainder of his time with a painless life.

This prophecy hinges upon the coordinating conjunctions. “An end to his labors” can certainly be interpreted as death, but the prophetic tablet, which Herakles obtained from the oracle at Dodona, specifically says either “*θανεῖν*” or “*τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη ζῆν ἀλυπῆτῳ βίῳ*”. The intentional distinction here mimics the ambiguity with which Herakles has furnished this prophecy. The words are inscribed on an ancient

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<sup>77</sup> εἶρπε.

<sup>78</sup> *Trach.* 166-68.

tablet (*παλαιὰν δέλτον*), and Deianeira claims that Herakles heard them from the two oracular doves at Dodona.<sup>79</sup> While the original oracle that Herakles heard at Dodona may have been true, Deianeira did not see or experience it. Deianeira's use of the word *εἶρπε* in this passage shows that she conceived of Herakles' departure on this occasion as a departure from his normal habits, and a step towards an unexpected change in the status quo.

Lichas uses this word again in line 394 when he attempts to return to Herakles without telling Deianeira the identity of Iole. The intentional withholding of information from Deianeira recalls her association between the unknown and Acheloös. Sophocles thus uses *ἔρποντος* here to signify that Lichas is intentionally trying to deceive Deianeira into taking Iole into the household. In line 547, Deianeira states that she "sees her youth creeping away".<sup>80</sup> Deianeira's use of *ἔρπω* here expresses her fears of aging. Deianeira knows for a fact that her youth is slipping away because she can see it (*ὄρω*). She does not know, however, what the loss of her youth will mean for her position in the *oikos*. Deianeira's fear is shown by her youth crawling away through the darkness as time passes, bringing her to a place that she cannot see, and therefore does not know. Deianeira subverts her fear in this place by telling the chorus that she is a woman of understanding (*γυναῖκα νοῦν ἔχουσιν*).<sup>81</sup> Deianeira then recounts the Nessus episode, in which Deianeira reveals that the

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<sup>79</sup> *Trach.* 157.

<sup>80</sup> *ὄρω γὰρ ἤβην τὴν μὲν ἔρπουσαν πρόσω.*

<sup>81</sup> *Trach.* 553.

*philtion* which she has hidden away is made with the hydra's venom. Deianeira goes so far as to describe the Hydra's venom as "μελαγχόλους".<sup>82</sup> The venom itself is both dark and must be kept in the dark for its use as a "*philtion*" to be preserved. Even more so, *μελαγχόλους* suggests that the venom is a particularly foul substance. In this way, Deianeira shows both that the *philtion* is associated with darkness as a manifestation of her own lack of knowledge of the *φάρμακον* and that the destructive power of the serpentine hydra is associated with darkness and ignorance. Deianeira here does not have true understanding of the *philtion's* purported powers. When she again uses *ἔρπε* at line 616, Deianeira uses it to send Lichas back to Herakles carrying the *philtion* tainted robe. The robe has been concealed in a chest, out of the light, and so in secret and unknown.<sup>83</sup> By using *ἔρπε* here, Sophocles is signaling to the audience that Lichas has been sent to Herakles unaware of the fatal truth of the robe. When Deianeira tells Lichas that she "reveals to the gods a sacrificer in a new peplos", Sophocles calls to mind a snake shedding its skin and coming into a new state of being, foreshadowing Herakles' own new state of being.<sup>84</sup> In addition, when Deianeira discovers the effects of her *philtion*, she recounts again that she concealed "it away from light and fire".<sup>85</sup> To continue the association between knowledge and light, Deianeira has kept it away from

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<sup>82</sup> *Trach.* 574.

<sup>83</sup> *Trach.* 622. ἄγγος.

<sup>84</sup> *Trach.* 612-13. φανεῖν θεοῖς θυτῆρα καινῶ καινὸν ἐν πεπλώματι.

<sup>85</sup> *Trach.* 685-86. ἄπυρον ἀκτῖνός τ' ἀεὶ θερμῆς ἄθικτον.

knowledge and the means of acquiring knowledge of the *philtron's* dangerous capabilities. In precisely following the centaur's instructions, Deianeira blinded herself to the dangers of its use. This is reiterated when Deianeira refers to the casket in which she places the robe, offstage and in the house, as "sunless".<sup>86</sup> The box should be read as a deceitful gift here, echoing the knowledge that Nessus gave to Deianeira. When Deianeira mentions the poison again in line 717, she again calls it "ίός". The word *ίός* is not a word used for *pharmaka*, but exclusively for venom.<sup>87</sup> In this passage, Deianeira also recounts that she saw first-hand the deadly effects of the venom on Cheiron, who was poisoned when he touched the arrow. The death of Cheiron, who is associated with the knowledge, shows that the unknown can destroy even those with knowledge.

When Hyllus confronts Deianeira with news of her *philtron's* effects he says, "Who can make unborn a thing which has already been revealed".<sup>88</sup> By this Sophocles means that the knowledge of what Deianeira has done cannot be unknown. Hyllus then tells Deianeira that his father "crawled away having sacked the city of Eurytus."<sup>89</sup> Sophocles layers many meanings into *εἶρπε* here. Herakles is so burdened with spoils that he has been slowed to a crawl. In this way, Herakles resembles a great serpent that has gorged itself. It is precisely at this point that

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<sup>86</sup> *Trach.* 691. ἀλαμπές ἡλίου.

<sup>87</sup> See chapter one for the distinction between *pharmakon* and *ίός*.

<sup>88</sup> *Trach.* 743. φανθὲν τίς ἂν δύναιτ' ἂν ἀγένητον ποεῖν.

<sup>89</sup> *Trach.* 750. εἶρπε κλεινὴν Εὐρύτου πέρσας πόλιν.

Herakles, like a slow-moving serpent, is at his most vulnerable. He has just conquered a city and does not expect to encounter more troubles. Herakles also is making his way homeward with no idea that his wife has sent this poison to him. In his ignorance, the sense of *εἶρπε* as the type of locomotion one uses to navigate the dark is shown here again. Herakles is slowly and blindly making his way homeward toward his unforeseen demise. At line 816, after Hyllus has recounted the agony of his father to his mother, the chorus asks Deianeira why she “creeps away in silence”.<sup>90</sup> Deianeira’s silent departure here shows the woman grappling not only with her role in the death of her husband and the destruction of her *oikos*, but also the unexpected consequences of her attempt to protect her status. Deianeira instead shuffles blindly offstage, into the *oikos*, to a fate she had not considered. Hyllus echoes the chorus’ word choice when he says, “let her slink away”.<sup>91</sup> This line drips with venomous contempt, as Deianeira’s reckless trust in the unknown *philtion* has brought an end to his expectations for the future as well. It is his desire not only that she depart, but that she go so far away that he no longer knows of her existence. In the throes of his pain, when all has been revealed, Herakles has described his pain as “creeping back again”.<sup>92</sup> This usage, and the word’s last usage in line 1108, show that Deianeira’s actions in the second half of the play have come full circle.

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<sup>90</sup> τί σῖγ’ ἀφέρπεις;

<sup>91</sup> *Trach.* 819. ἐᾶτ’ ἀφέρπειν.

<sup>92</sup> *Trach.* 1010. ἦδ’ αὖθ’ ἔρπει.

The incorporation of the hydra's venom into this version of Herakles' death connects it to Herakles' early life when he slays the snakes sent by Hera. While this episode from his infancy is not included in the *Trachiniae*, Sophocles brings this full circle when the venom of a serpent he had already slain, which he did not expect to kill him. This monstrous omen as his birth was also interpreted as a sign that he was not a mere mortal as expected, but the offspring of a god who had come to his mother by deception. This trope of a serpent as an unforeseen omen or cause of death is not unique to Herakles. Eurydice, the wife of Orpheus, perishes when she is bitten by a serpent.<sup>93</sup>

The connection between serpents, darkness, and the lack of knowledge is also demonstrated in the founding myth for Apollo's oracle at Delphi. Apollo slays the Python and establishes an oracle to provide prophetic knowledge. Apollo, as the god of both the sun and prophecy, personifies the association between light and knowledge. If the dichotomy between light and darkness that Sophocles applies to the *Trachiniae* holds here as well, the slaying of the Python and the establishment of the Pythia can be read as Apollo, the ultimate personification of light and by extension knowledge replacing an embodiment of darkness and the lack of knowledge.

Serpent imagery is also associated with healing, particularly through Asklepios. Asklepios is not only the god of medicine, but he is also taught the *technē* of

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<sup>93</sup> Apollodorus B2.

medicine by Cheiron. Moreover, Asklepios is the son of Apollo, who is associated with genuine knowledge. Cheiron, in Sophocles' interpretation in the *Trachiniae*, is injured and perhaps even slain by the hydra's venom. In the *Trachiniae*, Sophocles' connection between serpents, darkness, and a lack of knowledge is made manifest in harming Cheiron.

Sophocles uses serpent imagery to further emphasize the rash behavior Deianeira. Throughout the first half of the play, Deianeira is a passive character. Sophocles demonstrates this through her fear resulting in her lack of knowledge. In the second half of the play, Deianeira's fear of losing her place in the *oikos* finally pushes her to action to prevent her loss of status. In doing so, Sophocles uses the verb ἔρπω and its relationship to serpent imagery and -- through the connection Sophocles makes between Acheloös' serpent form and the night sky—darkness and the lack of true knowledge to verbally illustrate that Deianeira stumbles, blindly trusting in the centaur's *philtron*. Sophocles brings this theme full circle. Nessus takes advantage of Deianeira's fear of change in her domestic circumstances to obtain his revenge. Sophocles uses Deianeira's fear to demonstrate that blindly trusting in one who professes to teach can have disastrous consequences. By taking this stance, Sophocles creates a duality in the understanding of the sophists' knowledge. By offering their lessons in exchange for payment, the sophists benefit from the ignorance of others. Furthermore, as a member of the aristocracy, Sophocles himself would likely be less than thrilled at the thought of rhetorical *technai* being taught to,

as Kerferd says “all kinds of people”.<sup>94</sup> The education of anyone who could afford learning threatened the aristocracy’s status quo, much in the way that Sophocles portrays the arrival of Iole. Although she was a princess in Oechalia, she has been taken as a war prize by Herakles. By elevating her to the same status as Deianeira, Sophocles parallels the risks of overturning the accepted social norms by giving all with the ability to pay access the skills, particularly the rhetorical and political *technai* associated with the management of the *oikos*.

By using serpent imagery, Sophocles also creates a comparison not only between Deianeira and Clytemnestra, but also between Deianeira and Orestes. Orestes and Clytemnestra are both referred to as serpents. Clytemnestra is first referred to as a snake in lines 246-61 in the *Choephoroi*, where Orestes recounts that he and Electra are eagle chicks who have been orphaned by a serpent. This view of Clytemnestra as a snake is echoed at line 527.<sup>95</sup> This interpretation of Clytemnestra parallels Sophocles’ interpretation of Deianeira by inverting the established order.<sup>96</sup> O’Neill correctly notes that the eagle, normally the predator, is slain by the snake in this simile. This reversal of natural order is further strengthened by Cassandra’s prophetic utterances at line 1233 of the *Agamemnon*, where Cassandra refers to Clytemnestra as an “*ἀμφίσβαιναν*”, a two-headed serpent.<sup>97</sup> The appearance of a

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<sup>94</sup> Kerferd 1981.

<sup>95</sup> *τεκεῖν δράκοντ’ ἔδοξεν, ὡς αὐτὴ λέγει.*

<sup>96</sup> O’Neill 1998.

second head where the snake's tail should be also signifies the Furthermore, the eagle, through its association with Zeus, is also associated with divine prophecy, which can be construed as a type of knowledge. This association is also affirmed by the eagle's altitude and proximity to the sun, as the eagle can be said to see everything, and as has been established previously, seeing is the purest form of knowing. Once again then, the serpent is a symbol of the fatal lack of knowledge. The arrival of Iole in Trachis further parallels the arrival of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Clytemnestra, like Deianeira, is now confronted with an intended usurper to her position in the *oikos*. This same association with the lack of knowledge, or more accurately misinformation, is shown again in the *Coephoroi*, as Orestes proclaims to Clytemnestra that Orestes is dead.

When serpent imagery is applied to Orestes in the *Choephoroi* the audience is not supposed to see Orestes and Clytemnestra in the same light. As O'Neill demonstrates, the association between Orestes and the serpent should be read in comparison to *Iliad* 22.92-96:

ὥς τῷ γε κλαίοντε προσαιδήτην φίλον υἷον  
πολλὰ λισσομένω: οὐδ' Ἐκτορι θυμὸν ἔπειθον,  
ἀλλ' ὃ γε μίμν' Ἀχιλῆα πελώριον ἄσσον ἰόντα.  
ὥς δὲ δράκων ἐπὶ χειρὶ ὀρέστερος ἄνδρα μένησι  
βεβρωκῶς κακὰ φάρμακ', ἔδου δέ τέ μιν χόλος αἰνός,     95  
σμερδαλέον δὲ δέδορκεν ἔλισσόμενος περὶ χειρῖ:

So beseeching many things the two addressed their dear son, wailing: They did not persuade Hector in his heart, but he awaited mighty Achilles coming nearer. And as a mountain snake in a hole having eaten foul poisons, terrible and grim anger comes over him, coiling around his hole.

In this simile, the serpent takes a different role than the aggressive role shown by Clytemnestra. Hector is portrayed as the defender of Troy, rather than the aggressor. By transferring this image of Hector as a serpent to Orestes, Aeschylus reaffirms Orestes' choice in obeying Apollo's decree. Deianeira has elements of both Clytemnestra and Orestes in her character. Like Clytemnestra, Deianeira is introduced to her intended replacement, and she acts against her husband with lethal intent. On the other hand, Deianeira resembles Orestes in that she acts, from her perspective, for the established order of her *oikos*. By drawing elements from both Clytemnestra and Orestes, Sophocles creates a unique character in Deianeira. She is driven to protect the established order of the *oikos* through treachery, much like Orestes, but the unintended consequences of her lack of knowledge place her in the role of the murderous Clytemnestra.

Sophocles uses the negative connotations of serpents with death and treachery to emphasize Deianeira's lack of knowledge in her frantic attempt to defend her place in the *oikos* by further associating the serpent not only with the lack of knowledge, but with the possession of misinformation. Deianeira is deceived by Nessus, and in her reckless attempt to win back Herakles she deceives Lichas. But an examination of the *Trachiniae* in the context of the *Oresteia* reveals Deianeira to be a

conglomerate of Clytemnestra and Orestes as a result of the dissonance between her intended actions and the actual effects. Deianeira attempts to be an Orestes, but through her fear and her resulting recklessness she follows the instructions of an ill-intentioned teacher with lethal consequences, turning her into a Clytemnestra. This dichotomy between Deianeira and Clytemnestra is heightened by Hyllus' forgiveness of Deianeira upon learning that the intended effect of her *philtion* was not to kill Herakles but to win back his affection. Through serpent imagery, Sophocles shows Deianeira as attempting to defend her position in the *oikos*, but inadvertently destroying it through her lack of genuine knowledge.

## Conclusions

Sophocles uses the themes of misinformation and education in the *Trachiniae* to encourage his audience to examine the sophists for themselves. To discuss misinformation and education through the *Trachiniae*, Sophocles must first portray Deianeira as innocent, or at worst guilty of involuntary manslaughter. Sophocles' characterization of Nessus emphasizes his deceptive nature. Furthermore, Deianeira's recollections of the centaur's instructions in lines 681-2 show that she followed his instructions to the letter. In doing so, Deianeira has clearly been deceived. Carawan, however, makes a strong argument for Deianeira's guilt. He suggests that the vessel which contained the *philtion* is the same vessel in which Deianeira places the robe. Carawan posits that this reuse of the container is meant to show Deianeira's ironic intentions to kill Herakles. But Sophocles does not use the same word for both containers. At line 556, Deianeira calls the container a λέβης. When Lichas receives the robe in line 622, however, he calls the container an ἄγγος. Carawan is correct in identifying that both of words can refer to a cinerary urn, and that by using them interchangeably Sophocles is attempting to foreshadow the effects of the *philtion*. Both words are certainly used in such a fashion by Sophocles in the *Electra*, but they are distinctly used to refer to separate items. ἄγγος occurs twice in the *Electra*, first in line 1118 and the second time in line 1205. In both instances the word is used for the vessel containing the ashes of "Orestes". At line 1401, λέβης is used for a cinerary urn which Clytemnestra is preparing. While these items are used similarly here, a fifth century audience would have imagined a λέβης to be a circular container. This image of a round vessel is confirmed by Euripides'

*Cyclops*. Euripides uses *λέβης* four times to refer to two different objects. In lines 246, 399, and 404, the *λέβης* is a cauldron. In line 392, the object in question is a mixing bowl. Euripides also provides non-funerary contexts for *ἄγγος*. In the *Ion*, Euripides uses *ἄγγος* four times. In line 32, Euripides uses it to describe the container in which the infant Ion is placed. This usage continues in lines 1337, 1398, and 1412. These uses suggest that the *ἄγγος* that Lichas receives should be considered a separate type of container entirely. While Sophocles is possibly using different words for variety, Deianeira's recollection of her treatment of the robe suggests otherwise. Deianeira says that she "dipped this chiton, applying as that one said when he was alive".<sup>98</sup> This is compounded when Deianeira further recounts that she then took a tuft of wool and anointed the robe with that.<sup>99</sup> Deianeira also claims that she places the robe specifically in a chest.<sup>100</sup> This combination of dipping and then rubbing suggests that Deianeira did not use all the *φάρμακον* she had available. This is further demonstrated by Deianeira's recollection of "ὄσα ζῶν κεῖνος εἶπε", suggesting that she used the *philtion* in the exact amount prescribed. In doing so, she follows Nessus' instructions exactly, and acts without harmful intent. Through this interpretation, Nessus is shown to intentionally manipulate Deianeira for his own gain.

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<sup>98</sup> *Trach.* 580-81.

<sup>99</sup> *Trach.* 674-75.

<sup>100</sup> *Trach.* 692.

Resolving Deianeira's guilt places her in an intermediate place between an Orestes figure and a Clytemnestra. By placing Deianeira in this position, Sophocles attempts to show Deianeira as an innocuous, if self-serving, character. It is through the associations between serpents and deceit, however, that all three characters are given more emphasis. If the serpent and eagle metaphor that Orestes applies to Clytemnestra and Agamemnon is read as subversion of the natural order, Orestes' murder of his mother must be considered a restoration of that order. The serpent imagery in the *Oresteia*, as applied to Orestes, calls to mind Erechthonius. The chthonic associations of the serpent resonate with Athenian perceptions of their own autochthony as a fundamental element of society. This is reflected in Orestes' and Deianeira's actions against perceived usurpers to the established order. Sophocles uses this fear of the collapse of the most fundamental societal unit, the *oikos*, to fuel both Deianeira's passivity and her eventual need to act. For the first half of the play, Deianeira is passive because she is paralyzed by her fears of Herakles being injured or slain, which reflects her fears as a young girl of marriage, in which her father's *oikos* is replaced with that of the monstrous Acheloös. This lifelong fear, which has informed Deianeira's decisions in the first half, and her expectations that the future holds continued fears, is made manifest by the arrival of Iole. Deianeira's worst fears have been realized, as there is a clear and present threat to her position in the *oikos*. From Deianeira's perspective, her increasing age has led Herakles to take a new wife, and her only recourse is to use the *philtion* Nessus gave her. By playing on this fear, Sophocles shows that Nessus has

intentionally manipulated Deianeira into unwittingly poisoning Herakles for his benefit.

Sophocles' use of Nessus to subvert the traditional benevolent teacher model offered by Cheiron provides a mythological comparison to the burgeoning Sophistic movement. Sophocles is not stating that the sophists are inherently malicious but that their claims to teach *technai* and, perhaps more critically, virtue. He does not address these claims as true or false. Instead, he questions who benefits from the transaction. By starting with a *prooimion*, Sophocles structures his play in the form of a philosophical paradigm to imitate philosophical discourse. Deianeira begins the play by stating the *prooimion*, that "you could not know a man's life until he has died, whether useful or bad", Sophocles echoes Protagoras' statement that "man is the measure of all things". The occurrence of the cognates *χρηστός* and *χρημάτων* in both statements shows a mutual interest in examining usefulness to man.

Furthermore, Sophocles' use of Deianeira's story resembles the Prometheus myth given in Plato's *Protagoras*. Like Plato, Sophocles is using Deianeira's story as a mythological exemplum to test his *prooimion*. Through the manipulation of Deianeira's tragic flaw, Sophocles creates in Nessus a mirror image of Cheiron, and examining for whose benefit he taught Deianeira to use the *philtion*.

Sophocles deviates from the established traditions for Deianeira's character. The associations between snakes, darkness, and the lack of knowledge show that Deianeira is so immobilized by fears of change in the *oikos* that she takes drastic measures to keep her position. By making the character passive and frightened,

Sophocles emphasizes her reckless trust in Nessus and his instruction. In doing so, Sophocles' Nessus provides a mirrored image of Cheiron, as Nessus teaches Deianeira for his own benefit. The parallels between Nessus and the sophists, who both teach for their own gain, show the duality of the motivations of the sophists. This is also reflected in the use of serpent imagery, through the dual associations with death and healing. This dual nature of knowledge is further reflected in Apollo, as he is simultaneously the god of healing and of disease. The inclusion of these associations extends these dualities to the knowledge offered by the sophists. That knowledge can be used both to the student's benefit and to the student's harm.

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## Appendix: Figures



*1. Lefkandi Centaur, 10th century B.C.E. National Museum of Eretria. Image copyright the Swiss School of Archaeology in Greece.*



*Figure 2. Herakles slaying Nessus; ca. 630-600 B.C.E. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, photographer: Giannis Patrikianos. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Archaeological Receipts Fund*



*Figure 3. Medea and the Ram; ca. 470 B.C.E. British Museum. Courtesy of the British Museum.*



*Figure 4. Medea and Peliades; ca. 470 B.C.E. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (75.683). Photo credit: Johannes Laurentius. Courtesy of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin through Creative Commons License.*