

SOPHOCLES
PHILOCTETES

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INTRODUCTION

1. DEVELOPMENT OF THE STORY

Analysis of Sophocles' play

- 1-134 Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive outside Philoctetes' cave in Lemnos. Odysseus persuades Neoptolemus against his will to trick Philoctetes into giving him his bow (the bow of Herakles without which Troy cannot be captured). If Odysseus thinks there is excessive delay he will send a disguised sailor to help the intrigue.
- 135-218 The chorus of Neoptolemus' sailors inspect Philoctetes' cave, and ponder on his life on a deserted island with a gangrened foot.
- 219-675 Philoctetes enters through the back door of the cave. Neoptolemus tells his story. Philoctetes believes that Neoptolemus is sailing home because the Greeks have wronged him and appeals to Neoptolemus to take him home. They are moving into the cave when the disguised sailor enters. His story only increases Philoctetes' hatred of the Greeks and his desire to be taken home by Neoptolemus. Philoctetes and Neoptolemus enter the cave.
- 676-729 Left alone, the chorus sing of the miserable plight of Philoctetes and his hopes of getting home.
- 730-826 Philoctetes and Neoptolemus come out. Philoctetes has three successive attacks of violent pain and finally falls asleep after giving Neoptolemus the bow.
- 827-64 The chorus advise Neoptolemus to make off with the bow while Philoctetes is asleep, but Neoptolemus, whose sympathy has been won by Philoctetes' heroism and agony, sees that the bow is useless without Philoctetes.
- 865-1080 Philoctetes wakes. Neoptolemus tells him the truth: he must go to Troy. Philoctetes violently refuses. Odysseus enters, and his attempt at persuasion is equally unsuccessful. He goes off with Neoptolemus, who has the

- bow. Neoptolemus leaves the chorus of sailors with Philoctetes.
- 1081-1217 Lyric dialogue between Philoctetes, who expresses his utter misery, his hatred of the Greeks, and his desire for death, and the chorus, who try vainly to make him more reasonable.
- 1218-1471 Neoptolemus and Odysseus return. In spite of Odysseus' protests Neoptolemus gives Philoctetes his bow and makes a last vain appeal. As Neoptolemus and Philoctetes move off towards the ship to return to Greece, Herakles appears and Philoctetes accepts his instructions to go to Troy.

The story

When Sophocles dramatised the story of Philoctetes in 409 B.C., he was writing late in a long tradition which we can trace back to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Philoctetes may have been originally a great archer in his own right with a bow of his own, and therefore necessary for the sack of Troy, but in Sophocles' play it is essential that Philoctetes should have the bow of Herakles, which he was given because he consented to light Herakles' pyre. In the *Odyssey* Philoctetes was a great archer at Troy (8. 219) and returned home safely (3. 190). In the *Iliad* (2. 721 ff.) the Achaeans had left him in Lemnos, labouring with the cruel wound of the savage snake, 'but soon the Argives by their ships would remember Lord Philoctetes'.

But we have to go to the summaries of the Cyclic epics for the outlines of the story. In the *Cypria* after the sacrifice of Iphigenia the Greeks sailed to Tenedos. The summary goes on 'and while they were feasting Philoctetes was bitten by the snake, and because of his evil odour was left in Lemnos'. The account must have been elaborated further in the poem, and at least the location of the feast, the island of Chryse off Lemnos, must have been given, and the feast was presumably connected with a sacrifice to Chryse. The second stage in the story comes from the *Little Iliad* of Lesches, which begins after the death of Achilles, in the late stages of the Trojan war, ten years later. The beginning of the summary is all relevant to Sophocles' play: 'the Judgment of Arms (Achilles' arms) is made, and Odysseus took them because Athena willed it; Ajax went mad, and tortured the cattle of

the Greeks and killed himself' (the subject of Sophocles' *Ajax*). 'After this Odysseus ambushed Helenus, and when Helenus had prophesied about the capture of Troy, Diomedes brought Philoctetes back from Lemnos. He was healed by Machaon, and fought a duel with Paris, whom he killed. . . and Odysseus brought Neoptolemus from Skyros and gave him the arms of his father (Achilles).'

Pindar, *Pythian* 1. 53 (470 B.C.) adds nothing: 'the godlike heroes went to fetch the son of Poias (Philoctetes), who sacked the city of Priam and ended the labours of the Greeks, walking with infirm body'. Nothing about Herakles' bow, no complications, but Pindar postpones the healing to get the parallel between the sick Philoctetes fighting and the sick Hiero fighting. Bacchylides (fr. 7), we know, quoted the prophecy of Helenus as the reason for summoning Philoctetes.

Aeschylus and Euripides both dramatised the play before Sophocles. That both the later poets had seen Aeschylus' play is a safe inference from the fact that the younger poet (Euripides) remodelled a line of Aeschylus (253N). Our knowledge of their plays is chiefly derived from a comparison by Dio of Prusa written in the latter part of the first century A.D. (*Oration* 52). As far as we know, Aeschylus was the first to make Philoctetes an angry hero, unwilling to return, and the first to make Odysseus come to fetch him (we do not know whether in the epic Odysseus was responsible for abandoning him on Lemnos). The chorus were Lemnians, who came to visit Philoctetes and were told the story of his life. Odysseus, whom Philoctetes did not recognise, told Philoctetes a false story of the misfortunes of the Greeks: Agamemnon was dead, Odysseus had been put to death as a criminal, the army was in sore straits. This was obviously to win Philoctetes' confidence; it is certain also that Philoctetes had an attack of his disease and appealed to death to heal him. But the rest is unclear, and no obvious analogy in the other works of Aeschylus aids reconstruction. Presumably Odysseus spoke the prologue because he must have established his identity with the audience before the chorus or Philoctetes arrived.

Euripides produced his play in 431 B.C., the same year as the *Medea* and the *Diktys*. The main lines can be reconstructed: see Webster, *TE* 57 ff. Odysseus spoke the prologue, and of this we have a prose paraphrase in Dio of Prusa, *Oration* 59. Odysseus' opening line proclaimed the restless ambition which had brought him to Lemnos

to capture Philoctetes. He is afraid that Philoctetes will recognise him and immediately shoot him. But Athena has promised to change his appearance and voice (thus he avoided the problem of recognition, which Aeschylus did not raise). His mission is urgent because he knows that a Trojan embassy is coming in the hopes of getting Philoctetes to their side (evidently Helenus has already been captured so that both sides need Philoctetes). Then Philoctetes arrives and prepares to shoot Odysseus as being a Greek. Odysseus calms him with the story that he is a wronged fugitive and is invited into his cave. The chorus of Lemnians arrive and apologise for not having visited Philoctetes before (again a criticism of Aeschylus, who had not bothered about this). According to Dio, Euripides also introduced Actor, a Lemnian known to Philoctetes, who had often visited him. Actor has two probable functions, first to provide supplies for Philoctetes' guest (like the old man in the *Electra*), secondly to announce the arrival of the Trojan embassy.

The Trojan embassy arrives, led probably by Paris, who is the only speaking character. He makes large promises if Philoctetes will come to Troy. Odysseus cannot keep silence, and while still in his character as a wronged Greek urges Philoctetes not to give in. At the end Philoctetes drives the Trojans off by the threat of shooting them. This is a great debate scene with Odysseus pleading the Greek case without revealing his identity, rather as in 438 B.C. in the *Telephus* Telephus had pleaded the Trojan case against Menelaus before Agamemnon without revealing his identity.

For the rest of the play, it is certain that Philoctetes had an attack of his disease, it is highly probable that Diomedes seized the bow, and then presumably Odysseus revealed himself and together the Greeks compelled Philoctetes to go on the ship. The part played by Diomedes is not quite clear. Dio says that Diomedes took part, but in the paraphrase of the prologue no mention is made of him. Even if he had been a silent character (like Pylades in the *Electra*) it is hardly possible that neither Odysseus nor Philoctetes made any mention of him. Euripides likes giving a new twist to the action by the arrival of a new character, and so it seems probable that he only arrived in time to steal the bow (whether from the ship that brought Odysseus or independently). It is impossible to get the flavour of this play from scanty fragments. Clearly the great debate was a superb scene, and the

significant word 'compels' at the end of the papyrus summary suggests that Philoctetes went unwillingly at the end. This suggests that Odysseus and Diomedes showed the sort of ruthless brutality which Euripides attributed to the Greeks in the later *Palamedes* and *Trojan Women*.

Dio's paraphrase of the prologue has two other interesting points: Odysseus says that he needs to capture Philoctetes *and* the bow of Herakles, and Philoctetes speaks of the ingratitude of the Greeks when he had shown them the altar of Chryse (where he was bitten by the snake). Dio might be thought responsible for this, but luckily two vases date these stories. A fragment of a red-figure vase of 450-440 B.C. (Rome, Villa Giulia 11688, C. Clairmont, *A.J.A.* 57 (1953) 85, pl. 45-6; Beazley, *ARV* 498) gives Herakles on the pyre and a man running off with the bow who is presumably Philoctetes (and this is earlier than the allusion to Philoctetes in the *Trachiniae*, 1210 ff.). And a red-figure vase of about 430 B.C. in the British Museum (E 494, E. M. Hooker, *J.H.S.* 70 (1950) 35, fig. 1; Beazley, *ARV* 1079) shows Herakles sacrificing to Chryse in the presence of Philoctetes; this was in the earlier Trojan campaign, and because of this Philoctetes could *show* the altar of Chryse to the Greeks in the campaign against Priam's Troy. It is impossible to say whether this vase is earlier or later than Euripides' play, but it certainly shows that the story of Philoctetes guiding the Greeks to Chryse, because he had been there before, is at least as early as Euripides' play (and, for all we know, Aeschylus may have had both points).

Sophocles' play was produced in 409 B.C., less than three years before his death. It is not therefore an answer to Euripides' play in the sense that his *Electra* answers Euripides' *Electra* and his *Oedipus Coloneus* reasserts his own Oedipus against Euripides' *Phoenissae*. The lapse of time was too long for that. He certainly knew his predecessors' plays: he alludes to the prayer for death in Aeschylus (787), and his Odysseus like Euripides' is eaten up by ambition. He avoids the difficulty of the recognition by giving Odysseus Neoptolemus to approach Philoctetes for him, and he avoids the improbability of the Lemnian chorus visiting Philoctetes for the first time by making Lemnos a deserted island and forming the chorus of Neoptolemus' sailors. It would be wrong to say that he altered the story in this way to avoid the difficulties of his predecessors; the new points are in addition essential for Sophocles' whole conception of the story.

We have no knowledge what other two tragedies Sophocles produced at the same festival. His *Skyrians* dealt with the bringing of Neoptolemus from Skyros to Troy; of his *Philoctetes in Troy* we only know the title. The *Skyrians* has been dated early in Sophocles' career because of vase-representations of Neoptolemus leaving Skyros (cf. Webster, *TE* 86), but they may equally well have been based on epic; Odysseus is painted handing over Achilles' armour to Neoptolemus on a cup which long predates Sophocles' first production. The three plays may even have formed a connected trilogy: this was the time when, perhaps because of a rearrangement of the festival, connected trilogies were being performed again (cf. Webster, *TE* 8, 163). But we have no evidence, and the safest guides to understanding the play are the slightly earlier *Electra* (probably produced in 413 B.C., see A. M. Dale, *Euripides: Helen* (1967) x) and the later *Oedipus Coloneus*.

All the three late plays are dominated by a single figure, who is on stage for most of the play. This lonely figure is suffering from a great hurt inflicted some time ago: Electra from the murder of Agamemnon, Philoctetes from abandonment on Lemnos *and* from his gangrened foot, Oedipus from the discovery that he murdered his father and married his mother *and* from self-inflicted blindness and exile. All three suffer rather than do; the action consists in putting them through a great range of emotions as they react to their enemies or friends. The framework of the action is a prophecy, which is fulfilled at the end of the play (this is not a new element in the late plays).

This late Sophoclean formula explains the innovations in the story. The essential innovation is the introduction of Neoptolemus as the one person who could make contact with Philoctetes as Sophocles conceived him. He had, therefore, to switch the fetching of Neoptolemus from Skyros to a time before the summoning of Philoctetes. The introduction of Neoptolemus also avoided early direct contact between Odysseus and Philoctetes, and it was natural to make the chorus Neoptolemus' sailors and so secure the desired isolation of Philoctetes: Electra is equally isolated by living with her enemies. This Philoctetes must have no Lemnian chorus to sympathise, however belatedly, and no Actor to help him. This Philoctetes has been driven by loneliness, privation, and pain to such hatred of the Greek chiefs who exposed him that he cannot yield, he can only

break. Whether if Neoptolemus had come to him with the persuasion of the truth instead of lies, his real sympathy with the son of Achilles would have made him yield we cannot know because Neoptolemus has discredited himself before he makes his final appeal (1314 ff.), and even when he gives Philoctetes back his bow (1287), Philoctetes does not quite believe him: the parallel of Ajax and Tecmessa suggests that Philoctetes could not yield. So Sophocles introduces Herakles (1409), the one person to whom he can listen and who can justify the will of Zeus. This is not an external god putting the characters back on to their correct mythological lines; Herakles has a very special connection with Philoctetes, and the audience are reminded of this repeatedly through the play. A traditionalist would remember how in the first book of the *Iliad* Achilles acted out of character in not killing Agamemnon, and that Homer explained this by sending down Athena to stop him. A modernist might think that, though Philoctetes could not yield, he might break, and his breaking might be attended by a vision of Herakles.

It is Philoctetes' play, a study in suffering. Sophocles has treated the young Neoptolemus so sympathetically that he is apt to steal the lime-light. Both Aeschylus and Euripides had given Odysseus the false story which won Philoctetes' confidence. Odysseus had no scruples. Neoptolemus has to be persuaded to abandon the standards imposed by breed, but gradually under the pressure of his sympathy for Philoctetes returns to them. Whether Sophocles would have written such a study earlier, without the knowledge of contemporary discussions on education and without the spectacle of the corruption of young aristocrats (the play was written within five years of the establishment of the Thirty Tyrants), may perhaps be debated. Sympathy as a force which can make men act contrary to their resolves he had recognised as early as the *Ajax* (121), and sympathy for Electra causes the much less complex Orestes to reveal himself, just as it breaks Neoptolemus. What is much more important is to observe how perfectly the curve of Neoptolemus' reactions is designed to produce the reactions that Sophocles wants in Philoctetes.

Similarly Odysseus owes much to the Euripidean Odysseus and, like Creon in the *Oedipus Coloneus*, something to the embittered politics of the late fifth century. But essentially he is the Odysseus needed first to tempt Neoptolemus and then to arouse the maximum of hatred in Philoctetes.

2. STAGE PRODUCTION

The play was produced in what we call the Periclean theatre (cf. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 42 (1960) 500 ff.). The audience saw the circular dancing floor (*orchestra*) backed by a long wall divided into panels from the centre of which projected the central door of the stage-building. Between the ends of the long wall and the seats of the auditorium were the passages (*parodoi*) by which chorus and characters arriving from outside entered. The central door gave on to a stage which was raised by a few steps above the *orchestra*. Tableaux, such as Ajax surrounded by the slaughtered sheep, could be presented on a kind of trolley (*ekkyklema*) pushed through the central door; it is highly probable that the *ekkyklema* was pushed out at the beginning of this play as it would give a certain amount of extra height to the floor of Philoctetes' cave and make his threat (1001) to throw himself off the cliff more convincing. The *ekkyklema* leading into the open central door made it clear also that the cave was conceived as a kind of tunnel, so that it also has an entrance behind, through which Philoctetes initially appears (on all this cf. A. M. Dale, *Wiener Studien* 69 (1956) 104 = *Collected papers* 127). The long back wall took painted panels: here the set representing rocks, which was designed for satyr-plays, would probably be employed. The roof above the central door could be reached by a staircase from behind, and here Herakles appeared at the end of the play. Sophocles had three actors at his disposal: the first would take Philoctetes, the second would take Neoptolemus, and the third Odysseus, the Emporos, and Herakles. The first actor could manage the whole range of metres—sung, recitative, and spoken; the second and third are only given recitative and spoken lines. Supernumeraries with no speaking parts would be used as the attendants of Neoptolemus and Odysseus. The chorus consisted of a leader and fourteen chorus men.

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