

PHILOCTETES

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Philoctetes by Sophocles (the play)

Story

When the god Heracles was about to die, he conferred his great bow on the Greek hero Philoktetes. Unfortunately for Philoktetes, who went off to the Trojan War with this bow, he was bitten on the foot by a snake, which bite caused a stinking gangrene. Because this smell was intolerable, Odysseus and the sons of Atreus left Philoktetes on a deserted island, Lemnos. Meanwhile, in the midst of the Trojan War, the son of the Trojan leaders, the prophet Helenus, informs the Greeks that they will need to return to Lemnos, to get the bow, before they can win the war. This is where the play opens.

Neoptolemos and Odysseus—whom Philoktetes hates, for having abandoned him in the first place—return to Lemnos; Odysseus sets them up with a typical wily plan. Neoptolemos is to befriend the now deeply isolated Philoktetes, and to plot with him against Odysseus—in exchange for being allowed to see the bow of Philoktetes. (Neoptolemos is portrayed as a kind ingénu, genuinely on Philoktetes' side.) The idea is to capture the bow, and take it back to Troy. Philoktetes allows Neoptolemos to hold the bow—while he, Philoktetes, is suffering a terrible attack of pain. From here on, the play takes twists and turns which confuse a modern viewer. Neoptolemos is ashamed at having considered deceiving Philoktetes, and accordingly returns the bow to the gangrenous hero. Odysseus engages in angry argument with both men, then, characteristically, flees. This is the signal for Neoptolemos to relate freely to Philoktetes, whom he tries to convince to return to Troy—only to be rebuffed by Philoktetes himself. Finally Neoptolemos agrees to take Philoktetes back to Greece, though in doing so Neoptolemos risks the anger of the Greek army—which is anxiously awaiting the bow. This decision on the part of Neoptolemos might be the point at which, for the modern reader, the play seems to need to end. But it does not.

It is at this point that Heracles, who is indebted to Philoktetes—for long ago having agreed to light Heracles' funeral pyre—and who has subsequently been deified—formerly hero, now a god—it is at this point that Heracles intervenes into the destiny of Philoktetes, and essentially rescues him from the easy way out in life, returning to Greece and sulking his way out of the Trojan War. The god Heracles appears above the drama—in the kind of *deus ex machina* machine Medea used, to sail over the end of her play—with an announcement for Philoktetes, that if he will return to battle in Troy he will be victorious, and lead the Greek army to victory. Philoktetes agrees, returning to Troy, where his foot is healed, and where he himself achieves great fame in battle, among other deeds dispatching the Trojan Paris, who 'started the war.' Whereas we may today warm to the idea of the idealism of Neoptolemos, and shudder at the duplicity and flight of Odysseus, the perspective of Sophocles is different. He is internal to the Greek value of winning the war, and does not share our sentimentality about the 'noble lie.'

Characters

Philoktetes himself is a lonely character. When we first meet him he is virtually a 'man of nature,' too long isolated in his cave, living off wild food, and listening to the birds. His pain is ultimately overcome by his sense of duty, and it is he, not Odysseus, who proves to be the classic hero of the war.

Odysseus plays the tricky role for which he is known in . the *Iliad*. Having failed in his quest to manipulate Neoptolemos and to tease the bow away from Philoktetes, he flees the island of Lemnos. It is to be remembered, that the Greeks had great tolerance for wiles that succeed.

Neoptolemos Is the classic ingénu, faithful to his joint mission with Odysseus, and yet torn apart by the sufferings and vulnerability of Philoktetes. It is to be noted that Neoptolemos' benevolent game plan is in the end casually overridden by Heracles.

Themes

Conflict of needs. In this complex play, different characters have different, and conflicting, needs. Odysseus needs to capture the bow, Philoktetes to recover health and power, Neoptolemos to justify his duty and his moral life.

Piety is its own reward. Philoktetes ultimately wins out because he made the initial step, In the first stages of the 'myth,' of lighting the funeral pyre of Heracles. Upon his deification Heracles looks down and blesses Neoptolemos.