

# PHILOCTETES

## Sophocles

**Overview** Having acquired a superbly powerful bow, from the god Heracles, Philoktetes becomes one of the most hard driving of the Greek fighters at Troy. Unfortunately, he is bitten by a poisonous snake, on the battlefield before Troy, and falls victim to a toxic and stinking gangrene, which the Greek warriors, finding intolerable, get rid of by taking Philoktetes to the desert island of Lemnos, and abandoning him there. Ten years into the war, the Greeks fighting at Troy learn that they need the bow of Philoktetes in order to conquer Troy; the problem is how to get the man and his bow back to Troy. The working out of the problem is the subject of 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 in 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 Herakles 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 Herakles 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.'

### Themes

**Conflict** 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** 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 Herakles looks down and blesses Neoptolemos.

## 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 Herakles.

## MAIN CHARACTER

PHILOCTETES (closed)

**Character** Neoptolemos and Odysseus have been sent to Lemnos, to take Philoktetes and his bow back to Troy. Philoktetes has no idea of this plan. As we first meet him he is a Robinson Crusoe, ten years abandoned in the middle of the ocean, dependent on his bow for food, and in pretty constant pain from the gangrene that is destroying his foot. Neoptolemos, the more diplomatic of the capture-pair—Odysseus is known for trickery, on all sides—gently approaches the wounded warrior, and we tremble knowing how deeply isolated Philoktetes is. He is properly suspicious, deeply attached to the wild world of his cave and the wildlife he has lived from, and must be gradually wooed back into the world, from which in the end the benevolent Neoptolemos saves him, taking him not back to Troy but home to Greece.

**Parallels** A literate and seafaring nation, like the British, inevitably generates narratives of shipwreck and isolation on the high seas. Among those which have passed into high literature are Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the former a tale of adventure and shipwreck that turns into a harsh anthropology of Swift's own culture, the latter a study of human persistence (like Philoktetes?) and British practicality. The Greeks themselves, the other great seafaring nation, were fascinated by tales like that of Odysseus, driven by waves onto the shore of the (to him) unknown island of the Phaeacians.

## Illustrative moments

**Awareness** The play has opened with deliberations between Odysseus and Neoptolemos, about the best way to get the bow and take it and Philoktetes back to Troy. (Odysseus has arranged a trickery plan, to hide the intruders' perhaps still hated identity. He has created fake identities for himself and Neoptolemos, whom he claims not to know.) Seeing the newcomers arrive, Philoktetes cries out: 'You look Greek to me. You wear Greek clothes and I love to see them. I want to hear you speak my tongue.' Neoptolemos obliges, bringing delight and amazement to the deeply traumatized and isolated Philoktetes.

**Amazed** Philoktetes is amazed to learn—it is all part of Odysseus' trickery, to facilitate capturing the bow—that the strangers, as Neoptolemos puts it, 'have no idea who he is.' (He has no idea that the two 'strangers' are using guile on him, nor that Neoptolemos is deeply resisting Odysseus' cynical gameplay.) He continues questioning: 'you do not know the fame my woes have given me? The men who brought me to my ruin?' Clearly Philoktetes has been brooding, for ten years, on the wrongs done him by the Greeks, and with innocence he is pouring out his feelings to these two Greeks who have suddenly populated his barren island.

**Involved** Taking the bait proffered by Odysseus' deception, Philoktetes gives way to an irresistible temptation to share attitudes with the confidential seeming—though far from unified—Greek pair who have entered his private space. He is tempted to take all they say at face value, and asks whether they too have been victims of the Greek forces at Troy 'Do you have a claim against the all-destroying House of Atreus,' he asks, wondering whether these two intruders might share some grudge against the same people who took no pity on a pariah bow holder? The play's audience, meanwhile, finds itself enraptured in the plot twists, as Neoptolemos increasingly finds himself siding with Philoktetes and not with Odysseus.

**Testing** By this point Philoktetes begins to intuit the attitude of Neoptolemos, and to turn his attention to the younger man. 'Courage, boy,' he says. 'Hold this bow. Then give it back to me, and proclaim to everyone that you alone could hold it...' This testful and boastful remark, perhaps meant to flush out the true intentions of the two visitors—and the play touches fine psychological implications here—awakens Odysseus' sense that it is time to act, to capture and abscond with bow and bowman. We find ourselves deep inside Philoktetes' mind, interpreting, testing, and self-protecting.

### **Discussion questions**

In the end Neoptolemos becomes the friend and savior of Philoktetes. Is Neoptolemos the ultimate protagonist in this play, or is it Philoktetes, the survivor and the 'holder of the secret of the bow'?

During his lengthy isolation, Philoktetes has inevitably grown close to the nature around him—sea, birds, animals. Do you see, in Sophocles' portrayal, a rare (for the Greeks) 'romantic' sentiment toward nature?

The modern reader is likely to view the Odysseus of this play in a bad light—scheming, manipulative. Have we any reason to doubt that this would have been the Greek view? Is Sophocles pro-Philoktetes and anti-Odysseus?