

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
PHILOCTETES

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Philoctetes (in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*) closed

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.

Character Neoptolemus 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 enwrapped 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?