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# NATURAL AND DIVINE ORDERS: THE POLITICS OF SOPHOCLES' PHILOCTETES

Ryan Drake<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** A closer look at the character of Odysseus in the opening passages of the *Philoctetes* reveals a more nuanced psychology of guilt and justification than commentators have thus far appreciated in the cunning hero's role. This paper examines the relations of sympathy (*oiktos*) between Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and Philoctetes as a way of entering into the complicated political drama of the work. Conceiving politics in the *Philoctetes* as a hybrid construction of the demands of nature (including the phenomenon of sympathy) and the demands of the gods, this study provides a reading of Sophocles' play as an observation of the necessity for political regimes to efface the very conditions of sympathy that made them possible in the first place. On this reading, Sophocles' tragedy is to be seen as an exploration of the damage incurred by individuals when such effacement takes place.<sup>2</sup>

As he recounts the terrible story of Philoctetes, Odysseus pauses abruptly to qualify his own role in that story by stating:

I tell you I had orders for what I did:  
my masters, the princes, bade me do it (6).<sup>3</sup>

In this qualification, Odysseus justifies his actions — namely, marooning the diseased archer on the uninhabited and barren isle of Lemnos nine years earlier — while at the same time, with the same words, he acknowledges the injustice entailed by his acts. Odysseus has been called back, under new orders, to fetch the man he had abandoned, and thus to face the broken human being Philoctetes has subsequently become. Odysseus, to be sure, has good reason to be defensive. 'I was under orders to do this' (τὰχθειςτὸδ' ἐπέειπ),<sup>4</sup> he tells Neoptolemus without solicitation, as if acknowledging a need to account for his part in Philoctetes' harsh fate. The double-sidedness of Odysseus' qualification — as both a defence and an admission of guilt — is made

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<sup>3</sup> Quotations used in this paper, unless otherwise noted, follow D. Grene's translation of the *Philoctetes* (Chicago, 1957). Other consulted translations include C. Mueller and A. Krajewska-Wieczorek's *Philoctetes* (Hanover, NH., 2000); S. Heaney's *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (New York, 1991); Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones' *Philoctetes* (Cambridge, MA., 1994), and C. Phillips' *Philoctetes* (Oxford, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Author's translation.

possible by the ambiguity within the concept of ordering (*tartem*) itself. Its dual senses of order, first as commandment or prescription, and second as being arranged, as having a place within a larger structure,<sup>5</sup> betray a culpability felt by Odysseus that cannot be escaped by appealing to the political authorization granted him by the Atridae. Despite being pressed for time, Odysseus is compelled to explain further, listing the various ill-effects that Philoctetes, in his noisy agony, had on his fellow men at the outset of their campaign. Beset by a lasting ulcer on his foot as the result of a serpent's bite,<sup>6</sup> Philoctetes wailed incessantly, interrupting religious tributes and threatening to infect the entire expedition to Troy with his misfortune. In giving this further reason, he hopes that the young Neoptolemus will understand that a military — and thus, a political<sup>7</sup> — sacrifice was called for,<sup>8</sup> and Odysseus knows from the outset that today a second political sacrifice must be offered to undo the first.

Whether his justifications are sufficient, Odysseus makes clear by his description of the shelter in which Philoctetes was left that a measure of care

<sup>5</sup> Liddell-Scott-Jones, s. v.

<sup>6</sup> It is not until later in the play (192–200) that Neoptolemus mentions what would already have been familiar to the audience through legend, namely that the snake was sent by the goddess Chryse. It was her shrine that Philoctetes inadvertently defiled by treading upon it during a brief island stop *en route* to Troy. As Charles Segal interprets it, 'The bite of Chryse's snake not only causes but prefigures abandonment on this desolate, alien shore: the hero encounters the full savagery of nature and of men'. *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Norman, OK., 1999), p. 309.

<sup>7</sup> Though the connection between a political constitution and a military body may not be immediately clear to more modern readers, warfare was taken to be one of the tasks of the *polis*, a dimension of its activity. Recall, in this connection, the early passages of Plato's *Timaeus*, for example, wherein Socrates expresses his desire to move beyond the static sketch of the city previously given in the *Republic*. Just as one might not be content with the painted images of beasts rendered by artists, but may wish to 'gaze upon them moving and contending in some struggle that seemed appropriate to their bodies', so too does Socrates yearn to look upon the city in like action: 'a full account of her struggling against other cities in those contests in which cities contend' (19b–c). While it would be a mistake simply to conflate the Achaean alliance with the civic structure of a single *polis*, its hierarchical system of order, rank, and interdependence reflects that of a political body, organized as it is around commonly recognized ends.

<sup>8</sup> Just how 'called for' the sacrifice of Philoctetes actually was, remains an open question for interpreters. B.M. Knox identifies him in no uncertain terms as the 'most outrageously wronged' of the Sophoclean heroes, whose 'comrades in arms who abandoned him had no excuse but the repugnance they felt for his sickness and their inability to stand his cries of agony'. *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley, CA., 1964), p. 117. Aristide Tessitore takes a more sympathetic view of the Achaeans complicit in marooning Philoctetes, maintaining that 'Despite the obvious injustice to Philoctetes, the Greek dilemma was a real one. Philoctetes' suffering must have been especially dispiriting to his fellow soldiers. Indeed, the inability to offer sacrifices and libations before going into battle may well have brought with it the risk of mutiny'. 'Justice, Politics, and Piety in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*', *The Review of Politics*, 65 (2003), pp. 61–88, 63–4.

and compassion were exercised in finding a serviceable home for the unlucky archer. Odysseus was able to find a two-mouthed cave that captures sun during the cold season and cool, soothing breezes during the summer (17–21). What is more, there is a fresh spring nearby, so that Philoctetes, with his foot bleeding black blood, will not have to drag himself far for refreshment. Within a single speech making up the first twenty five lines of Sophocles' work, Odysseus expresses an inescapable ambivalence grounded in political life: the formal demands made upon one — as part of — and for the sake of the social order, on the one hand, and the compassion that alternately grounds and threatens this order, on the other.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars of the *Philoctetes* have largely overlooked this subtle ambivalence on Odysseus' part in favour of reading Neoptolemus as the real, and often only, figure of internal struggle in the drama. Consequently, Odysseus' character has been all too easily interpreted in convenient opposition to that of the son of Achilles, who is caught between the demands of his own nature (*phusis*) and those of the larger political order, represented in the play by the Achaean army.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Ruth Scodel finds that 'for Odysseus time is a series of discrete moments which have no relation to one another', and further, that for him, 'there is no continuity of the self' as there must presumably be for one like Neoptolemus, who would not otherwise be so pained by self-contradiction.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Mary Blundell, despite her oft-quoted observation that '*Philoctetes* is the most ethically complex of all of Sophocles' plays', nonetheless takes a rather simplistic view of Odysseus as one who 'sees virtue only in terms of reputation, as potentially useful in a pragmatic sense'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, on such accounts, the Odysseus of the *Ajax*, who calms an enraged Agamemnon,

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet has observed that Odysseus does, in fact, speak of marooning Philoctetes as an exposure (Ποταροῦ υἱὸν ἐξέθηκ' ἐγὼ ποτὲ, 5), yet in the more technical sense of 'left in a place that is the opposite of the household enclosure or the cultivated land in the neighbourhood, and is instead the wild and distant countryside... above all it is the uncultivated land where the flocks and herds live, far from house, gardens, and fields — the alien and hostile space of the *agros*'. 'Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the *Eiphebia*', in J. Vernant and P. Vidal Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1988), pp. 161–79, 166. Thus, Odysseus' act of abandonment is not to be seen as that of exposing a child whose death is all but assured, but rather an act that is pregnant with hopes of the lone hero's survival, wretched though it may be.

<sup>10</sup> Josh Beer, for example, states: 'The ethical contrast between the two character types — the Achillean and the Odyssean — is as pronounced as in any extant tragedy. Whereas the Achillean model represents the traditional aristocratic ideal in which success is to be won by honourable means and deceit has no place, for Odysseus, success is an end to be achieved by whatever means are available'. *Sophocles and the Tragedy of Athenian Democracy* (Westport, CT., 2004), p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> R. Scodel, *Sophocles* (Boston, 1984), p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> M. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 184, 191.

along with Philoctetes and the bow given him by Heracles, would together bring down the walls of Troy. Though their mission is sanctioned by the plans of the gods, Odysseus must nonetheless be cautious about persuading Neoptolemus to proceed by trickery. He is aware that Neoptolemus is by nature opposed to deceit, and it is from this *phusis*, inherited from his father, that Neoptolemus derives his sense of honour.

The justifications that Odysseus gives to his young protégé have most often been taken by interpreters as a candid admission of Odysseus' own set of values, rather than as a means for appealing to Achilles' son.<sup>15</sup> Yet since Odysseus knows from the outset that Neoptolemus will have a difficult time with these orders, it is just as consistent with his own character that the famous tactician would advertise the advantages to be gained in following their mission, and also to either omit any of its unsavoury consequences or finesse the more obvious ones. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that they have a plan, a *sophisma* (14), to carry out, though what the young man does not know is that this *sophisma* will extend its reach to work back upon himself as well.

Odysseus, then, must tempt Neoptolemus with promises of 'pleasure in victory' (81) and also warn him that not carrying through with their plan will result in 'pain for all of the Argives' (67).<sup>16</sup> These appeals to *hedoné* and *lupé* are aimed directly at Neoptolemus' *phusis*, attacking his natural inclinations on their own ground, as it were. For, pleasure and pain are the very terms Aristotle uses in Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to explain Neoptolemus' motivations to return to his own nature later in the drama: it is due to the 'pain of telling a lie' (1146a18–22), as well as the 'pleasure of telling the truth' (1151b17–23) that the young man abandons his role in the artifice. It becomes evident, however, that Odysseus has not judged Neoptolemus adequately, and that the final measure of persuasion he offers the youngster, the promise of 'being hailed as a wise and good man' (119), is still not enough, in the end, to make Neoptolemus hold to his military orders.

Thus, in attempting to manipulate Neoptolemus' nature, Odysseus takes on the role of a salesman who believes in his own product; he must, in a familiar phrase, play the politician. This point of persuasion from which scholars draw their inferences about Odysseus' *ethos* in the tragedy is, when considered in light of the vulnerable and ambivalent Odysseus of its opening lines, less revealing of his true character.<sup>17</sup> As with much in Sophocles' drama, there is more reason to look indirectly for traces of character and belief than there is to

<sup>15</sup> Simon Goldhill makes a case for reading Odysseus' self-justifying claims as moving from self-preservation to personal profit, thus revealing his own shameless values. 'The Language of Tragedy: Rhetoric and Communication', in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P.E. Easterling (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 127–50.

<sup>16</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>17</sup> Hanna Roisman argues that in articulating his plan of ensnaring Philoctetes' soul, Odysseus must first ensnare the soul of Neoptolemus by asserting himself between the young man and the authoritative influence of his father's reputation, gaining the young

and who makes sympathetic pleas on Teucer's behalf, seems hardly recognizable in the *Philoctetes*.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the implications of casting Odysseus in this either sub-or super-human manner (that is, as either above or below conventional morality) extend also to the political interests that his character represents. Scodel straightforwardly identifies the Achaean army as thoroughly corrupt, which has the effect of setting Philoctetes' and Neoptolemus' exchanges within a larger context of an unnecessarily pernicious social order.<sup>14</sup> However, such easy characterizations of Odysseus or of the political dimension of the *Philoctetes* water down what I take to be an irresolvable tension within political life *tout court*, as Sophocles presents it in this work.

In what follows I would like first to present a reading of Odysseus and Neoptolemus not as opposed characters in the *Philoctetes*, but as individuals vulnerable in different ways to the same ineluctable demands of citizenship. Each is moved and conflicted by his hand in Philoctetes' fate, and given Odysseus' ambivalence at the opening, each must reckon with a loss of continuity, whether of self or within his community, or both. Here, human compassion (*oiktos*) and adherence to the political order, whose existence presupposes compassion, cannot come to any easy reconciliation. Secondly, I wish to show how, through the drama of *oiktos* between the savage Philoctetes and the Greeks, politics in Sophocles can be conceived as a complex mixture of two more fundamental orders exemplified in his tragedy — the orders of nature, on the one hand, and divinity, on the other. It is the way in which nature and the gods are portrayed in the *Philoctetes* that ultimately, in spite of the suspiciously tidy *deus ex machina* at the end, reveals political life as the realm in which tragic events inevitably reoccur.

Odysseus, as we have noted, supplements his less-than-convincing justification by way of an appeal to the compassion he exercised in finding suitable shelter for Philoctetes many years prior. Now, with Neoptolemus, Odysseus must carry out a second justification: he must convince the inexperienced warrior to deceive Philoctetes in order to bring the archer and his bow back with them to Troy. These orders are not merely descended from the will of Agamemnon and Menelaus, but are rooted in divine prophecy, as forced out of Helenus, Priam's kidnapped son; the latter proclaimed that Neoptolemus,

<sup>13</sup> Here we should note the parallel between Odysseus' role as mediator between Teucer and Agamemnon, on the one hand, and Neoptolemus' mediating role between Odysseus and Philoctetes, on the other: each forges a friendship in his role as diplomat, yet Neoptolemus' bond with Philoctetes results in a rift between themselves and the greater polity, while Odysseus' favour to Teucer allows the latter to re-join their martial alliance.

<sup>14</sup> Scodel, *Sophocles*, p. 96. Aside from regarding Odysseus as untroubled by ethical concerns — which I go on to discuss in further detail in this paper — Scodel offers little in the way of support for her claim that the social order of the Greek army is, in fact, a corrupt institution.

take a sly schemer such as Odysseus at his word, whether he is talking to purported friends or enemies.<sup>18</sup> By uttering such pithy maxims as, 'When one does something for gain, one need not blush' (111), and that a lie is not shameful if it 'brings salvation'<sup>19</sup> (109), Odysseus is convincing only to the extent that one overlooks how much is at stake in his actually seeming convincing to his cohort.<sup>20</sup> The victory of the Greeks rests upon the acting skills of Neoptolemus, and since the son of Achilles has such an antipathy toward acting, Odysseus must therefore be an even more convincing actor in arranging the necessary artifice.<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, there is a decisive difference between Odysseus and Neoptolemus, and this being that one can follow through as an actor, and the other can't.<sup>22</sup> Where Plato has Socrates proclaim in the *Republic* that the 'double-man', that is, the man who can act otherwise (and in an inferior mode)

man's trust, and manipulating his nature through competing models of emulation. 'The Appropriation of a Son: Sophocles' *Philoctetes*', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 38 (1997), pp. 127-71, 137-9. In short, the *sophisma* necessary for bringing Philoctetes to Troy requires a prior *sophisma* in order to be successful.

<sup>18</sup> A number of objections are anticipated in making this point, among them A. Maria Van Erp Taalman Kip's hermeneutic principle of restricting our interpretations of characters' intentions to what can reasonably be identified as deceptive or sincere within the explicitly written texts themselves. 'Truth in Tragedy: When are We Entitled to Doubt a Character's Words?', *American Journal of Philology*, 117 (1996), pp. 517-36, 523. As a mechanism for protecting certain literary texts from interpretive abuse, Kip's proposal is a sober one. Yet with respect to the *Philoctetes*, which explicitly and implicitly thematizes the concealment of intentions from others and the fundamental distrust of language, such a principle unduly constricts our reading and reduces complex characters like Odysseus to simple foils for the development of an assumed 'real conflict' between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.

<sup>19</sup> Author's alternative rendering to Grene's 'rescue' for *sōtēnai*.

<sup>20</sup> Note that Goldhill uses this very quotation to support the opposite case, namely, that Odysseus is being perhaps too honest in this circumstance. 'The Language of Tragedy', p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> A number of readers have called attention to the fact that acting and theatricality in general are at issue within the *Philoctetes*. Thomas Falkner undertakes one of the more extensive investigations of the play's 'metatheatrical' dimensions, including not only the 'play within a play' staged by Odysseus and carried out by Neoptolemus and the sailor-playing-merchant, but also Sophocles' implicit endorsement of theatre despite its corrupt usage upon the title character. 'Containing Tragedy: Rhetoric and Self-Representation in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*', *Classical Antiquity*, 17 (1998), pp. 25-58, 25-7. As well, the prevalence of artifice throughout the drama has occasioned others to contend that from the point of view of the audience, there is 'no clue to a "real" level of action'. D. Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* (London, 1982), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that Neoptolemus cannot — at least for a time — carry out his deceptive role more than competently. As Knox notes, it is hard to see how Philoctetes could have been more quickly and expertly ensnared'. *The Heroic Temper*, p. 129.

he thinks in order to entertain audiences, has no place in the *polis*,<sup>23</sup> Sophocles has Odysseus implicitly maintaining that such duplicity is at certain moments necessary for belonging to the *polis*. And in the *Philoctetes*, it is by no means clear that the social order is defective or outright unjust; in the present situation, its dictates are in accord with the path indicated by the gods in the form of prophecy.

Indeed, we have no signs that Neoptolemus regards the Achaean campaign as in any way unworthy of his investment, except when he resists, for a brief moment, the proposed *sophisma* of subterfuge. Yet to accept Aristotle's explanation of why Neoptolemus does not succeed in his appointed role — that is, out of pain or pleasure having to do with lying and truth-telling — is not to have grasped the entirety of what the young man must face.<sup>24</sup> Neoptolemus' audience is a single wretched and pitiful human being, not only for being left stranded friendless in isolation for nearly a decade, but also for being plagued the entire time by a debilitating disease that disfigures his soul in addition to his body. It is the soul (*psyche*) of this man that Neoptolemus is ordered to ensnare with his words, although Sophocles leaves it an open question whether 'man' is an entirely appropriate name for what Philoctetes has become (55-56). For Neoptolemus, the real difficulty in carrying through his artifice is that Philoctetes directly and persistently calls for compassion. And it is for this aspect of the plan that Odysseus did not calculate well enough.

How is it that Philoctetes provokes a form of sympathy from Neoptolemus? In the first place, Neoptolemus has already had a look at the archer's pally shelter and had been repelled by the horrid scent of Philoctetes' pus-soaked rags (38-9). As well, the chorus — Neoptolemus' company of soldiers — hears him emit a bitter cry even before he is seen (213-8). Thirdly, the pathetic delight that lonely Philoctetes takes in hearing the words of a fellow-tongue and of telling his own story of abandonment are together a trying force upon any listener's resistances. But lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it is the sheer power of repetition: Philoctetes is relentless in his pleas for *oiktos*. As much as he is pained by deviating from his own nature, Neoptolemus appears equally shaken by the plight of Philoctetes, who, in several ways, also embodies a force of nature.

This loose identification of Philoctetes with nature is shown first in the fact that he has been made to exist outside of any social body, any political organization. On his own, he does in a strange way embody a city of one — his abode contains primitively-shaped utensils, and he does make further use of the technical skills of survival by means of his bow and his re-creation of fire from the friction of flint. In addition, however, Philoctetes initially refers to

<sup>23</sup> *Republic*, 394c-398a.

<sup>24</sup> As R.P. Winnington-Ingram points out, 'if [Neoptolemus'] conscience is still not easy, he conducts his deceitful role with competence, if not zest'. *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 283.

himself as *apēgriōmenōn*, or wild, living in the wilderness (226).<sup>25</sup> And despite the fact that he utilizes his sacred bow for hunting, his affliction prohibits swift movement and commands enough of his attention to keep him more directed to the immediate concerns of living than the typical city-dweller who has the fruits of civilization at his or her disposal. As the chorus, in its collective sympathetic observation, notes, Philoctetes is 'bewildered and distraught at each need as it comes', and 'his thoughts are set continually on pain and hunger' (174, 185). Consumed by pain and the basic concerns of hunting and gathering, Philoctetes' savage life represents a stark contrast to the very idea of the *polis*, which operates according to rules that presuppose a distance or a reflective mediation from animal existence.

Here we should not miss the parallel with Odysseus' delegation of duties: in order to protect himself from any further ambivalence, any threat of compassion, he uses Neoptolemus as a mediating force between himself and the pitiful Philoctetes; in short, he shows himself once more to be skilfully political. Certainly, Odysseus must use the young man as a mediator, since their plan would be foiled once Philoctetes recognizes Odysseus. But this mediation has a second effect, namely, inoculating Odysseus against that aspect of nature most pronounced in the character of Philoctetes: the grotesque disease with which he is stricken. While this disease, visited upon him by the goddess Chryse as a punishment for treading over her abandoned temple on the way to Troy, does not seem physically communicable, the compassion that Philoctetes inspires in his audience does in fact seem to be infectious. The term '*oiktos*' for which Philoctetes repeatedly calls takes as its root '*oi'*'<sup>26</sup> that is, a characteristic Greek expression of woe.<sup>27</sup> '*Oiktos*', as compassion, carries within its very utterance a sense of communicating grief, or sharing in suffering as an essential prerequisite for comfort, understanding, or aid.<sup>28</sup> Philoctetes, in his suffering and desperation, attempts to inspire in Neoptolemus the same *pathos* to which the archer is subject, and to gain, as his desired form of aid, passage back to his homeland.

<sup>25</sup> Segal provides a thorough investigation of the significance of the isle of Lemnos in casting its lone inhabitant as savage or uncivilized. It was on this island that the myth of the Lemnian women (to whom Sophocles also dedicated a lost work) takes place, wherein the adult males of the island are slaughtered by their wives. *Tragedy and Civilization*, p. 307ff.

<sup>26</sup> LSJ, s. v.

<sup>27</sup> This root is also present in the exclamation '*oimoi*', uttered by Philoctetes upon learning the fates of Achilles and Nestor's son Antilochus, rendered alternately by Grene as 'Ah!' and 'O!' (332, 426). Cf. Falkner, 'Containing Tragedy', pp. 50-1.

<sup>28</sup> Note also that the chorus, upon hearing of Philoctetes' warped condition, already takes up — and in fact, emphasizes — the language of compassion, beginning its second strophe with the indicative '*oiktirō*' (170), and closing the anastrophe with '*oiktros*' (186).

It is this compassion that Odysseus avoids through the mediation of Neoptolemus, and to the extent that Philoctetes' suffering is communicable, it is, in light of its hindrance to political success, to be treated as an infectious disease. What Philoctetes' pleas aim at in Neoptolemus is both natural and social: they seek the young man's mimetic impulse, through which Neoptolemus intuitively experiences a kindred sorrow, and therefore a pathetic bond, with Philoctetes.<sup>29</sup> Philoctetes, at hearing that Achilles' son will take him away from the island, praises him and the chorus, calling them 'dear friends' and stating that they are now 'bound in friendship' (*ἐφ' ὅσῳ προσφιλῆ*)<sup>30</sup> (532). The significance of his proclamation is that due primarily to such compassion,<sup>31</sup> a new community seems to have been formed. According to versions of the Promethean myth such as that found in Plato's *Protagoras*, it is also the case that cities were formed on the basis of such bonds of friendship and mutual aid.<sup>32</sup> The natural impulse to mimic the pain or joy of another carries with it a political *telos*, a drive to mutual understanding and shared duties. Thus, the tragedy for both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes consists ultimately in the fact that the preservation of the *polis* demands at certain moments the deliberate undermining of its natural foundations.

The antagonism between nature and political order is played out most clearly through the soul of Neoptolemus; the stress of maintaining a role that requires him to deny both his own honest nature as well as the natural sympathy for a suffering fellow human leads him to abandon the cunning *sophismata*.<sup>33</sup> Yet this abandonment is more of a bitter compromise.

<sup>29</sup> The nature of this kindred *pathos* is deceptively complex. For it imbues Neoptolemus with feelings not unlike those by which the audience of Sophocles' production are stricken. As Aristotle observes in the *Poetics*, both pity and fear take hold of the audience members and carry out a 'cleansing' (*katharsis*) on the part of the spectators (1449b24-9). Neoptolemus, however, is both actor and spectator: his mimetic character causes within himself not only a crisis of self-representation, but also a confusion of what cleansing and pollution mean in the present circumstance.

<sup>30</sup> My translation, a slight emendation of Grene's 'You have bound me to your friendship' (533).

<sup>31</sup> An additional aspect of their bond — at least from Philoctetes' standpoint — has to do as well with having enemies in common, as Neoptolemus emphasizes with his inverted curse at 389: 'May he who hates the Atreidae be as dear in the Gods' sight as he is in mine.'

<sup>32</sup> *Protagoras* 320c-322d. Note, however, that Protagoras' version of the myth has Hermes, the god not only of communication but also trickery, deliver the elements of civic friendship to humans. This added detail complicates any straightforward reduction of friendship to either divine or natural bases. Observe in this connection Odysseus' appeal to Hermes, Victory, and Athena 'the city goddess' (134-5) for guidance once he has instructed Neoptolemus in their plan.

<sup>33</sup> As Malcolm Heath puts it, 'Neoptolemus was in reality acting as Philoctetes' enemy all along. But in sustaining this pretence of friendship Neoptolemus encounters and incurs genuine obligations towards Philoctetes'. 'Sophocles' *Philoctetes*: A Prob-

Neoptolemus confesses his trickery to Philoctetes, but only after he has taken the latter's sacred bow away from him, refusing, in the name of justice, to give it back (926–7). Upon receiving Philoctetes' wrathful curses — which are on display throughout the entire drama — Neoptolemus finds himself in utter perplexity, horrified by the sympathy infecting his resolve. 'A terrible compassion (ὀϊκτρος δεινός) has come upon me for him', he confesses, 'I have felt for him the entire time' (965). Neoptolemus experiences his compassion as terrible because it renders him helpless,<sup>34</sup> because it makes of him as well a creature deserving of pity.

If Philoctetes' suffering is contagious, it is therefore also fitting that he views the morality of political order in terms modelled upon disease. In attempting to talk Neoptolemus into returning his bow, Philoctetes attributes Neoptolemus' deceit to being infected by the influence of bad men, as if he had come down with a passing moral ailment (972). Yet with respect to the sons of Atreus, he treats their military regime as if it were consumed by a cancerous affliction from the very point that Agamemnon and Menelaus first committed deeds of injustice: 'It is not the sting of wrongs past but what I must look for in wrongs to come. Men whose wit has been mother of villainy once have learned from it to be evil in all things' (1357–60). For Philoctetes, then, *oiktros* is the treatment for political diseases that spread precisely through the system of commands and orders that come from on high. However, he has no interest in curing the Greeks with whom he first sailed on their campaign to Troy. His hatred for them, especially for Odysseus and the Atreidae, makes him unable to forgive or feel sympathy for them at all. As Odysseus rightly surmised from the beginning, Philoctetes could only be taken by craft, and not by persuasion. That Philoctetes has grown immune to the power of reason-giving, that he cannot re-evaluate his position, attests to his status as a savage, rather than as a political agent capable of compromise.<sup>35</sup> Like a wild

lem Play?', in *Sophocles Revisited: Essays Presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones*, ed. J. Griffin (Oxford, 1999), pp. 137–60, 149.

<sup>34</sup> The term that Neoptolemus uses for his condition, and which Philoctetes immediately repeats, is *'aporía'* (897–8), a state of perplexity or paralysis. In its usage here, we can already find resonances with that later, more overtly philosophical sense of the term in which Socrates' interlocutors are caught when they can no longer wield speeches to their advantage: Neoptolemus discovers the limit of his capacities as an actor (whether feigned or sincere) when he can no longer command his words once he has left behind his own nature (φύσιν ἁρτών) (902–3).

<sup>35</sup> Goldhill rightly sees this problem for Philoctetes, especially once he realizes that he has been duped: 'Once trust has been removed by false speech, what can be said to reconstitute faith in language? How can words put back together the contract shattered by the deceptiveness of language?' 'The Language of Tragedy', p. 144.

and dangerous animal — in fact, regarded as their quarry by Neoptolemus<sup>36</sup> — he can only be trapped into compliance.

While political life must seek to regulate, or even to deny, its natural roots in order to function — as Freud has amply demonstrated in the present age — Sophocles shows that there are limits to which such regulation is possible. Philoctetes, human representative of the natural order, maintains his resistance to political integration despite promises of glorious victory and the healing treatment of the Asclepiads at Troy. He also proves incapable of exercising upon Neoptolemus the very compassion he has demanded from the latter: he seeks an alliance that will not only alienate the son of Achilles from the rest of the Greeks, but will doom him to enmity with them. Though Neoptolemus, in his perplexity, is infected by the pity that threatens to reduce him to the rank of the pitiful, he does not seem to begrudge Philoctetes' inability to return this *pathos*. His apparently mature intuition presages Aristotle's insight that pity, involving as it does a fear that pain apparent on the part of others could possibly be visited upon oneself, cannot be given by those who have already been ruined, 'since the worst has befallen them already'.<sup>37</sup> From this perspective, Philoctetes' psychological intractability is to be attributed less to any flaw in his character than to the natural limitations of his circumstances. In the midst of his suffering, Philoctetes is, then, passive with respect to the foundational gesture of sympathy and dependent upon the favours of those in a superior condition for his transfer from the savagery of his wild existence back into communal life. The result for Neoptolemus; however, is that he finds himself, in the end, ready to sacrifice his honour among the Greeks and his safety for the sake of compassion and the bond with Philoctetes that has arisen from it.

It is little wonder that Philoctetes places the entire burden of guilt for his misfortune upon the shoulders of Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Odysseus; he sees his fate as the result of decisions made by evil men, rather than as a small part in a much larger order of events. The pain of betrayal, intermingled with his unremitting physical pain, has so shaped his view of causes and agency that at best he forsakes the gods, and at worst he is downright blasphemous. 'How can I reckon the score', he asks, 'how can I praise, when praising heaven I find that the Gods are bad?' (451–2). The gods, in Philoctetes' view, award the deceitful with good fortune,<sup>38</sup> while remaining deaf to the plight of the innocent, such as he takes himself to be. Yet Philoctetes attempts to

<sup>36</sup> For an extended development of the theme of hunting in *Philoctetes*, see Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, pp. 300–3.

<sup>37</sup> *Rhetoric* (1385b19–21). Note that Aristotle here does not use the term *'oiktros'*, but *'eleos'*, whose meaning I take to be roughly synonymous with the former.

<sup>38</sup> Recall that Philoctetes is incensed to hear that the insolent, wisecracking Thersites — according to Homer, 'the ugliest man who ever came to Troy' (*Iliad*, 2.246ff.) — is still alive (442). An irony here is that Philoctetes unknowingly shares an enemy in com-



'reckon the score', as he says, from a standpoint of strictly human justice, and thus conceives of political developments as thoroughly human creations, where the corrupted souls of men infect the souls of others.

Philoctetes' inability to see any further than the limits of the political regime that placed him upon Lemnos brings censure upon him first from the chorus of Neoptolemus' attendants: 'It was the will of the gods that has subdued you, no craft to which my hand was lent. Turn your hate, your ill-omened curses elsewhere' (1119-20). But secondly, even though Neoptolemus has gradually come under Philoctetes' sway, he reproaches the archer forcefully:

The fortunes that the gods give to us men we must bear under necessity. But men that cling wilfully to their sufferings as you do, no one may forgive or pity. Your anger has made a savage of you. You will not accept advice, although the friend advises in pure goodheartedness ... Mark it, Philoctetes, write it in your mind. You are sick and the pain of the sickness is of God's sending ... (1316-26).

Despite his resolution to help Philoctetes and thus to deny victory to the Achaeans, we see that Neoptolemus does not escape the same sort of ambivalence and regret that Odysseus had betrayed at the opening of the drama. Where Odysseus long ago chose to follow his given orders, here Neoptolemus takes the opposite course, and experiences nonetheless the anxiety, the dis-ease of his own plight.<sup>39</sup> For Neoptolemus, siding for or against Philoctetes is not siding for or against political orders as such, in holding to his agreement of friendship with the stubborn old warrior, he has simply founded a new community, a new *polis* in miniature, with its own potential interests and conflicts.<sup>40</sup> Yet Neoptolemus has come to understand that guilt is not to be avoided, whether it has to do with adherence to natural or political orders; furthermore, keeping to divine orders and the obscure justice of the gods appears to be more a matter of fortune than of human judgment.

mon with Odysseus, who gave Thersites a sound beating for his ridicule of Agamemnon (*Iliad*, 2.282ff.).

<sup>39</sup> Will finds that Neoptolemus' 'desire for unity ... is frustrated by the continuing refusal of Philoctetes to return to Troy'. F. Will, *The Generic Demands of Greek Literature* (Amsterdam, 1976), p. 15. A hard-learned lesson for Neoptolemus here is that the nobility after which he strives is not dependent wholly upon keeping to his nature; in fact, it is dependent to large extent upon the actions and imperatives of others.

<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, Vidal-Naquet argues that their pact to return Philoctetes home amounts not to re-creating another community, but instead 'changing to another Lemnos'. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the *Ephēbeia*, p. 173. The fact that the Achaeans would certainly come for them and decimate their lands (1404) means that they can at best look forward to lives carried out in another barren wilderness.

Thus, the *deus ex machina*, the brief appearance of Heracles, who had originally given Philoctetes his sacred bow as a gesture of friendship,<sup>41</sup> to Neoptolemus and Philoctetes at the play's end, accomplishes at best a qualified good for these men. Only the commandment of Zeus, relayed through Heracles, is enough to sway the stubbornness of Philoctetes and convince him to fulfil his destiny at Troy of his own will.<sup>42</sup> Heracles allows Philoctetes to rise above his natural, savage state in order to recognize the authority of the gods, and in so doing, also allows him to re-join the political order out of which he had been cast. Philoctetes heeds his divine orders at once, which include forging a friendship with Neoptolemus, but also paying sacred tribute to Heracles himself once the task of conquering the Trojans has been completed. 'Remember this', Heracles proclaims, 'when you shall come to sack that town, keep holy in the sight of God. All else our father Zeus thinks of less moment. Holiness (*eusebeia*) does not die with the men that die. Whether they die or live, it cannot perish' (1440-4). The prophecy of Helenus, looming in the background of the drama, now finds its sanction for Philoctetes and Neoptolemus through the words of the hero's apparition, words that for Philoctetes can finally be accepted without suspicion or mistrust. Zeus' plan, incontrovertible, has come to light through Heracles' *muthos*, wherein Philoctetes can readily assume his own designated part.

The divine orders<sup>43</sup> of Heracles relieve Philoctetes from his inertia of will, but also work as a treatment upon his soul; he can participate once more in the mutual exchange of favours out of which friendship issues, and this he pledges to do with Neoptolemus. Yet we receive no indication of his status with respect to Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus, whom Philoctetes has cursed for the past lonely decade, and for whose suffering he has insistently

<sup>41</sup> 670, 'It was for ... friendly help I myself first won it' (εὐφραγῶν γὰρ καὶ τὸς αὐτὸς ἐκτίσάμην).

<sup>42</sup> Some scholars have questioned whether Heracles' command could possibly leave any room for genuine choice on Philoctetes' part. Oscar Mandel raises the sharpest objection thus: 'When a god says "Go", men go. God dissolves the human will.' *Philoctetes and the Fall of Troy* (Lincoln, NE., 1981), p. 111. While the gods do have an unmistakable share of authority over human actions, it makes little sense in the context of this drama in particular to efface Philoctetes' agency with the orders of Heracles. The significance of Philoctetes' bow as a sign of friendship derives from Philoctetes' willingness to obey Heracles' funereal wishes; the archer has earned his bow precisely because he had the options of carrying out or denying those wishes. Had Philoctetes no choice in the matter, his act of lighting Heracles' pyre and sending the dead hero heavenward would hardly be an act of service or friendship; rather, it would be compelled action. Likewise, it is 'in memory of my bow', Heracles says, that a share of the spoils of their coming victory at Troy are to be dedicated to him, as both a holy ritual and as a testament to the friendship that gods encourage among humans (1431-2).

<sup>43</sup> Falkner highlights the fact that Heracles calls his own speech not a *logos*, but a *muthos* ('Containing Tragedy', p. 49), and this distinction appears fitting, given that all other attempts at persuasion through *logos* have failed to urge Philoctetes back to Troy.

prayed. It is doubtful that he will ever be able to fully make peace with the knowledge that he had become a political sacrifice for these men. Likewise, Neoptolemus must come to grips with the fact that he has, if only for a brief period of time, betrayed the Achaean campaign for the sake of his own nature. Thus is Heracles' solution to the impasse between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes only a qualified good: it allows the political mission to go forward, allows both men to achieve success and glory in defeating Troy, but it does not erase either man's agony.<sup>44</sup> Each is destined to take his place in the social order, and each will proceed as a saved, yet damaged human.

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<sup>44</sup> As Tessitore rightly observes, Heracles' command actually 'sharpen[s] the conflict between Odysseus and Philoctetes inasmuch as neither character is made to capitulate to the other ... [q]uestions raised in the course of the play persist, as does the fundamental antagonism that animates the drama's two main rivals': 'Justice, Politics, and Piety', pp. 82-3.