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Speaking for Himself: Odysseus and Rhetoric in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Speaking for Himself: Odysseus and Rhetoric in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

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In order to reconcile the *deus ex machina* at the end of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* with the actions of the rest of the play, this project analyzes the role of Odysseus within the play with special attention to rhetoric. By considering the character of Odysseus as a complex construct referencing both literary and historical contexts, this study suggests that Neoptolemus in fact errs in siding with Philoctetes to the degree that he does by the tragedy's end. The themes of the play involving Philoctetes and Neoptolemus then become warnings against inappropriate emotional responses, again consistent with Heracles' advice in the *deus ex machina* at the play's end.

Keywords: Sophocles, Philoctetes, Odysseus, Neoptolemus, character, rhetoric, pity

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Introduction

Performance of Athenian tragedy was fundamentally persuasive. Tragedians competed for their pieces to be produced and then for first prize, especially at the City Dionysia. But the judges chosen by lot were not the only attendees to be persuaded; other Athenian men made up a large part of the audience, and women and foreigners were also welcome. Thus, when analysis turns to what a tragedian meant to communicate to an audience and what an audience might have thought of a tragedy, a new set of problems arises. To which portion of those in attendance was a tragedian appealing? Certainly some rhetorical strategies would have had more effect on male citizens in the audience with actual experience in the assembly and the law courts. Similarly, how well would a foreigner have known the current issues in Athenian politics? If one reads a playwright's comment on contemporary society into tragic performance, does this become a limitation on the tragedy's broad appeal? And what of a tragedian's use of myth? Was there always enough widespread knowledge of characters' backstories to allow plays to jump into the middle of a larger tale without leaving the audience in need of context? A safe approach to these questions is the assumption that the more an audience member knew of myth, politics, rhetoric, the more that person could enjoy the presentation. After all, the value of rewarding or manipulating audience expectations is still a worthwhile element in today's discussion of art and genre. Indeed, Sophocles was famously successful in the estimation of the judges at the City Dionysia, but then he is conspicuously absent in the competition scene between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Thus, the question of who made up the audience to which the tragedians of the fifth century BCE could appeal renders discussion of the original meaning of ancient tragedy, on both the creation and reception ends of the spectrum, an especially difficult one.

Nevertheless, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* offers a unique opportunity to the scholar interested in Classical Athenian art and society. As a late tragedy from Sophocles, *Philoctetes* allows one to analyze how changes in the tragedian's themes correspond with the massive political shifts in Athens over the course of the fifth century BCE. Classicists are certainly justified in reading into the works of Sophocles, a well-known public figure and key player in Athens' complicated political scene, commentary on the times and morals for the audience in attendance at the city's Great Dionysia. *Philoctetes*, with all of its concern for the proper means of affecting the best possible outcome as well as the presence of warriors engaged in activities beyond the war at hand, undoubtedly offered all sorts of advice for an Athenian population so recently out from under the control of a Spartan-backed oligarchy and now busy with picking up the pieces of the Athens that was.

In addition, the content of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* presents a unique opportunity not only to analyze one tragedian's spin on a famous story but also to compare this treatment to those of other tragedians. In the 52nd oration of Dio Chrysostom survives a comparison of some of the main points of the tragic versions of the Philoctetes myth presented by Aeschylus and Euripides, in addition to Sophocles. This ancient account is rewarding in its own right for its value in understanding what would have been appealing about tragedy, especially on a poetic level, to ancient audiences and critics. But in this case, the discussion of the transmission of characters, including the several tragedians' usage of Homeric precedents for Odysseus' character, helps modern critics to make judgments regarding Sophocles' motivations for using characters in the way that he does and with what results. For example, Sophocles' decision to introduce Neoptolemus as a liaison between Odysseus and Philoctetes, beyond simply retroactively correcting his predecessors' device of rendering Odysseus unrecognizable to Philoctetes, holds

serious implications for the complex rhetorical scene to emerge by the end of the play. The fact that a problem – logically created by the actions of the characters within the tragedy mostly acting against Odysseus’ means and goal – can only be solved by the only *deus ex machina* in extant Sophocles demands specific attention.

The inclusion of Odysseus as a character in Sophocles’ version is certainly consistent with other treatments of the myth; but as a relatively rare character in extant tragedy – appearing as a speaking character only in Sophocles’ *Ajax* and Euripides’ *Hecuba* – this play once more offers the chance to see what the genre and its artists have done with Homer’s epic constructions. The questions of how Sophocles alters or adheres to the Homeric Odysseus and to what effect are worthwhile in the contexts of each of the genres at hand in addition to larger considerations of what occurs in the transmission and reception of literature in general. Once more, this is an Odysseus somewhat outside of the Trojan War; like his character in the *Odyssey*, the war informs Odysseus’ worldview and the decisions he makes as a result, yet there exists a certain separation. The Greeks are still at Troy, but Odysseus’ actions at Lemnos are the ones moving the war closer to what has been prophesied must happen in order for the Greeks to emerge victorious from the lengthy campaign. Perhaps consistent with what a seasoned reader might come to expect from Greek authors, so many of the tales surrounding the Trojan War deal with Greeks in conflict with other Greeks rather than the physical combat between Trojans and Greeks. As *Philoctetes* illustrates, victory at Troy requires much more than Greek military superiority; gods, with their moral requirements, get involved in ways that many of the heroes fail to anticipate.

Odysseus’ role in *Philoctetes*, in a sense, represents the genesis of this project. Two pieces of recent scholarship on the play by Sophocles are particularly perpendicular on the

subject of Odysseus.¹ On the one hand, Austin insists on a strong religious interpretation of the play, beginning with Odysseus' early claim that Philoctetes' exclamations of pain interrupted the Greek expedition's worship while on Lemnos, and that this incompatibility as the reason for Philoctetes' abandonment informs the reader to seek meaning in an especially theological context. Furthermore, Austin adopts a very strong stance against Odysseus, claiming that the main conflict of the tragedy is Neoptolemus' decision either to side with Odysseus' sophistry or to learn the value of pity under Philoctetes. Roisman, on the other hand, puts forth an interpretation that places Odysseus himself in a more central position relative to the action of the play. In her eyes, Odysseus' appeals and methods betray complexities in the situation at Lemnos that have gone largely unrecognized in scholarship on the play but allow for a much more sympathetic attitude toward the character. Particularly in-line with this project's findings is Roisman's assertion that Odysseus ultimately emerges "as prescient, practical, and motivated as much by common interests as personal ones", for he "is nowhere presented as corrupted or self-serving."² Regrettably, she also espouses the opinion that Heracles *ex machina* at the play's end is actually Odysseus in disguise. This dramaturgically problematic opinion has been picked up at least as recently as 2007 in Meineck and Woodruff's popular translations for Hackett, and as such demands some additional attention for what it might mean to a holistic analysis of Odysseus' character by the end of the fifth century BCE.

Thus, this analysis of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* focuses on Odysseus and what this specific usage of his character contributes to interpretation of the tragedy. By viewing Odysseus in this manner, one begins to see some of the more common readings of this play as insufficient; the

¹ These are, in order of their presentation here, Norman Austin's *Sophocles' Philoctetes and the Great Soul Robbery*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011) and Hanna M. Roisman's *Sophocles: Philoctetes* (London: Duckworth, 2005).

² *Sophocles: Philoctetes*, 75.

character of Odysseus highlights the shortcomings in Neoptolemus' actions within the play that ultimately lead to Heracles' correction at the tragedy's end. In conjunction with this, the historical, literary, and rhetorical contexts of Sophocles' time period all receive attention in this attempt at better understanding how Odysseus would have appeared to his Athenian audience. Performing a close reading of the tragedy with a specific eye for the rhetoric of what others have to say about Odysseus and how it compares to what he himself says allows one to anticipate some of what occurs within the text as well as to see the play as in dialogue with what those in attendance could have thought of Odysseus by this time in Greek literary history. The Odysseus that emerges is a layered construct demanding reconciliation with popular interpretation of the *Philoctetes*, and therefore requiring resolution with the character as he appears throughout literature as well.

As mentioned above, there are apparent disagreements even today on the overall meaning of the tragedy but especially on how Odysseus contributes to this meaning. The character of Neoptolemus, again an inclusion unique to Sophocles' tragic depiction of this myth, has received significant scholarly attention of late. His immediate objections to Odysseus' suggestions in the prologue originate in his understanding of *phusis* and his absent father. While this conflict anticipates the young man's lengthy struggle in choosing between Odysseus and Philoctetes, scholars have been surprisingly dismissive of the rhetorical points made by Odysseus to which Neoptolemus is reacting. Similarly, Odysseus' occasional appearances throughout the play offer insight into what he thinks he must say that Neoptolemus cannot; once more, rhetoric seems to be the key to understanding Odysseus' role in the play. By providing his characters with specific rhetoric, Sophocles also allows for interpretation beyond just what he as a tragedian is saying. The rhetoric of his characters would have fallen on ears accustomed to many styles and even

competing schools in late Classical Athens. In accordance with this, some scholars have casually dismissed Odysseus as a Sophist, an assertion that demands qualification both in regards to its validity and its implications. With the Athenian audience in mind, one must consider whether Sophocles intended or at least allowed for the possibility of this interpretation of Odysseus' character, as well as what a Sophist would have meant by the end of the fifth century BCE.

Again, one must not assume that Odysseus is always sympathetic or that he is necessarily more sympathetic in epic than in tragedy. Characters in tragedy were borrowed from epic in a way that allowed for minimal stage time to be wasted on context. Odysseus just seems to have carried more options with him, and this makes some assumptions about his character more informed by other depictions. In general, one embarks on a complicated task when asserting what Odysseus would have essentially meant as a character in a given play. But it is this very complexity that Sophocles uses in *Philoctetes*, setting up multiple Odysseus characters in layered narratives, and the ultimate character to emerge by the play's end is made that much more rewarding for those who have taken the effort to keep track.

Others Speaking of Odysseus

The presence of a gap between what Odysseus says and does in *Philoctetes* and what others attribute to him has several implications for rhetorical analysis of the tragedy. First, it raises epistemological questions regarding sources and their biases. Odysseus states his motivations quite clearly on multiple occasions within the text; the same cannot always be said of those with whom he is at odds. Neoptolemus' comments to Philoctetes regarding Odysseus form the basis of their manipulation of the archer and yield some worrisome reactions on the subject from Philoctetes himself. In addition, such a gap is not without precedent in Sophoclean tragedy and becomes an even more interesting feature when considered in the context of Homeric and other tragic depictions of Odysseus. The characters who go too far in vilifying Odysseus, namely Ajax and Philoctetes, find themselves in a similar situation relative to the gods and the Greek expedition at Troy, once more allowing earlier works to open up new possibilities of interpretation as far as this usage of Odysseus' character. This paper, in considering the overall depiction character of Odysseus prior to and featured in the presentation of *Philoctetes* at the City Dionysia in 409 BCE, will argue for the existence of an archetypal Odysseus character used effectively in contrast to the character that appears when Odysseus can speak for himself.

It is at Odysseus' suggestion in the prologue that Neoptolemus prepares to speak to Philoctetes as if offended by this imaginary Odysseus. As soon as the plan is revealed to Neoptolemus, namely that the young warrior do the speaking, Odysseus offers himself as the link for Neoptolemus to establish with Philoctetes. Odysseus suggests a scenario in which Neoptolemus was offended by the decision regarding Achilles' arms, bringing in all the emotion of Ajax' famous reaction to the real decision for Neoptolemus – and the audience – to access in the scene to come with Philoctetes. In this sense, Odysseus is rhetorically present throughout the

first episode while Neoptolemus ensnares Philoctetes; the ideas therein belong to Odysseus and the elaborate story employed by Neoptolemus features Odysseus as the main antagonist.

Odysseus, by this suggestion, shows awareness of how others speak of him in his absence. He uses the accusation that he is only out for trickery, willing to sign up for every malicious campaign, in order to align Neoptolemus with what Philoctetes must think of the lord of Ithaca. Thus, the first Odysseus distinct from the Odysseus who speaks and acts for comes at son of Laertes' own orders and sets up the importance of this distinction to balanced interpretation of the hero's role within the play.

After meeting and briefly listening to Neoptolemus, it does not take long for Philoctetes to go from rejoicing at his reunion with fellow Greeks to complaining against Odysseus. Not knowing the proximity of his enemy, the ruse begrudgingly agreed to by Neoptolemus having already been put in practice, Philoctetes rails against the Κεφαλλήνων ἄναξ (264) as one of the three men responsible for his abandonment, the story of which Neoptolemus claims to have never heard. This last point is of particular rhetorical importance, as Philoctetes' readiness to mention Odysseus by name – which the archer proceeds to do in line 314 before going on to wish the horrors of his own fate on the Ithacan lord and the sons of Atreus – proves Odysseus correct already. Philoctetes' grudge against those who abandoned him is what requires Neoptolemus to be the speaker and to speak in such a way that Philoctetes boards their ship under false pretenses. Sophocles masters this bit of implicit rhetoric, providing both Neoptolemus and readers the opportunity to remember what is at stake and why force and persuasion will not work in this instance. By mentioning Odysseus even before Neoptolemus can launch into the prearranged narrative, Philoctetes hands the son of Achilles an easy transition by which to begin establishing credibility with his audience of one. There is a common tale of loss

of *timē* – the younger’s tangible, the elder’s intangible – at the hands of the same men, Greeks victimized by Greeks. Still working within his *phusis* as the offspring of a noble warrior, Neoptolemus relates that his own experience has confirmed Philoctetes’, namely that Odysseus and the sons of Atreus are evil men (321-322). Neoptolemus then proceeds to tell Philoctetes, eager for news of his friends with whom he sailed for Troy nearly ten years prior, a story whose details are all suspect to the audience but nevertheless convincing in their familiarity. True or not, the involvement of Odysseus in the story, both as its co-author and as a player therein, makes it relevant to the trickster’s characterization within the play and invites comparison with other works.

The youth claims that δῖός τ’ Ὀδυσσεὺς (344) was one of the Greeks who guided him to Troy after Achilles’ death, and yet once the mourning period had passed, Odysseus refused to give up the arms of Achilles to Neoptolemus. This deliberately negative depiction seems to emphasize Odysseus’ opportunism, willing to say whatever it took to get Neoptolemus to Troy, namely that it was not lawful for anyone but the son of Achilles to take the Trojan citadel (346-347). Neoptolemus, motivated by his own desire for honor and glory, would surely pursue this sure chance to play an indispensable role in the Greek campaign against Troy. But with his own honor threatened, the possibility of driving Neoptolemus back to Scyros by his own stubbornness was of no concern to Odysseus. Again, there is a divide here between the real Odysseus and the one used by others speaking in his absence. Few would argue against the opinion that Odysseus is indeed out for himself in nearly all of the stories preserved from antiquity.³ Odysseus himself admits as much in *Philoctetes*, declaring νικᾶν γε μέντοι πανταχοῦ χρήζων ἔφυν (1052). But victory for Odysseus does not mean defeat for everyone else. On this particular mission,

³ His role in *Ajax*, from his initial horror at Athena’s punishment of the son of Telamon to his unsolicited defense of Ajax’ right to a proper funeral, may be the closest to an exception that ancient Greek literature permits.

Odysseus' victory is bundled up with the success of the Greeks and the fated destruction of Troy. Agamemnon himself confirms this fact in the *Iliad* after attempting to motivate Odysseus with a bit too much criticism in the heat of battle. By way of reconciliation, the leader of the Greek expedition at Troy offers this analysis of Odysseus' character: [οἶδα γὰρ ὡς τοι θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλοισιν / ἤπια δήνεα οἶδε: τὰ γὰρ φρονέεις ἅ τ' ἐγὼ περ](#) (4.360-361). Though occasionally divided in such scenes regarding how best to motivate the united Greek forces on the battlefield, Odysseus is the supreme champion of Agamemnon's cause at Troy. He is the emissary chosen to deliver Agamemnon's message to Achilles in Book IX, and the warrior chosen with Diomedes to seek alternate means of forcing the Trojans away from the ships in Book X. Odysseus, once convinced that the Greek campaign at Troy is an unprecedented opportunity for individual gain in-line with the Homeric code of achievement, does his utmost to further this cause. He knows that his best chances lie in battling the doomed Trojans, and this in accordance with the decrees of the immortal gods so often present to affect the tide of battle. Thus, keeping Neoptolemus at Troy would have been the top priority for the Homeric Odysseus armed with his unique gift for foreseeing the benefit for himself in every situation.

Neoptolemus has more to say about the invented Odysseus in the embellished scene back on the Trojan plain. When the Atreidae informed Neoptolemus of the fate of Achilles' arms, Odysseus was present to defend himself as the savior of Achilles' body and therefore the proper recipient of the champion's arms (371-373). Again, Odysseus speaks and gets his way. For Philoctetes, this is yet another illustration of the sons of Atreus unjustly favoring the son of Laertes; for an audience who has just heard the prologue, this is a continuation of the tradition already present in this tragedy. Odysseus has just won an *agon* within the context of the play, the results of which are playing out in this very scene. Whether there is any element of truth to the

story carefully framed to win Philoctetes' alliance, Neoptolemus is relating the tale as someone who has indeed just been won over by Odysseus. Relating the emotional end to his own sympathetic narrative, the son of Achilles shares with Philoctetes the heated exchange between the Neoptolemus and Odysseus of the tale that ends with Neoptolemus' departure from Troy for home. This brings Neoptolemus back to the time of the play, encountering a fellow victim of the injustices of the Greek leaders at Troy in an ostensibly fortunate turn of events for both characters.

It is at this point that Neoptolemus says of himself: τῶν ἐμῶν τηρώμενος / πρὸς τοῦ κακίστου κακῶν Ὀδυσσέως (383-384). This bitter declaration lashes out not only at Odysseus but also at his parentage, again providing a chance for Philoctetes to solidify his alliance with the son of his old friend Achilles, the parent whom the archer has already praised by this point as a most beloved father (242) and noble (336). The combination of these various choices in dialogue underscores the fact that Philoctetes' early liking for Neoptolemus is a direct result of the youth's birth, his *phusis* in its most primitive meaning. Some mark this as the beginning of Neoptolemus' realization that being true to his nature will require him to side with Philoctetes instead of with Odysseus. The argument that Neoptolemus' consideration of his own *phusis*, brought to his mind "where Odysseus induce[s] Achilles' son to dismiss the instinctive promptings of his *phusis*" while "Philoctetes is exhorting him to obey them by avoiding something 'shameful'",⁴ fails to recognize the gap between the Achilles that Philoctetes knew and the Achilles of the *Iliad*. It is true that Neoptolemus' father explicitly announces his contempt for double-dealing men in 9.312-313, but Achilles is also hardly the embodiment of achievement in the council. He suffers injustice at Agamemnon's hands as a direct result of

⁴ Mary W. Blundell, "The *Phusis* of Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *Greece & Rome* 35 (1988), 139.

being too ready to correct his superiors with strong language and even violence. Agamemnon chooses Briseis not because Achilles did not deserve her, but because he is the best choice in order to make an example of what happens to loudmouthed subordinates. Philoctetes knew nothing of this Achilles, whose final identification with Priam's plight is an extension of the important moral understanding that one can anticipate the effect of one's actions on a victim through sympathy. In this sense, "Neoptolemus' inborn nature (*phusis*), inherited from his father Achilles, a man of deeds rather than words"⁵ might actually be contributing to his inability to assess the situation at Lemnos properly, if he has inherited his father's quick temper in addition to his willingness to use force.

Regardless of what is going on in Neoptolemus' mind at this point, Philoctetes declares himself a believer, acknowledging Neoptolemus' description as consistent with what he knows the sons of Atreus and Odysseus to be capable of doing (405-406). Philoctetes, in sympathy with Neoptolemus, elaborates but exaggerates: ἔξοιδα γάρ νιν παντὸς ἄν λόγου κακοῦ / γλώσση θιγόντα καὶ πανουργίας, ἀφ' ἧς / μηδὲν δίκαιον ἐς τέλος μέλλοι ποεῖν (407-409). This utterance betrays the possibility of a shift in the direction of the narrative. Up to this point, Philoctetes has spoken the truth regarding the circumstances of his abandonment and isolation. His intermingled oaths of vengeance and curses against those responsible for his abandonment are understandable. But with this statement he goes beyond the realm of his personal experience and paints a portrait of an Odysseus far removed even from the reality of Philoctetes' own experience. Now Odysseus is nothing but contemptible, setting his skills to whatever is evil and unscrupulous, capable of bringing about nothing just. Anyone familiar with existing depictions of Odysseus will recognize – and would have recognized – this as hyperbole. Even in Euripides' *Hecuba*, Odysseus' only

⁵ Hanna M. Roisman, "The Appropriation of a Son: Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 38, no. 2 (1997), 130.

attempt to defend his decision to decline Hecuba's tearful pleas to intervene and spare Polyxena is to identify himself as first and foremost a part of the Greek cause. In a fashion very similar to the Odysseus speaking to Agamemnon at the end of *Ajax*, Odysseus offers the following counsel to Hecuba as preface to his response to her supplication: διδάσκου, μηδὲ τῷ θυμοθμένῳ / τὸν εἶ λέγοντα δυσμενῆ ποιοῦ φρενός (299-300). Odysseus does not decline to agree out of spite or even self-interest at the expense of others. Achilles' ghost demands a sacrifice or the Greeks cannot sail home from Thrace. Odysseus knows all too well what Hecuba has suffered up to this point, but to yield to her here would literally render the Greek expedition undone from within, not to mention the setting of a precedent supremely worrying to Odysseus, that of refusing to honor Greek heroes after death. Not even in this, arguably the most unsympathetic tragic or epic depiction of Odysseus, set in contrast to an absolutely despondent and sympathetically developed Hecuba, is the son of Laertes guilty of simply choosing evil for evil's sake as Philoctetes here declares.

Perhaps most alarming within the text is what this declaration suggests of Philoctetes' mental state. This hyperbole can be seen as yet another symptom of Philoctetes' too-long removal from society. With no one to supply him with other possibilities regarding the nature of those behind his abandonment on Lemnos, Philoctetes has had nearly a decade to formulate personal opinions without the benefit of dialogue or further experience. In reality, the decision to abandon Philoctetes had everything to do with the constraints of a particular situation and very little to do with any intentional malice on the part of Odysseus, Agamemnon, or Menelaus. This functions as an early clue that the abandoned archer cannot be trusted as a reliable or even rational voice in the tragedy; the unsatisfactory plan formulated in the exodos prevented only by Heracles' ultimate intervention absolutely proves this. Once more, the rhetorical value of this

scene is underscored by the presence of Odysseus as a mere archetype, the scheming Greek with the constant support of the Greek leaders and the most important gods in favor of the campaign against Troy. Neoptolemus has presented a constructed Odysseus as part of a plan proposed by the real Odysseus, and now Philoctetes shows just what he himself is capable of believing. Once more with relatively little prompting from Neoptolemus, Philoctetes proves himself ready to rail against Odysseus, regarding whom the archer has no proof of personal ill-will. The relevant exchange comes to a close after a few lamentations that Odysseus lives while so many good men have perished (416-418, 428-430), and Philoctetes and Neoptolemus move on to their plans to leave Lemnos together.

With this first example of characters speaking about Odysseus in his absence in place, it is fitting to expand on the notion that there seems to be much more agreement between descriptions of Odysseus in tragic works than there is between the actual actions of Odysseus' characters. It is well within the rights of the tragedian to provide only the most tenuous link between characters of the same name and background featured in different tragedies; favoring one tradition over another allows for new possibilities for emotion-filled drama in a competition where entertainment is at worst the second priority.⁶ But to use the same speaking character repeatedly and then have other characters discuss their own view of that person begs for analysis. A character can cease to be simply a vehicle for dialogue and begin to push readers toward parallels in their own lives and experience. Again, with a focus on the presence of rhetoric within these tragedies, Sophocles' precedent of having Odysseus' critics be so distant from the portrayed actions of the lord of Ithaca deserves more recognition than it receives.

⁶ Euripides' *Helen* focuses on an entirely separate variation of the Trojan War where Helen was not to be found at Troy at all; the opportunity for a double recognition scene between Menelaus and Helen, as well as their tension-filled escape from Egypt, is justification enough for the tale's adaptation to tragedy.

For example, Ajax slanders Odysseus repeatedly throughout the first half of the son of Telamon's eponymous tragedy, when in reality Odysseus' character in that play is particularly docile. Ajax refers to Odysseus as devious and a hateful rogue (379-383, 390) and that man with the most dishonest mind (445). Meanwhile, Odysseus not only expresses sympathy for Ajax as a fellow human forced to yield to the will of the gods (124-126) but after Ajax' suicide, Odysseus personally intervenes via an extended, reasonable speech to convince Agamemnon that the hero, second only to Achilles in might, deserves a proper burial (1337-1373). It is clear that, among his other flaws, Ajax chooses to consider himself a victim of injustice rather than just the loser in one of so many competitions for glory between the Greeks at Troy. Odysseus, just like so many of the most prominent Greek heroes at Troy, seeks every opportunity for individual glory; Odysseus is most unique in the fact that he nearly always wins.⁷ While stealing and trickery are not outside of Odysseus' repertoire, the character so hated by Ajax in Sophocles' play on the subject is hardly out for personal gain. Now that he and Ajax are no longer in competition, Odysseus can once more recognize all that Ajax has achieved in nine years of war at Troy, and Odysseus argues in favor of Ajax receiving funeral rites in honor of all of these achievements. In Odysseus' eyes, Athena has gone beyond merely protecting him from harm by driving Ajax into madness rendered into humiliation once sanity returns. In other words, this may be a particularly uncharacteristic Odysseus, but as it was produced prior to *Philoctetes*, with this Sophocles had already established in *Ajax* the precedent of having characters say one thing – the more typical complaints against Odysseus by his opponents – while Odysseus' actions tell something very different. *Philoctetes*, in response to Neoptolemus' carefully weighted narrative, reveals his own

⁷ His two most glaring losses, in Book IX of the *Iliad* and in *Philoctetes*, are quickly recovered; the former comes in Book X of the *Iliad* when Odysseus' limited report regarding Achilles' willingness to fight pays off with Odysseus' selection to raid the Thracian camp, and the latter with the fulfillment of Odysseus' initial goal by Heracles' theophany at the play's end. Limitations on Odysseus' glory from the *Philoctetes* incident will be discussed in the conclusion.

tendency toward self-pity as a victim of injustice in ignorance of other motivations on the part of those who abandoned him. Thus, in *Philoctetes* as in *Ajax*, Odysseus has space to be more sympathetic because the other characters seem so ready to ignore his actions and embrace the usual diatribe.

These declarations from Neoptolemus and Philoctetes in the first episode portray Odysseus in very much the same light as some scholars still see him. But one must remember what Neoptolemus' goals and methods are at this point in the play, as well as the implications of Philoctetes' blinding hatred for the rest of the tragedy's action. Austin, for all of the religious connotations that he unearths in Sophocles' text, reduces the conflict to a choice between the evil conspiracy of Odysseus and the friendship of Philoctetes. Indeed, Austin's entire strong reading is based around his translation of lines 54-55 of the tragedy, where, in Austin's words, Odysseus declares to Neoptolemus: "you must see how using words will steal the soul of Philoctetes"⁸. This emphatic rendering of so important a passage, though within the linguistic range of possibilities, paints Odysseus as too unconcerned with Philoctetes' life. While the bow is indeed the key to the archer's survival on Lemnos, one need not suppose that Philoctetes' death was the only possible outcome of the theft of Heracles' bow, much less what Odysseus wanted out of the expedition. In fact, ancient literary criticism leans toward other predictions. The potential for Odysseus' arguments to be viewed as not only necessary but even reasonable is consistent with Dio Chrysostom's analysis of the Aeschylean adaptation of the story. In his estimation, "the deception which Odysseus practiced upon Philoctetes and the arguments by which he won him over are not merely more becoming and suited to a hero...but in my opinion they are even more

⁸ *Great Soul Robbery*, 50.

plausible.”⁹ In this version, Philoctetes does not recognize Odysseus after so long a time and illness, removing from the plot devices of this adaptation the problematic need for mediation such as Neoptolemus’. Odysseus is then free to invent an elaborate tale of the failure of the Greek expedition,¹⁰ Philoctetes’ delight at which is indicative of a penchant for *Schadenfreude* that might be problematic and unhealthy were it not consistent with so much of the ethics and commentary on human nature in Greek tragedy. By comparison, Odysseus’ tale in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* remains much closer to the truth, compounded only by Odysseus’ use of his subordinate, Neoptolemus. If using Neoptolemus is the true crime of which Odysseus is guilty, the obvious necessity of this approach – given Sophocles’ important variation from Aeschylus, namely that Philoctetes be capable of recognizing Odysseus – would surely have been recognized by ancient critics like Dio Chrysostom. Neoptolemus’ involvement certainly complicates the rhetorical situation for Odysseus, but it hardly discounts what Odysseus tries to accomplish. Thus, ancient literary critics hardly seem to have the same issues with Odysseus as those of Austin’s opinion.

The next instance of presenting an archetypal view of Odysseus is yet another one of Odysseus’ construction. The merchant’s intervention, in fulfillment of Odysseus’ final words to Neoptolemus in the prologue (126-129), takes place right after Neoptolemus has agreed to take Philoctetes with him. Apparently, Odysseus thinks that Neoptolemus is taking too long to accomplish the task, further increasing Odysseus’ own rhetorical influence on the situation. As far as the potential for the merchant to be Odysseus in disguise, there are a few quick problems to address in an effort to understand the rhetorical situation more fully. Odysseus’ warning to Neoptolemus that he might send a sentry disguised as a merchant contains no mention that it

⁹ George P. Goold and Jeffrey Henderson, eds., *Dio Chrysostom IV*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 345.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 347.

might in fact be Odysseus himself. Thus, Odysseus would have to be fooling Neoptolemus as well in this scene, something beyond the realm of conventional tragic practice – and contemporary understanding – as far as deceiving Neoptolemus without doing the same to the audience. Such a move would certainly push this depiction of Odysseus closer to the realm of the amoral trickster, deceiving for the sake of deceiving in which some wish to place this Odysseus. Furthermore, the third actor (playing the parts of Odysseus, the merchant, and Heracles) would be switching masks in order for the audience to know that this is a new character. Once more, playing with this convention in a way that tricks Neoptolemus but keeps the audience in the loop seems far-fetched. Consistent with the constraints on dramaturgy at the Dionysia and the character of Odysseus that emerges as a result of the analysis above, the merchant should be his own character and not Odysseus in disguise.

No matter the voice on stage, the ideas presented by the merchant certainly belong to Odysseus. Of most interest to this thesis are the merchant's comments regarding Odysseus, which seem to mirror the type of sentiments that Neoptolemus (deliberately, in his persona) and Philoctetes (excessively, in his bitterness) have already expressed. The merchant, while sharing another fabricated story that this time ends with Odysseus and Diomedes on their way to fetch Neoptolemus at that very moment, remarks that Odysseus was said to be confident in his ability to bring Philoctetes back by persuasion or by force (593-594) before relating how Odysseus, ὁ πάντ' ἀκούων αἰσχροῦ καὶ λωβήτ' ἔπη (607), captured Helenus by trickeries (608). The effect of this communication is three-fold, and as a rhetorically rich structure its audience is worth establishing. These tales cannot be meant to move Philoctetes, who has already agreed to join Neoptolemus on his ship; their force must be intended for Neoptolemus himself. The merchant elicits a reaction from Philoctetes, who firmly announces that persuasion and force on the part of

Odysseus would be as effective in getting the archer to Troy as it would be to bring a dead Philoctetes back to life (622-625). Here the spy's tale highlights, through Philoctetes, his commander's earlier point that Philoctetes will not be taken by persuasion or force. The implicit intent behind this reminder is that Neoptolemus' earlier suggested methods will not work, so if that is what is holding up the process of getting Philoctetes to the boat, abandon such an approach. Furthermore, the tale establishes what Odysseus suspects and Neoptolemus now knows: that Odysseus is as hated an enemy as Philoctetes has in his life.

Finally, the mention of trickery as the way that Helenus was captured acknowledges Neoptolemus' resistance to the method, but in light of the solidified point that force and persuasion will never work, deception once more emerges as the only way suggested thus far to take Philoctetes. Here Sophocles carefully reveals something about Odysseus. This is not his usual *modus operandi*; he is accustomed to being the messenger himself, able to counter what his opponents say on the spot and overpower them as long as they can be persuaded to listen to some measure of reason. Again, when reason will not work, Odysseus has other methods; in this case, he has the foresight that Neoptolemus ultimately lacks to know that an alternative is called for. The merchant's words make it clear once more that Neoptolemus must carry out Odysseus' commands exactly, both out of duty as his subordinate and as the best chance this mission has of succeeding. This is the act of a worried, desperate Odysseus, hardly a supremely confident, scheming villain for Neoptolemus to recognize and reject. This ploy by Odysseus has a negligible impact on the action of the play; however, it is valuable as a further example of the role of rhetoric in revealing Odysseus' true motives and ultimate justification.

Odysseus is not out to kill Philoctetes, nor can the depictions of Odysseus from Neoptolemus and the merchant be taken at face value. Their words, however reflective of what

actually may have happened at Troy, simply need to be plausible and therefore convincing. Philoctetes even declares himself convinced, but his complete denigration of Odysseus' character is more worrisome than anything that Odysseus has proposed thus far. Odysseus was indeed involved in Philoctetes' abandonment, but this act is not entirely to blame for Philoctetes' descent into barbarism. His disease – νόσον ἀγρίαν in the words of the chorus to Neoptolemus (173) – is the first element in the tragedy to be called feral, a characteristic that Philoctetes acknowledges in himself in his very first speech, describing his appearance as ἀπηγριωμένον (226). This description calls to mind comparisons with Polyphemus from *Odyssey* 9. The effect of such a parallel inspires sympathy only insofar as solitude has been “imposed on pitiful Philoctetes.”¹¹ He is still partially responsible for his wildness, and the threat that he poses, like Polyphemus, is a direct result of his inability to behave on the same level as civilized men. Even the by-then friendly chorus in the second kommos (1095-1100, 1116-1122) and Neoptolemus in the exodos (1316-1320) are careful to point out that Philoctetes' fate is his own doing. Furthermore, if his affliction proves fatal, Philoctetes will be far more responsible for this than for his accidental wandering into an apparently unmarked shrine. The chorus follows up by saying that it is not right to mix what is just with what is just spiteful (1140-1142) and continues by reminding him not to reject kindness and assistance extended out of friendship, namely the opportunity that they are offering to escape certain death on Lemnos (1163-1168).

It is just this sort of objective observation, so common to tragic choruses, that clarifies Odysseus' role within the play. Without a doubt, Philoctetes' years of suffering and the sudden nature of his abandonment render the archer deserving of sympathy. Sophocles is careful to include an attack of pain within the tragedy to solidify the fact that Philoctetes, in this respect,

¹¹ Daniel B. Levine, "Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Odyssey* 9: Odysseus versus the Cave Man," *Scholia* 12 (2003), 12.

merits the pity of both Neoptolemus and the audience. Odysseus never tells Neoptolemus to be dismissive of Philoctetes' situation, nor does he himself seem dismissive in his recollection of the memory of the horrible affliction from which Philoctetes suffers. The chorus serves an important function in this regard, for while it supports Odysseus' ruse and Neoptolemus' early management thereof, "it constantly expresses pity for Philoctetes"¹² and "its pity becomes one of the chorus' salient emotional characteristics, allowing to be allied to Neoptolemus' intensifying compassion for Philoctetes, while it remains loyal, in other ways, to Odysseus' plan."¹³ The chorus mediates Odysseus' intellect and Neoptolemus' feeling, following a good middle path from which the latter could certainly learn. In reality, the best thing that Odysseus and Neoptolemus can do for Philoctetes' isolation and incurable wound is to get him on the boat to Troy. If Philoctetes is unwilling to make this decision for himself, it becomes the duty of anyone with an understanding of what Philoctetes has become and an interest in bringing about what must happen for the Greeks to succeed at Troy to suggest something like what Odysseus does in the prologue. This reading can even fit within the explicit possibilities of the text in line 109 where readers find Odysseus "convincingly invoking τὸ σωθῆναι...as the ultimate purpose of transporting Philoctetes to Troy."¹⁴ Odysseus will be saved from Philoctetes, Philoctetes from disease and isolation, and the Greeks from defeat, as long as Neoptolemus approaches the situation as Odysseus has counseled. Force and persuasion may be morally preferable in most circumstances, but here they will not succeed. Odysseus' trickery is one of the only options, and if Philoctetes' obstinacy is the counterpart as far as the true alternative that Neoptolemus may

¹² Margaret R. Kitzinger, *Mnemosyne Supplements 292: Choruses of Sophokles' Antigone and Philoktetes: Dance of Words* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁴ Akviri, Taousiani, "OY MH ΠΙΘΕΤΑΙ: Persuasion versus Deception in the Prologue of Sophocles' Philoctetes," *Classical Quarterly* 61 (2011), 428.

choose, one can hardly say that Neoptolemus makes the best decision for anyone. Only Philoctetes thinks that returning to Greece, where familiarity will certainly ease the pain of abandonment but no one can offer succor for the snakebite, is the better option. Thus, Philoctetes is guilty of muddling the just and the spiteful, using his pitiable state as an excuse to reject what is obviously the better option. If the price for redemption and a cure is reconciliation with Odysseus and the sons of Atreus, Philoctetes is unwilling to pay. Perhaps even worse, Neoptolemus fails to see the distinction between pitying Philoctetes and accepting the archer's opinion as one founded in anything but years spent wallowing in self-pity.

Philoctetes offers all of these reasons to Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and the chorus once he realizes that he has been deceived and deprived of his bow. With desperation compounding the years of pain and grudge holding, one can almost understand a temporary refusal to see reason. However, after giving the bow back to Philoctetes, Neoptolemus once more goes on in his speech to offer not only a chance to survive on his own terms but to be cured and gain the honor that he has been missing for years by playing an invaluable part of the predicted Greek victory at Troy (1329-1335). Yet even with what appears to be a true ally suggesting that returning to Troy is still the best route, Philoctetes still refuses. Neoptolemus has failed to recognize that persuasion, whether from Odysseus or anyone, is ineffective in the face of Philoctetes' obstinacy. The son of Achilles becomes guilty himself of confusing what is motivated by spite for what is motivated by justice. As an overall moral of the story, this one seems particularly timeless: that just because someone deserves pity does not mean their opinion is pitiable.¹⁵

Thus, a reader with an eye out for rhetoric can anticipate that Odysseus' character will emerge as more than a simple negative option for Neoptolemus to reject in favor of Philoctetes'

¹⁵ An appropriate modern analogy might be that of the relative with extreme ideas; as family the person deserves to be tolerated, but one should hardly start a political campaign for the relative simply on the grounds that they are a relative.

positive one. To come to this conclusion is to fail as Neoptolemus does and accept Philoctetes as a rational man, in ignorance of the insurmountable obstacle that his willfulness becomes by the time of the *deus ex machina*. At worst, to buy into this portrayal of Odysseus is to forget Neoptolemus' motivation and means in the first episode. Beyond what Neoptolemus and Philoctetes have to say, Odysseus' character achieves even greater complexity when viewed as the product of the hero's own actions and speeches within the play.

Odysseus Speaking for Himself

Much has been said of the difference between Odysseus' treatment in the fifth century and in the Homeric epics. Homer uses the son of Laertes as the transitional character between the world of war in the *Iliad* and polis-life back in Hellas in the *Odyssey*, famously blending Heroic- and Archaic-Age contexts and morals. In this tradition, Odysseus is perfectly suited to wear the masks of a fifth century still very concerned with the balance between civic and individual accomplishment, between what must be done to preserve the world as they know it and what ideally ought to be done. Scholars as recent as Austin have gone as far as to equate Odysseus with the Sophists of Classical Athens. Austin argues that by putting the word *sophisma* in Odysseus' mouth in line 14 as the description of the scheme that Odysseus is about to suggest to Neoptolemus, Sophocles' would have been deliberately calling the minds of those in attendance to an important question of their day: the definition of *sophos*. "When Odysseus uses *sophisma* here, speaking now as a fifth-century sophist, surely we are to understand that from his point of view his plan is *rational*."¹⁶ The modern scholar further argues that Neoptolemus deliberately picks up *sophos* as a critical term while explaining to Odysseus why he has sided with Philoctetes in line 1244, rendered in Austin as "You were wise by birth, but nothing you say is wise."¹⁷ Such conclusions demand reconciliation as far as defining Sophism in accordance with modern scholarship, as well as establishing to what effect such a comparison would have occurred to Sophocles or his audience.

That words related to *sophos* were key terms in the fifth century BCE in Athens is beyond question. The Sophists differed from the older age of *sophistai*, who could be anyone from revered poets to sages, in that they made *sophia* into a skill that could be taught for a price.

¹⁶ *Great Soul Robbery*, 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

In this they also differed from the philosophers who ostensibly sought after *sophia* as a lifelong exercise rather than believing that they could acquire it for practical application. Kerferd argues that the term *sophistēs* for the movement of the fifth century BCE originated in the fact that Protagoras and his associates wished to be associated with the “honorable tradition”¹⁸ of those wise men of old but also applied their skill as professionals who “received fees for their teaching.”¹⁹ Thus, the Sophists’ name referred both to their skill and their association with *sophia* as something of a product. Guthrie clarifies: “A *sophistēs* writes or teaches because he has a special skill or knowledge to impart. His *sophia* is practical, whether in the fields of conduct or politics or in the technical arts.”²⁰ Like so many political terms, the force of the name *sophistēs* depends heavily on the intent of the user. Thus, in deference to a term whose definition is so problematic, *sophisma* is more impartially rendered ‘an application of skill’ in fairness to both the older sense with which Odysseus could naturally be associated and the pervasive notion of *sophos* as gifted in applying a particular skill.

This introduces some of the main problems in accurately describing the Sophists. The general consensus is that it was not their acceptance of money that earned the Sophists their first enemies, but the fact that they received money in exchange for teaching wisdom. All of a sudden, anyone with enough substance could be trained “so that he might become a real power in the affairs of the city both as a speaker and as a man of action, in other words become an effective and successful politician.”²¹ In comparison with the great followers or practitioners of *sophia* of the past, the Sophists had rendered greatness something of a commodity in the eyes of some in the Athenian political arena. Sophists were also famous for questioning commonly held

¹⁸ *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁰ William K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: Volume 3, The Fifth Century Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 30.

²¹ Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, 26.

beliefs in the pursuit of establishing what existed according to *nomos* as opposed to *physis*, what today might be deemed the difference between social constructs and natural laws. So, while in reality the Sophists taught practical skills for one to succeed in speaking and engaged in philosophical debates, the general image that emerged was one of a new school of thought that did not believe in anything and for the right price would teach anyone to argue convincingly in favor of this. Once more, a gap appears between the reality and the perception of this skilled and successful group.

Indeed, the Sophists seem to have borne much more than their fair share of the blame for what was certainly a troubled period in Athens, the latter half of the fifth century BCE. As the Peloponnesian War, plague, and civil war took their toll on Athens, the general population underwent a religious crisis. De Romilly summarizes: “People’s faith in the justice of the gods began to waver as they noticed that, in human society, it was the strong that triumphed.”²² In response to this, the popular concept of the Sophists allowed the justification of any belief including radical departures from traditional worship. However, one hardly needed the approach of the Sophists for support; there were legitimate atheists in Athens, and what survives in literature with regard to the Sophists is hardly objective. For example, Aristophanes’ depiction of Socrates in *Clouds* is extremely difficult to accept. On the surface, Socrates espouses a Sophistic sort of beliefs, but in reality these are “a very distorted caricature of the epistemological or anthropological analyses of the real Sophists.”²³ Furthermore, anyone familiar with Plato’s Socrates knows that this character would have shied away from rhetoric as a profession, much less appearing as a Sophist himself. As far as leadership in Athens goes, one can hardly argue

²² *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 134.

²³ *Ibid.*, 144.

that Pericles, with his association with Protagoras beginning in 443,²⁴ made or still makes for a better scapegoat than Alcibiades, who at the time of the presentation of *Philoctetes* in 409 BCE was still a few years away from his final return to Athens. If the practices of the Sophists allowed for the possibility of non-traditional philosophies and behaviors, there were still plenty of others contributing to the religious crisis in Athens independent of these rhetoricians for hire.

With popular opinion of the Sophists mediated by such depictions as the comedy of Aristophanes, and later perspectives informed by the problematic voice of Plato's Socrates, one must exercise caution when asserting what Sophocles' audience would have thought of the Sophists. If anything, the intelligent and influential public figure would have been able to access the emotion and force of the debate over the supposed immorality of the Sophists without needing to appear to come down in favor of one side or the other. In the context of *Philoctetes*, where two versions of Odysseus appear, one for popular usage and one who speaks for himself, there exists the opportunity for audience members to consider the effect of such distinctions in their own lives. In addition, if "Sophocles' extant work is in a sense a study in piety, *eusebeia*,"²⁵ there ought to be something in Odysseus' involvement which aids the overall tragedy in turning minds to the gods. The son of Laertes, like the Sophists, is not the party most to blame for the abandonment of the gods. Thus, if the equation of Odysseus with the Sophists of Classical Athens is intentional, Sophocles' purpose may just as well have been – and perhaps more reasonably so – to alert the audience to go deeper than considering surface arguments and motivations in determining what is Neoptolemus' best course of action.

Whatever the case, in *Philoctetes* Odysseus has to be much more than an eloquent but ultimately empty speechmaker or instructor. The lord of Ithaca has a very specific assignment

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁵ Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 95.

that he must accomplish through the added challenge of a young intermediary; however, it must be remembered that Neoptolemus only ever takes issue with Odysseus' means, not the nobility of their shared cause. Odysseus is aware of his status as a messenger of the sons of Atreus and of Philoctetes' antipathy towards him. These are constraints beyond his customary assignment as ambassador and function as more than a mere device to explain Neoptolemus' necessary presence in this version of the story. With these complexities of Odysseus' character within the play itself recognized, notions of Neoptolemus' decision simply as one between good (Philoctetes) and bad (Odysseus) ought to be dismissed as unbecoming of the situation that Sophocles has set up, especially by the tragedy's exodos. In the end, Odysseus' intricate depiction in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* informs the complicated conflict of the tragedy by heightening the tension and ambiguity integral to Neoptolemus' difficult decision between Odysseus and Philoctetes. The many comments that Odysseus himself makes by way of self-defense or explanation of his motivations and methods stand to reveal much about the character as Sophocles has him thinking of himself. As explained above, Odysseus' readiness to put forth a likeness of himself as a device in the tales that he instructs Neoptolemus and the merchant to use reveals a character aware of and actively engaging with his own image. Adding this analysis to a reading of the play betrays Odysseus as a complex character involved in Sophocles' complex conflict that simply cannot be reduced to a lesson about learning to distinguish and choose between right and wrong.

The rhetorical strategy with which Sophocles empowers Odysseus from the very beginning of *Philoctetes* reveals important aspects of the character with serious implications for the rising action of the play. Odysseus begins the play with a summary of what happened the last time that he was on Lemnos. This tactic is referred to as the *historia* approach within the practice

of *narratio*, where a speaker simply restates the facts of a case. Odysseus mentions that Lemnos was deserted until he there abandoned Philoctetes with his stricken foot and the resulting howls of pain that interrupted the expedition's religious ceremonies. Odysseus' narration comprises lines 1 through 11, a brief bit, before cutting his speech short with the comment, [ἀκμὴ γὰρ οὐ μακρῶν ἡμῖν λόγων](#) (12). Expediency is the force behind Odysseus in this scenario, and despite all that Odysseus could accomplish with lengthy, convincing explanations, the risk to his life with Philoctetes whereabouts unknown is too great. As the son of Achilles is his subordinate, Odysseus requests that he locate the cave where Philoctetes was abandoned ten years before and determine whether or not Philoctetes is to be found therein (16-25). After finding the spot empty, Odysseus allows himself a brief continuation of his *narratio*, here focusing on Philoctetes' *persona* rather than the *negotia* above. Once more, the son of Laertes dwells only briefly on Philoctetes' suffering and how he must be fending for himself before getting back to the task of securing the area. These quick speeches, intermingled with the on-stage action of setting up the scene as the area around Philoctetes' dwelling, clue in an audience with an ear for rhetoric as to the angle from which Odysseus is providing argumentation. With his use of *historia*, both of *negotia* and *personae*, Odysseus aims to persuade by instruction "directed towards the intellect."²⁶ The son of Laertes' preference for words over deeds is about to become explicit (98-99), but to make the intellectual approach central to Odysseus' rhetoric from the very beginning sets up an important distinction to be made as the play progresses.

Odysseus' brief opportunity to tie what happened on Lemnos to why Philoctetes has to be approached in accordance with Odysseus' careful scheme has its limits, and there are possibilities of meaning in what is not said. The options for persuasion beyond *docere* are

²⁶ Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, trans. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, and David E. Orton, eds. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 113.

delectare and *movere*, which “are aimed at the emotions.”²⁷ There is little emotion in Odysseus’ explanation of Philoctetes’ abandonment, placing the emphasis on the expediency of leaving the man whose lamentations interrupted the religious observations of the young expedition. One can read some regret into Odysseus’ admission *ἐμοὶ δὲ τούτων οὐδέν ἐστ’ ἀρνήσιμον* (74), as being a member of the first group who sailed to Troy under the sons of Atreus meant that Odysseus had to follow their orders, including leaving Philoctetes behind. Nevertheless, the absence of emotion here is more than made up for once Neoptolemus employs Odysseus’ tactical approach to ostensible success by the end of the first episode. For then comes the attack on Philoctetes’ foot, a pitiful scene whose intensity is compounded by the realization that this has been a regular occurrence for the better part of ten years now. Odysseus fails to warn Neoptolemus about the possibility of such a scene, and Neoptolemus suddenly finds himself unable to continue the ruse against such a helpless sufferer, who by this point in the play even lacks the bow that has sustained Philoctetes in the absence of a caregiver. Thus, when this powerful emotion enters the play, it appeals to Neoptolemus in a way that Odysseus’ brief speeches have not, and the overwhelming force of pity takes Neoptolemus down a path that demands divine intervention to be corrected.

Before any of this action can take place, Odysseus is still getting ready to leave the stage with Neoptolemus as his rhetorical stand-in. In anticipation of the son of Achilles’ reaction to what he is about to say, Odysseus tells Neoptolemus to be faithful to his noble heritage and follow orders (50-53). These orders are then given, for Neoptolemus to capture the mind of Philoctetes by his words (54-55). Knowing both of his own title as master of words and of Neoptolemus’ youth and inexperience, Odysseus then proceeds to describe exactly what Neoptolemus should say, namely the story regarding the arms of Achilles as described above

²⁷ Ibid.

(56-69). These lines set up Odysseus as the commander of the expedition, and once more as the shrewd planner in accordance with his reputation. They also anticipate Odysseus' limited physical appearances in the play but remind the audience that the rhetoric to come is meant to belong to Odysseus, not Neoptolemus. Thus, while absent from the stage, Odysseus effectively dominates the direction of the first episode. One need not read any ulterior motives into Odysseus' character at this point, other than what Odysseus and Sophocles' use of myth can declare of what has happened prior to the action of the play.

Many scholars have drawn comparisons between Odysseus' role here and his role in the embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* 9. Beye summarizes the similarities: "The same group of army leaders, reduced to desperation, aware of how central to their objectives the absent hero is, are forced to send off a mission to persuade him to return."²⁸ Not only is Odysseus involved in both embassies, but he has basically the same goal in both, at the command of the Atreidae. To some degree, this similarity also sets up the ultimate failure of the embassy's plan to coerce its target; on another level, it is Heracles' appearance that finally does convince Philoctetes to fight just as it is the result of Apollo's intervention against Patroclus that ultimately moves Achilles to enter the battle once more on the side of the Greeks. However, Sophocles makes one very deliberate departure from the dynamic of the embassy to Achilles, but Beye's point on the subject, that "the circumstances of Philoctetes' exile...have caused him to hate Odysseus to a degree far beyond the mild contempt that Achilles shows for Odysseus in the *Iliad*,"²⁹ is left conspicuously undeveloped. This is the main difference that keeps Odysseus from personally seeking out Philoctetes, as Odysseus himself explains to Neoptolemus on several occasions. Neoptolemus must mediate all of Odysseus' efforts to bring Philoctetes and his bow to Troy, and it is the

²⁸ "Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the Homeric Embassy," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 101 (1970), 63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

judgment that Neoptolemus passes on Odysseus' methods that forms the heart of the conflict for the larger part of the tragedy. One could reasonably assume from the direction of the prologue that the main action of the play will lie in getting Philoctetes on the boat to Troy if one relegates Neoptolemus to the role of a mere mouthpiece for Odysseus. But, like Achilles' reluctance to rejoin the Greek cause, there are narrative twists in store. Achilles' son is willing to bring Philoctetes back with them by force (90) or by persuasion (102). Juxtaposition with *Iliad* 9 – where Odysseus can himself transmit the promises of Agamemnon, coupled with his own rhetoric and appeals to principles of good character – once more underscores the limited circumstances in which Odysseus finds himself in *Philoctetes* as the source of the hero's superficially unsympathetic suggestions to Neoptolemus. Perhaps Odysseus, as a result of his position, chooses to appeal to Neoptolemus' desire for glory rather than explaining his own motivations in great detail in the prologue. Neither does Odysseus take the time to anticipate Neoptolemus' pity for Philoctetes as an obstacle to the success of the mission. Odysseus, on a rhetorical level superior to that of Neoptolemus, already sees that pity for someone is a poor excuse for allowing their opinion to break down one's own resolve to accomplish noble ends.³⁰

Nevertheless, Odysseus begins his self-defense in the very first speech of the play. When explaining how Philoctetes came to be stranded on Lemnos, Odysseus explains that he did his part *ταχθεις τόδ' ἔρδειν τῶν ἀνασσόντων ὑπο* (6). Odysseus not only sets the example for following potentially questionable orders but he also reveals an aspect of his character with tragic precedent. In Euripides' *Hecuba*, Odysseus employs a very similar excuse when Hecuba

³⁰ At the same time, Odysseus knows what it took to get Neoptolemus' father back to fighting for the Greeks at Troy. Agamemnon's embassy failed famously, but Patroclus' death succeeded. Achilles' emotion, from his immediate reaction to the news of his best friend's slaughter to his mistreatment of Hector's corpse, dominates the last seven books of the *Iliad*. In this way, Odysseus' failure to anticipate the role that emotion would play in Neoptolemus' involvement in this embassy functions as a limitation of how sympathetic he can be in *Philoctetes*. In any case, the rhetorical strategy here could certainly use some broadening.

begs him as a suppliant to do what he can to spare Polyxena just as the queen once spared his life when he was captured as a spy in Troy. Odysseus basically replies that he can do nothing about the order (327-335). In this case, it is Achilles' ghost who demands Polyxena's sacrifice, already the second ghost to present an opinion in the play. This makes for a difficult rhetorical situation, one where Odysseus will not even attempt to justify himself beyond the Greek army's duty to Achilles. This father's return will also have consequences for Neoptolemus, who must himself perform the sacrifice. Polyxena's death is the first half of Hecuba's compound tragedy in her eponymous play, and Odysseus' defense does little to stifle the generation of pity for Hecuba's awful state. With this precedent in mind, Odysseus starts *Philoctetes* in a dark place, recalling an unfortunate duty from ten years prior. The champion will never deign to apologize, but his readiness to shift the blame to his commanders suggests a certain desire to acquit himself. One must be careful when assuming that Odysseus' assumed sophistry is "evident already in his specious justifications for abandoning Philoctetes on Lemnos."³¹ In context, Odysseus' statement is hardly a justification as much as it is an explanation of what must happen as a result of simply what was done irrespective of the reason. The rhetorician has not simply chosen a side to defend, but presents history as informing what must be done without room for variation, or pity for that matter.

As a result of his involvement in Philoctetes' abandonment, Odysseus announces that Neoptolemus must be the one to interact with the missing archer. Odysseus takes multiple precautions to ensure that Philoctetes does not spot him and thereby give up the ruse and the Greeks' chances of success. When Neoptolemus first objects to the trickery inherent in Odysseus' plan, Odysseus makes the mission a matter of maturing for Neoptolemus. Of his own youth, Odysseus says that he too once γλῶσσαν μὲν ἀργόν, χεῖρα δ' εἶχον ἐργάτιν (97). Thus,

³¹ Roisman, *Sophocles: Philoctetes*, 74.

this is Neoptolemus' opportunity to learn the value of being ready to practice words before deeds. One must notice how Odysseus says nothing here of innate skill or talent, only that it is a matter of perspective and priority that enables one to accomplish tasks with the tongue rather than the hand. In this way, Odysseus not only once more establishes the superiority of his position as commander of the expedition but here assumes the role of a mentor guiding Neoptolemus down the path that will ostensibly lead to successes akin to those on account of which the lord of Ithaca is on this very mission. Here, comparisons between Neoptolemus and Telemachus become particularly apt; "Neoptolemus sets out on a voyage from Scyros in search of his father which brings him to manhood, just as Telemachus is incited to do by the disguised Athene at the beginning of the *Odyssey*."³² Just as Athene guides Telemachus to become more like his father in Odysseus' absence, Neoptolemus receives instruction on how to fill Achilles' shoes from Odysseus. Athene comes to mind as a stand-in for Odysseus quite a bit more readily than Odysseus does for Achilles, but this intertextuality again places *Philoctetes* in dialogue with Homeric precedents where strategy ultimately spells out Troy's demise when brute force fails.

This answer from Odysseus also treats Neoptolemus' first usage of *phusis*, appearing in verb form in line 88: ἔφυν γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐκ τέχνης πράσσειν κακῆς. Odysseus replies that it is not a matter of being in one's nature or not, but rather a decision that one must make to prefer the use of words to the use of force. To the lord of Ithaca, the deception that the assignment to Philoctetes requires is a subset of the practice of words; persuasion still comes into play, as only a convincing story will get Philoctetes and his bow on the boat to Troy. Few would argue that Odysseus is lying here, stating this principle only to coerce Neoptolemus into following a maxim in which Odysseus has no real faith. In conjunction with arguments made above, Odysseus

³²Mary Whitby, "Telemachus Transformed? The Origins of Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *Greece & Rome* 43, no. 1 (1996), 32.

realizes the limited circumstances within which he must work, and in his brief orders to Neoptolemus he attempts to communicate the absolute necessity of words in this situation. Odysseus believes in this principle and chooses to share it as part of enabling Neoptolemus to make the best possible manipulation of Philoctetes. The fact that Odysseus shares this belief with Neoptolemus as part of an anecdote from his own life adds a personal element that would have made the appeal that much more convincing.

Odysseus bids farewell to Neoptolemus with an appeal to Hermes and Athena to guide and protect their endeavors (133-134). More than a passing remark on his way off-stage, Odysseus here betrays the fact that the gods are on their side. Not only are they civilized men who honor the gods – as compared with Philoctetes’ embittered, apolitical lifestyle that holds the gods in contempt – but Neoptolemus and Odysseus know of the prophecies. The war will end soon because Philoctetes will return to Troy with his bow. Robinson astutely notes that “Sophocles at no point allows any of his characters to purport to quote the exact words of the oracle *verbatim* and in full, uncut, unexpanded, and uninterpreted.”³³ This works well as a device to keep the audience from making early judgments regarding the morality of what is at stake, and adds suspense later in the play when Odysseus goes as far as to give Philoctetes the freedom to jump to his death, if the archer truly desires it. Nevertheless, Odysseus’ knowledge of the importance of the gods’ will to the success of their mission has already been betrayed, and comes into sharp contrast with Neoptolemus’ dismissal of the same as the tragedy progresses. While Odysseus knows that this fact will hold no weight with Philoctetes, and therefore only appears as a last-ditch rhetorical gamble late in the tragedy, one must believe that Odysseus’ confidence is bolstered by the sanctity of their mission. Odysseus certainly has reason to trust in Athena, even

³³ David B. Robinson, “Topics in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*.” *The Classical Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1969), 49.

if sometimes she goes too far in protecting him. And as for Hermes, if there is room for him in the pantheon, Odysseus' methods could hardly have been to as repugnant to an Athenian audience as they are to Neoptolemus.

In this way, Odysseus' invocation of these gods here and implicit trust throughout in what has been prophesied will happen at Troy call to mind his character's dealings with the gods in Sophocles' *Ajax*. Here readers could understandably ask, "What has become of the old partnership without which the *Odyssey* could not be imagined?"³⁴ Once a respected companion of the goddess, Odysseus now finds himself repulsed by Athena's treatment of Ajax; once Odysseus' competitor in pursuit of the arms of Achilles, the mighty hero is now an unwilling spectator left feeling like a pawn in Athena's fatal lesson against *hubris*. As the messenger relates to Tecmessa and the chorus, Ajax is guilty of spurning Athena's help in the battle line (774-776). For this offense, Ajax is made to think that he is slaughtering his enemies within the Greek army while in reality he is butchering their livestock. Upon realizing Athena's ruse, Ajax finds himself unable to bear the shame and ultimately throws himself on his own sword. As witness to all this, Odysseus is humbled to a consideration of his own humanity and subservience to the will of the gods. Whether powerless to stop it or sworn in his duty to fulfill it, the Odysseus of extant Sophoclean tragedy remains concerned with piety and how it relates to the nobility of the Greek cause. Again, this hardly makes him the ideal corollary for the Sophistic movement, either the public perception thereof or the rhetorical school. While both Odysseus characters may share some level of reverence and fear for the gods in their respective plays, the Odysseus of *Philoctetes* is unique in that he must rely entirely on the gods to be proven justified at the play's end.

³⁴ William K.C. Guthrie, "Odysseus in the *Ajax*." *Greece & Rome* 16, no. 48 (1947), 115.

Once Neoptolemus has the bow in his possession, Odysseus no longer needs to fear for his life. He has done his part to speed up the process by sending along the merchant, only for the entire scheme to be blind-sided by the attack on Philoctetes' foot. Odysseus does not come back on stage until Neoptolemus seems suddenly unconvinced of the plan that he has been following. Philoctetes has heard, to his horror, of Neoptolemus' true destination at Troy (915-916). He demands the return of the sacred weapons, and when Neoptolemus turns to his chorus of sailors for advice, Odysseus comes out of hiding to provide his own. While Neoptolemus stands by with Heracles' bow in hand, Odysseus uses his own arguments on Philoctetes. Neoptolemus' men can now take him by force (985), but this should not be necessary. Odysseus states truthfully that it is the will of the gods that Philoctetes accompany them (989-990), and for a civilized man who yields to the will of the gods, there is no choice but to travel this path (993-994). The convergence of the will of the gods and Odysseus' own pursuit of glory is not a mere coincidence, but an important qualification of why Odysseus tries to accomplish his mission in the way that he does. Odysseus has thus far manipulated the rhetorical action of the play through Neoptolemus and the merchant, but after the pitiful scene with Philoctetes' suffering the son of Laertes' control over Neoptolemus starts to slip. In apparent disregard for his earlier assertion that Philoctetes' punishment must have been a contrivance of the gods in order for Troy to survive as long as it did (191-200), Neoptolemus allows pity for Philoctetes to cloud his judgment of the situation. If, as in other versions, a disguised Odysseus himself had been present, and witnessed the effects of the poisoned wound, he could have just as logically allowed the situation to steel his resolve that returning Philoctetes to Troy is the right thing to do, now not only for himself and the Greek campaign but also for the archer's afflicted foot. But for

Sophocles' purposes, the son of Achilles must appear the intellectual inferior of Odysseus only to be corrected for as much by the play's end.

This recognition of the futility of his actions in the face of fate drives Philoctetes to the threat of self-violence (999-1002), as such realizations often do in Sophoclean tragedy. Oedipus gouges his eyes out when he looks upon his horrible life as a fulfillment rather than an avoidance of the fate decreed before his birth. Ajax, guilty of exceeding the bounds of moderation, kills himself once he realizes that what his trust in his own might is completely unfounded, his killing of those guilty of injustice against him converted into the bloody hallucinations of a madman by Athena's intervention. Yet Philoctetes is unable to end his suffering in death as Odysseus quickly orders men to restrain the disarmed archer (1003). Rather than representing the ultimate reversal of a tyrant or mighty hero going from a position of power and respect to one in which they cannot bear the horror of their own circumstances, the suicide of a man suffering alone for ten years would hardly provide for tragic catharsis. In addition, this act on the part of the son of Laertes either betrays an unwillingness to allow Philoctetes to die on Odysseus' watch – a softer side incompatible with the Odysseus that so many wish to set up as a binary opposite to Philoctetes' purity – or, more likely, reveals Philoctetes' necessity to the success of the mission at Troy.

The latter explanation stands as a textual qualification of the assertion that Odysseus' "words, as he himself admits, arise only from the necessities of the situation and not from any fixed or stable character and set of convictions."³⁵ The truth motivating Odysseus has not changed from one moment to the next, but Odysseus' rhetorical approach has. The words arise from the man who fits himself to the situation, and Philoctetes' obstinacy here pushes Odysseus

³⁵ Robert J. Rabel, "Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the Interpretation of *Iliad* 9," *Arethusa* 30 (1997), 299.

to make some very obvious declarations that still fall on deaf ears. Odysseus presents the path before Philoctetes as necessary only to the extent that one must yield to the will of the gods. A man's obligation to the gods goes only as far as he wishes to remain free of fatal punishment or madness, and in his willingness to inflict the former on himself Philoctetes seems to be showing symptoms of the latter. In his characteristically effective rhetoric akin to reverse psychology, Odysseus makes a final, effective appeal to Philoctetes' most fundamental desire: self-preservation. Even if Philoctetes were free to jump, and Odysseus or Teucer could use Heracles' arrows to bring down Troy (1056-1059), Philoctetes would still have achieved no meaningful resolution of the same problems that have afflicted him since the incident on Chryse. Odysseus reveals that he has nothing personal against Philoctetes, because Odysseus is now free to use force to get Philoctetes to Troy. He would prefer not to, whether for the glory of mastering the situation or because anyone in their right mind would see that choosing to be cured and soon proclaimed a hero is the obvious choice. Sophocles' plot proves the success of Odysseus' rhetoric, persuasion without deception, as Philoctetes does indeed refrain from jumping. Once more, a disarmed Philoctetes is no match for an Odysseus who can present arguments in person.

Still, Odysseus has to return to the stage two more times to attempt to stop Neoptolemus in his determination to return the bow to Philoctetes. The first time involves a series of exchanges where Odysseus appears incredulous at Neoptolemus' decision to return the bow (1222-1240). At one point in this discussion, Odysseus makes a baseless threat against a now resolute Neoptolemus that he himself will fight to hold on to the bow (1254-1255). The son of Achilles has only to reply that he too is ready to fight (1255-1256) in order for Odysseus to back down. With deception no longer in play as the approach to get Philoctetes to Troy, it is now Neoptolemus who cannot be moved either by persuasion or force. Odysseus here has no means

by which to change Neoptolemus' mind, the limitations of his circumstances now completely dominating the rhetorical situation. This fact is once more emphasized by Odysseus' final, fleeting effort to forbid Neoptolemus from returning the bow, this time coming full circle by appealing to Neoptolemus' sense of social duty and invoking the Greek leaders on whose mission they were sent (1293-1294). The master of words can barely squeeze in one more threatening sentence before Philoctetes, now reunited with his bow, threatens to let an arrow fly at his hated enemy (1299).

Trust in the gods must be once more considered when discussing Odysseus' most revealing admission. When Philoctetes curses Odysseus in the depths of his self-inflicted despair, he accuses the Greek leader of using Neoptolemus, who knew nothing other than to do what he was ordered (1006-1010). In response, Odysseus declares himself to be whatever sort of man the situation requires (1049). Yet in clarifying this statement, Odysseus does not highlight to what depths he would sink if given enough reason, but rather declares: οὐκ ἄν λάβοις μου μᾶλλον οὐδεν' εὐσεβῆ (1051). This statement is illustrative of Odysseus' current situation, where he knows that he has the gods on his side. He may be fighting urges to indulge in baser strategies, but he exercises restraint in trying to convince Philoctetes (a man still suffering from his violation of Chryse's shrine) to save his own life and seize the opportunity for glory – not to mention cure and redemption – at Troy. Rather than an admission of his own amorality, the passage is an indication of Odysseus' confidence in his own ability, and perhaps by extension his belief in the intellect of the two men confronting him at this moment. One cannot ignore the connection between Odysseus' use of εὐσεβῆ and Heracles' final admonition that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes ἐννοεῖσθ' ... εὐσεβεῖν τὰ πρὸς θεοῦς (1440-1441). Heracles essentially picks up the term from Odysseus' rhetorical use of it and clarifies its purpose to the tragedy, ultimately

reconciling Odysseus and Heracles as on the same side. Though their references to reverence end up being aligned in intent though ultimately not in effect, still the connection serves as a reminder that Heracles urges the rebellious duo to follow Odysseus to Troy, as the Greek leader has been attempting to persuade them – in one way or another – throughout the play.

Being chased off the stage by Philoctetes signifies the end of Odysseus' action within the play. Much for the same reason that this author does not believe that the merchant characteristically or realistically could be Odysseus in disguise, this project does not include discussion of the intervention of Heracles as part of the rhetorical strategy of Odysseus within the play. Odysseus has been plenty present in introducing the rhetorical situation, explaining how Neoptolemus is to enter it, and then constantly seeking to redefine it once Neoptolemus has committed his *hamartia* of mistaking a pitiable character for a sound one. After his failure to conquer Neoptolemus with words, and his reluctance to coerce either by force, Odysseus and Sophocles' audience must await the tragedy's conclusion for the rhetorician's redemption.

The Exodos in the Context of Odysseus' Role

Odysseus' exit from the play midway through the exodos finds the embassy to Philoctetes in a precarious position. On the one hand, Neoptolemus has stated to Odysseus that he will return the bow to Philoctetes regardless of the consequences (1248-1255). On the other hand, he has not declared that he has given up on the mission, only that he regrets having swindled Philoctetes out of his bow and needs to right this wrong. For this, Odysseus has threatened to bring the might of the Greek army against Neoptolemus, simultaneously betraying his lack of confidence in the mission's chances of success and his anger at Neoptolemus' insubordination. Once the bow is returned, Neoptolemus quickly intervenes to keep Philoctetes from taking Odysseus' life, and the two are left on stage united as friends, the exchange of the ever important bow the symbol of their *xenia*. Only now does Neoptolemus finally make it clear that although he has given up on Odysseus' approach, he still believes in the justice of their mission. He appeals to Philoctetes as Odysseus has (989-998), but with a bit more deference and the credibility of the archer's first new friend in many years. The violation of the shrine at Chryse and the consequent wound (1326-1328), the cure at the hands of the sons of Asclepius (1329-1334), the glory of sacking Troy (1334-1335, 1344-1347), and the prophecy of Helenus (1336-1342) all come up again.

But Philoctetes' obstinacy proves more than even a sympathetic chorus and a repentant Neoptolemus can undo. Neoptolemus even prefaces his entire appeal with an acknowledgement of Philoctetes' condition, counting the archer among mortals who [έκουσίοισιν έγκεινται βλάβαις](#) (1318), somehow hoping that if Philoctetes could only recognize this in himself he would yield to just advice. But the constricting grudge against the sons of Atreus and Odysseus has driven reason out of Philoctetes' mind to the same degree that the attacks of pain to his foot drive out

his ability to communicate intelligently. Even when the prophecy of Helenus is made clear enough for Philoctetes to understand that he and Neoptolemus will be present when Troy falls later that same year, the archer still resists the inevitable, preferring the world in which he is only a victim and in no way responsible or irrational. Force has supplanted reason at this point, as Philoctetes and Neoptolemus unsatisfactorily resolve to head back to Greece and fight off whoever may come seeking justice for their desertion of the cause at Troy (1402-1408). One can hardly claim that this determination offers any sort of resolution for the larger conflicts surrounding the play; the wound, the cause of Philoctetes' abandonment, has no chance to be healed. The war against Troy, begun by Philoctetes and thousands of others a decade prior, cannot be brought to an end with Heracles' bow and Achilles' son. Only in comedy could Neoptolemus and Philoctetes' suggested attempt to surmount the unavoidable obstacles to their successful return to Greece be considered satisfactory. But as it is tragedy, Odysseus' last departure from the stage marks the tragic low point of the plot, with Neoptolemus and Philoctetes out of their minds with the newfound power they have acquired now liberated from Odysseus' semblance of control over the situation.

It is for this reason that Heracles, provider of the sacred bow and a god himself, must intervene and convince Philoctetes by sheer influence over him. Heracles' mere presence is a reminder of what Philoctetes could have become. Although only half-correct in his claim that Philoctetes is "a humane and sympathetic man,"³⁶ Avery is quite right in noting that Philoctetes' absence from the first nine or so years at Troy has relegated him to "a second Heracles" only "as possessor of the famous bow."³⁷ Heracles' appearance not only recalls the importance of the bow's history – which now includes Neoptolemus – but also highlights Philoctetes' role in his

³⁶ "Heracles, Philoctetes, Neoptolemus," *Hermes* 93 (1965), 280.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

past ten years' suffering. The magical gift from one friend to another has been lying dormant, relegated to killing small game in a quest for survival instead of applied to its heroic task of once more taking down Troy. The time has come for Philoctetes to rise up to the level of his unerring arms not only in deeds but in character, overcoming the conditions that have rendered him a bitter, immovable savage.

In a note reminiscent of Odysseus' role in the first episode, "[t]he epiphany of Heracles at this moment embodies—in a dramaturgical medium other than language—the commanding authority of presence."³⁸ The mere fact that he is Heracles is what makes the difference for Philoctetes' thus far inexorable obstinacy, countering the inability of Odysseus' authority to make a lasting difference for Neoptolemus'. Heracles' speech offers little information beyond what Odysseus and Neoptolemus have truthfully declared that could prove to be the detail that changes Philoctetes mind. It must be the background, the history of cemented friendship between the immortal and the only one willing to end his suffering. In this sense Heracles can easily be seen as returning the favor, and perhaps with this in mind Philoctetes is finally wise enough to accept it. Although Odysseus first announced clearly that it was the will of Zeus that Philoctetes go to Troy (989-990), having literally relied on the physical reminder of the archer's glorious role in his most famous friend's life, the impeccability of what Philoctetes has dwelt on of Heracles' character – especially compared to the archer's deranged impression of Odysseus, ten painful years in the making – renders the impossible possible.

Furthermore, if Odysseus is such a villain in the play, Heracles' speech is remarkably silent on the subject. There are no words of praise from the god for Neoptolemus' decision to abandon Odysseus' approach in favor of pity for Philoctetes. Nor is there any chastisement for Neoptolemus' taking of the bow under questionable circumstances, the action that seems to have

³⁸ John Carlevale, "Education, *Phusis*, and Freedom in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *Arion* 8, no.1 (2000), 53.

played the largest role in Neoptolemus' reversal. Heracles' arrival does not commemorate a high point for suggested courses of action in the play; a *deus ex machina* in this case can only mean quite the opposite. Even more telling, Heracles offers advice to the Troy-bound heroes that Neoptolemus will famously ignore. This is Sophocles, after all, and the appearance of a god certainly anticipates an implicit emphasis on *eusebeia*. Nothing in Odysseus' approach tends toward irreverence for the gods, and Sophocles' choice to focus the conclusion of the play on what it takes to set Neoptolemus and Philoctetes straight ultimately sets Heracles and Odysseus on the same side of the tragedy-long debate. The suggestion that Heracles' appearance marks Neoptolemus' understanding "that he has understood the integral connection... between the divine plan and the establishment of friendship"³⁹ does not take into account Heracles' admonition to respect the gods at Troy. The connection between pity (present from the third episode on) and friendship (only appearing in the latter half of the exodos) is indefensible in the context of Neoptolemus' immature understanding of emotion in human relationships, but Heracles' advice highlights the importance of this context. If pity can prove powerful enough to overcome Neoptolemus' willingness to yield to Odysseus, one can understand how overzealousness on the battlefield could lead to refusing to yield to the gods. The interpretations that count Neoptolemus' alliance with Philoctetes as a good development for the tragedy and characters, and also get closest to accounting for the difficult nature of Heracles' intervention and advice end up as meandering, grasping theological readings of the entire play. Philoctetes still yields to Heracles on account of their friendship, not the relationship between mortal and god. Though Philoctetes' wound "reduces [him] to a life of brutishness and agony", its cure will not solve the fact that "it also cuts him off from the gods."⁴⁰ Readers are left only to wonder

³⁹ Christopher Gill, "Bow, Oracle, and Epiphany in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *Greece & Rome* 27 (1980), 144.

⁴⁰ Segal, *Divinity, Nature, Society*, 98.

what will become of Philoctetes' grudge against gods and men that has informed so much of the play's action.

As far as the character of Philoctetes is concerned, the lesson to be gleaned from him is somewhat comparable to the scenes with Achilles in the final book of the *Iliad*: there is a time when it is right to yield, but for a hero who thinks he is the victim of injustice it can take the intervention of a god to point this time out. One must remember that Achilles' rage shifts from its focus on Agamemnon, at whose hands the son of Peleus almost certainly suffers injustice (only to be advised by Athena that Achilles' patience will pay off several times over), to rage for Hector's slaughter of Patroclus. Patroclus' death is a direct result of his own exceeding of the boundaries set by Achilles in exchange for the son of Peleus' inspirational armor, and then solidified by fate following Patroclus' killing of Sarpedon. Thus, Achilles has little to call unjust other than the incomprehensible tragedy of a man losing his closest companion. Philoctetes can call his abandonment injustice on the part of the Atreidae and Odysseus, but the wound to his foot is largely his own doing (probably with a bit of fate and the will of the gods mixed in), and his obstinacy is a direct result of his own choices over the last ten years. Thus Philoctetes and Achilles are decently comparable on many levels, but there remains one notable difference.

With Achilles readers have the chance to witness not only the hero's recognition of the need to accept the will of the gods and the inevitability of yielding at the appropriate time, but also a resolution of the emotion that has driven the action of the entire work. Thetis comes to Achilles on behalf of the other gods and Achilles informs her that he will accept Priam's offer to ransom Hector's body. Priam soon appears in the Greek camp, but he does more than present the gifts and complete the transaction for his son's remains. The king of Troy appeals to Achilles as a father, not knowing that Achilles has accepted the fact that he himself will never again see his

own father. In this moment, Achilles equates his own sufferings with those of his enemy and they are reconciled. The enemy has a face, a family, and a fate to which Achilles can relate. The ending of the epic is then made all the more effective by the full shift in focus from Achilles to Hector and his memory, eulogized by his wife, his mother, and his sister-in-law. In Philoctetes' case, with Heracles analogous to Thetis as the most inherently powerful god in the rhetorical situation, the god appears in order to reverse Philoctetes' course completely. The archer is not on the verge of yielding by any means, and his complete *volte-face* offers little that compares with the catharsis of Achilles' weeping with Priam. No promise to refrain from shooting Odysseus on the voyage back to Troy, no reconciliation with those at the head of the Greek expedition here explicitly blessed by the gods can suggest that Philoctetes' obstinacy allows for anything but a reluctant rejoining of the campaign.

One last possibility regarding Philoctetes' character comes from the Euripidean take on the myth. The details of this version as preserved by Dio Chrysostom remain limited. But the fact that it was presented as part of a trilogy with the now-famous *Medea* brings in a few options. Medea is a character deserving of pity for what Jason has inflicted upon her, but few extend that pity to excuse her actions by the end of the play. When the audience's ability to sympathize with a character changes as a result of the actions within a tragedy, the play has the effect of forcing viewers to confront the trajectory of their emotions. When does Medea stop being sympathetic, and should people have seen this change coming? Dialogue acts as a clue to what course a plot may take, but action must often be independent of character's expectations in order to create fully lamentable, unpredictable circumstances. In this sense, Philoctetes follows a similar path. His abandonment and physical condition are pitiable, but the way that his mind has warped to believe in absolutes – himself as victim and his oppressors as purely evil – must be blamed

partially on what he has allowed himself to become. Philoctetes seems wild and out of touch, but his obstinacy only really manifests itself when not even the repentant Neoptolemus can change that mind long since made up. Though Euripides' variation of Philoctetes need not share these characteristics, nevertheless Medea's prominent character does seem to inform the Sophoclean Philoctetes.

There also remains the issue of Neoptolemus' ultimate character. He must be the tragic character as his choices dictate the action and direction of the play; as final evidence, his agreement with Philoctetes would lead to so dire a conclusion that a god must appear to redirect the play's action. For this reason it is difficult to accept most readings that *Philoctetes* "is a study in evolving moral character."⁴¹ Neoptolemus does receive moral instruction, but by way of Odysseus' rejected counsel and Heracles' sudden correction. Beyond merely realigning the play with myth and the reasonable expectations of the audience, the intervention marks Neoptolemus' decision as missing an important point, just as he will during the sack of Troy. With regards for Neoptolemus' *hamartia*, Austin insists that it is just as Neoptolemus' himself declares: [σοὶ πῦθόμενος](#) in response to Odysseus' question [ἢ δ' ἄμαρτία τίς ἦν](#); in lines 1225-1226. Yet, in accordance with Austin's own admission that "tragic heroes are not usually able to discern their *hamartia* until it is too late to undo the consequences,"⁴² such action within the context of the play would be quite exceptional. This identification also smacks a bit of contamination with Aristotle's language. No, Neoptolemus' *hamartia* has its roots in the third episode when he first allows Philoctetes' pitiful state to hinder proper evaluation of the situation. From there it expands to Neoptolemus' confession to Philoctetes, his rejection of Odysseus, the return of the bow, and finally the decision to accompany the archer to Greece. The initial crisis stemming from a

⁴¹ Anne H. Hawkins, "Ethical Tragedy and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *The Classical World* 92, no. 4 (1999), 338.

⁴² *Great Soul Robbery*, 177.

misunderstanding of the complex morality of the situation balloons to mean the potential failure of the Greek siege of Troy and the rejection of Helenus' prophecy. Such an ending is unsatisfactory not only because of what the myth dictates, but because Neoptolemus' conclusions derive from his immaturity. The *hamartia* of the tragic hero is only prevented from producing its disastrous consequences by the intervention of a god, a unique usage of the device befitting Sophocles' only extant example thereof. Once more, the value of this reading emerges in light of the above considerations of Odysseus as part of Sophocles' general treatment of rhetoric within the tragedy.

Thus, by allowing a more sympathetic depiction of Odysseus in *Philoctetes*, the play becomes one sufficiently in-line with Heracles' intervention as opposed to a simple lesson on the value of pity interrupted by a reminder that Greek victory at Troy still needs to happen. Roisman offers the following nuanced view of the tragedy's uncovered meaning: "the question the play explores is not what is right in abstract terms, but what is the right course of action under circumstances where the moral and the practical are at odds or where different moral goods collide."⁴³ The moral and the practical are at odds only if pity for Philoctetes is the same as favoring his advice in deference to pity; readers have no basis within the tragedy for believing that Odysseus did not feel pity for Philoctetes, and perhaps more reason than not to believe that he regrets having abandoned the archer the way that he did. One must be careful where comparing the ethical question of *Philoctetes* to the situation in the Mytilenean debate from Thucydides. No one tries to defend death as what is best for the Mytileneans, but it might be the option that secures Athens' own future. In this case, the moral decision seems to be opposed to the practical one; in *Philoctetes*, the practical decision sets the success of the Greek force at Troy

⁴³ *Sophocles: Philoctetes*, 72.

as dependent on the deception of a single man who will be quantifiably better for having been brought to Troy – even against his will.

The idea of different moral goods colliding is significantly closer to the reading informed by the analysis above. Again, real pity for Philoctetes entails doing what is best for him and curing the afflictions to his physical and mental state. The best way to accomplish this, as Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and Heracles correctly state, is by getting Philoctetes to Troy. The foot will finally be healed, the company of other men will allow Philoctetes to think beyond himself, and then perhaps he will listen to reason and reconcile with Odysseus and the sons of Atreus on the grounds that his abandonment was a poor decision on the grounds of human decency but practically demanded by *eusebeia*.⁴⁴ None of these offers for Philoctetes at Troy requires the archer's arrival to be voluntary; in a larger sense, Heracles' intervention practically renders Philoctetes submission involuntary. Odysseus' and Neoptolemus' warnings to heed the gods can be resisted somewhat understandably, but not even Philoctetes can reject the direction of his deified friend. Thus, pity for Philoctetes' condition is a moral good, but its application demands consideration. Odysseus asks that it be applied in order to get Philoctetes what he needs at Troy, but Neoptolemus allows it to turn his actions against the goals of the Greek commanders, his immediate superior, the gods themselves, and the overarching fate of Troy. In this sense, Odysseus emerges victorious in accomplishing what he set out to do, and this with the explicit support of the Greek gods.

In a reading related to the tragedy as presenting moral goods in competition with one another, there is the political idea that some moral goods are inherently more worthwhile than others. An ending following Odysseus' proposed plan to get Philoctetes to Troy represents a

⁴⁴ One can practically hear Agamemnon's half apology to Achilles, blaming the fickle gods and their curse of madness in a moment of heightened emotion, from *Iliad* 19.78-144 repeated to Philoctetes.

good from which an entire people benefit; the conclusion arrived at by Neoptolemus and Philoctetes on their own admittedly sets them against the whole Greek expedition. Thus, whether at the heart of his motivation or not, “Odysseus is an instrument of the common good, seeking not for personal glory, but the best outcome for all.”⁴⁵ Again, this reading is within the realm of the possible, though it hardly includes the wide range of societal forces at work within the play. In consideration of Odysseus’ admission that he can be whatever man the situation requires, there must be a reckoning of the idea that Odysseus is completely self-centered with the reality that he trusts in the sanctity of his mission. An excellent microcosm for this synthesis is the scene of confrontation between Odysseus and Philoctetes in the third episode. In response to Philoctetes’ invocation of Hephaestus and accusation that the son of Laertes makes the gods liars, Odysseus abandons the political defense of his mission and methods (cf. 66-67: Neoptolemus cannot hurt Odysseus, but he can harm all the Argives) and declares Zeus the author of his mission, the presented path the one that must be traveled (986-993). Thus, Odysseus has the option of “argu[ing] with Philoctetes by using his own language; Philoctetes’ appeal to Hephaestus is trumped by Odysseus’ appeal to Zeus”, but “Odysseus is, however, unsuccessful because his invocation of a divine authority is perceived to be a patent attempt to justify his own actions.”⁴⁶ Again, rather than any weakness in the defensibility of his mission and methods, Odysseus’ persuasion falls short in the face of Philoctetes’ unwillingness to yield to Odysseus on personal grounds. Philoctetes’ caricature of Odysseus will not be undone. Thus, viewing Odysseus as a political force allows for a sympathetic reading of the son of Laertes’

⁴⁵ Martha Nussbaum, “Consequences and Character in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 1, no.1 (1976), 29.

⁴⁶ Aristide Tessitore, “Justice, Poetics, and Piety in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*,” *The Review of Politics* 65, no.1 (2003), 69.

self-defense, whether he chooses to invoke his own opportunity for gain, the declarations of the gods, or the Greek cause at Troy.

Ultimately, Odysseus emerges as a unique voice in a world too concerned with *phusis* and inherited greatness. Odysseus makes his own greatness with “an ethic of his own, based on the power of language and of change.”⁴⁷ But in this particular case he finds help, and perhaps some solace, along the way as a loyal member of the Greek expedition at Troy and a favorite of the gods. Heracles proves the reality of the gods’ support, and the victory at Troy that he predicts will indeed involve the bow in Philoctetes’ possession and the son of Achilles. But who can argue that strategy courtesy of Odysseus, son of Laertes, is not the true key to Greek triumph over the Trojans? It is Odysseus’ unique world of mind that, while limited in success here, is the true example standing in opposition to Neoptolemus’ ultimate moral failings.

⁴⁷ Ruth Scodel, *Sophocles* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 96.

Conclusion

Odysseus, as a character in ancient Greek literature, is not universally admirable. In the *Odyssey*, for example, the fact that his revenge is carried out with support from Athena and Zeus does not mean that the means and measure by which he secures justice for his family are beyond questioning. The main point of this project is to suggest that the Odysseus in *Philoctetes* can be viewed as more sympathetic than he appears on the surface, and that rhetoric is the key to uncovering the presence of this possibility within the text. Odysseus' supreme loyalty to the Greek cause at Troy, whether ultimately based in the pursuit of individual glory or not, is much more than an excuse employed to avoid Philoctetes' potentially lethal wrath; this loyalty holds water as Odysseus' defining characteristic in *Hecuba* and features prominently in the *Iliad*. Ajax and Philoctetes, in their respective plays, both go too far in ascribing absolute, negative qualities to Odysseus and thereby reveal the self-constructed circumstances in which they themselves become solely the victims of injustice permitted by Odysseus' supporters on Olympus and at Troy. This reality complicates the role of sympathetic, tragic character that each of the Greek heroes at odds with Odysseus traditionally plays. But both within and without the constraints of Aristotelian tragic poetics, Sophocles successfully recreates in *Philoctetes* a situation in which his Athenian audience could appreciate the difficulty of living in times complicated by competing theories and methodologies.

One worthwhile qualification of Odysseus' success by the end of *Philoctetes* is the possibility that Heracles' intervention takes away the glory of the accomplishment of getting Philoctetes to Troy from the son of Laertes. While difficult to defend as the express purpose of the *deus ex machina*, it might serve as some correction of Odysseus' focus on the fame accrued by such an achievement. Again, the merchant's tale of Odysseus' bragging about his confidence

in being able to coerce Philoctetes by impossible means has to be exaggeration. But as far as Odysseus confessing to being the man that the situation requires, and appealing to Neoptolemus by promising that, as a result of following Odysseus, he will be spoken of as *sophos* and can be called pious every other day of his life after today, Heracles does decrease the likelihood that there will be this amount of payoff. Neoptolemus appears to have abandoned such thinking shortly before his crisis at the start of the third episode, rejecting the chorus' suggestion to take the bow and run while Philoctetes sleeps for the compound shame of leaving the deed unfinished and this only by means of falsehoods (835-842).

On the subject of unfinished deeds, the lack of a typical Sophoclean tragic ending must be taken in conjunction with the unique *deus ex machina*. Heracles intervenes in such a way that keeps the unthinkable results of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes' agreement from taking place. Without too much emphasis on Sophocles' affinity for myth, there is some horror in the abrupt reversal from Neoptolemus' final appeal as a sworn friend of Philoctetes to the casual idea that they can return to Greece and simply kill anyone who opposes them with Heracles' blessed arrows. Rather than being yet another character whose egregious actions elicit disaster within the context of the play, Neoptolemus gets another chance to contextualize emotion and action. There is a glimmer of hope in this deliverance, the boy's youth a cheerful element of his newfound bond with Philoctetes (1433-1437). But then, the force of Heracles' admonition to observe *eusebeia* is here made clear by the dominating presence of myth, and the imminent tragic reenters the audience's view. Neoptolemus will fail in his next chance, with the cured and heroic Philoctetes nowhere to be seen. This, as a price for Greek victory at Troy, is a most unique evocation of pity and fear among extant tragedies.

One final usage of Odysseus has implications for this analysis. Nearly contemporary with Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Here Odysseus appears as the ultimate threat to Agamemnon and Menelaus' plan to back down from killing Iphigenia. In a way all too similar by this point, the sons of Atreus briefly come to the unsatisfactory conclusion of killing Calchas, as he is one of the few people who know Artemis' demand of the expedition stranded at Boeotia. But then they remember that Odysseus also knows, and he represents a threat. Agamemnon reminds Menelaus that Odysseus ποικίλος ἀεὶ πέφυκε τοῦ τ' ὄγλου μέτα, to which Menelaus responds, confirming φιλοτιμία μὲν ἐνεχεται, δεινῶ κακῶ (526-527). This represents another usage of the archetypal Odysseus, in this case by some rather unpracticed and certainly not self-aware conspirators. Their treatment of Odysseus does receive a significant amount of support later in the play, when Achilles reports to Clytemnestra that the son of Laertes is indeed heading up the movement within the Greek army to come claim Iphigenia as a sacrifice (1361-1365). However, this quick exchange is interrupted by Iphigenia's famously irreconcilable reversal of opinion. What is illusion or sarcasm or merely yielding to the force of myth at this point in the play is anyone's guess. This treatment may mark the final usage of Odysseus in the dramatic presentations of the fifth century BCE, and it seems to do so with little care for resolving the incompatibility of Odysseus as a type with Odysseus as a speaking character.

But Sophocles' Odysseus is complete in *Philoctetes*, and the man retains his winning streak. Though he has been questioned and deemed reprehensible by both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus over the course of the tragedy, Odysseus is justified in Heracles' intervention as simply having used questionable means to accomplish what fate declared key to Greek success at Troy, an eventuality to which even the gods yield. The hero has worked throughout the tragedy within the constraints of Neoptolemus' changing mind and the wavering chances that the

embassy will accomplish its mission any time soon. Odysseus' defense of his methods as the only way humanly possible, given the circumstances of Philoctetes' unending hatred toward the sons of Atreus and the son of Laertes as well as the archer's possession of Heracles' unerring bow, still stands unchallenged. Neoptolemus' instincts to pity Philoctetes and be wary of Odysseus' methods are not at fault; the issue at heart for the youth is indeed maturation, in this case the recognition of the possibility of relative moral values. Like Orestes, Antigone, and Hippolytus before him, Neoptolemus has had to choose what he believes to be the lesser of two evils. Unlike these tragic characters, Neoptolemus' consequences have yet to come by the play's end. The scene is a complex one, in-line with the complex perspective adopted by Odysseus throughout. Not simply a man serving himself, Odysseus forces his opponents to recognize that Greece and its gods are on his side, and that in remaining faithful to his duty to these he has chosen to accomplish his mission by any means necessary. If Sophocles' intent was to set up Odysseus as the obstacle for Neoptolemus' coming to understand friendship, he succeeded only in creating a straw man. The right idea, the best way for Greeks to get Philoctetes to Troy, has been declared by Odysseus from the start.

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