

Appropriating an Ancient Hero: Gide's *Philoctète*
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In this paper I show that in composing his *Philoctète* Gide makes radical—I shall use the word "violent"—choices in departing from Sophocles to make Philoctetes his own kind of hero. His ultimate aim in these choices is to help his audience gain freedom from the orthodoxies, especially the religious ones, that he thinks constrain them.

In "L'évolution du théâtre" (*Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, 1932-9, vol. IV), Gide calls for a return to ancient Greek tragedy. Here we are to find heroes to counter Christianity's heroism of "acceptance" and "resignation" (216), a heroism that invites the audience to pretend to something they do not feel (209-11). Their very distance in time and place will lend the ancient heroes a respect that will help bring modern audiences out of their hypocritical bondage (204-5). But Gide is not content merely to translate Sophocles; he makes Sophocles his own, he appropriates Sophocles' play. While he exploits the distance he values in the names he takes from Sophocles, in his *Philoctète* Gide creates a Philoctetes radically different from Sophocles'. Gide's hero chooses to remain on the island ultimately to enjoy a virtually Platonic (Faguet, "Sophocle: *Philoctète*, par André Gide," *Propos de théâtre*, Paris, 1903, 42) truth, goodness, and beauty. Here he is free from the ethical tensions in society, free from his country (which wants to use him), and free from a world that subordinates human beings to the gods (who, interestingly, never appear in this play but are nonetheless cited as authoritative). (*Œuvres Complètes* vol. III, e.g. 20, 25, 50). He models the liberation Gide values in "L'évolution du théâtre" and which Gide sought for his own sexuality (Robinson, *Gay Lives*, Chicago, 1999, 181-204).

Sophocles of course acknowledges the ethical tensions in society and the possibility of doing evil in the name of country, but presents us with a world in which humans ultimately find some remedy in the gods. Gide's Philoctète, says Watson-Williams (*André Gide and the Greek Myth*, Oxford, 1967, 60-1), "gropes his way" in the course of the play to the view that "there is something above the gods" ("Mais c'est donc qu'au-dessus des dieux, Néoptolème, il y a quelque chose" [*Œuvres Complètes* vol. III 47]). This "something" is "the self" (Watson-Williams 60). But in Sophocles there is nothing above the gods, certainly no human self. Here even the moving redemption of friendship in Neoptolemos is finally insufficient to bring things to their proper conclusion. It takes the gods to achieve that. Alt aptly calls Sophocles' play a drama of human "Unzulänglichkeit," "insufficiency," ("Schicksal und H Υ YKY im *Philoktet* des Sophokles," *Hermes* 89 [1961] 174). Gide's Philoctète claims a self-sufficiency (in knowledge of the world and of himself) that Sophocles' Philoctetes realizes he cannot claim. Students of the two *Philoctetes* plays have reduced the voice of Heracles to the human conscience (Faguet 43-4) or neglected Heracles altogether (Wilson, "The Wound and the Bow," in *The Wound and the Bow*, New York, 1947, 294-5) and so have missed a crucial difference between the two plays—and the violence of Gide's appropriation.

Hall, speaking of a "collective assault" on a text by those who would present it, prefers "appropriation" to "reception" ("Towards a Theory of Performance Reception," *Arion* 12 [1] [2004] 61). But even "appropriation" by itself seems inadequate to describe Gide's aggressive "assault" on Greek tragedy to forge a weapon to fight the orthodoxies he thought so stifling for everyone and so repressive in his own life. We would expect nothing less than the most aggressive individualism from the author whose hero is not Philoctetes, but Philoctète.