Sophistry and Persuasive Communities in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*

For decades, readers have evaluated Sophocles’ representation of Odysseus in the *Philoctetes* as among the most unfavorable and unscrupulous figures to appear on the tragic stage in fifth century Athens. Scholars such as W. B. Stanford and Bernard Knox note the extent to which the Odysseus of the *Philoctetes* embodies a kind of duality created by his Homeric persona—a hero who has achieved his status and engages with enemies and friends by means that are less typically heroic (Stanford, 1954; Knox, 1964). Odysseus’ traditional adaptability of thought and cunning undertake a moral quality in the play, leaving an impression of an underhanded and ambitious figure who will achieve his objectives with little consideration for who is injured in the process. More recently, scholars such as James Boyd White and Martha Nussbaum have identified within the play a competition between two “persuasive communities”— groups of speakers and listeners that operate under a system of shared values and ideologies concerning the proper and fair use of persuasive speech—of which Odysseus and Philoctetes are representative. Philoctetes adheres strictly to a “men-as-ends” persuasive community that requires speakers and listeners to interact with one another on a basis of equality and mutual concern, thereby creating a stable community that is protected from external forces. Conversely, Odysseus is the champion of a “men-as-means” persuasive community that is interested only in objectives and their completion, and that considers the subjugation of listeners by speakers a necessary evil of that process. Through the resolution of the friction that arises between these two persuasive communities—and specifically through Odysseus’ failure and Philoctetes’ success in indoctrinating the young Neoptolemus into their respective persuasive communities—scholars have postulated Sophocles’ distaste for the kind of coached rhetorical dexterity familiar to the civic experience of his audience, or even his “militant affirmation of inherited excellence (Rose, 1992).”

However, this paper suggests a more complex reading of these persuasive communities and seeks to interpret the Odysseus of the *Philoctetes* not as an inherently vile or self-interested figure, but rather as representative of a sophistic rhetorical ethos that, though extreme, has certain merits that cannot be ignored. Here, I identify specifically sophistic modes of persuasion in Odysseus’ approach to Neoptolemus and discuss the impact of this approach upon the play’s audience in 409 BC, just two years after Pisander’s carefully calculated pitch to the Athenian assembly produced real, tangible constitutional change. Rather than a single, negative reaction to the guile of Odysseus, I propose instead a spectrum of responses from a fifth century Athenian audience that a modern reader can authentically experience as well, each of which will be determined by the viewer’s or reader’s particular attitude toward the tenants of the persuasive communities at hand. While some audience members may share with modern scholars a strong distaste for a rhetorical ethos that subjugates listeners to advance its own goals, others may have recognized both the utility of Odysseus’ persuasive community—even if they regret the necessity of its use—and the severe handicaps faced by Philoctetes’ more amicable one. Moreover, this more nuanced reading suggests a complicated and less combative objective in Sophocles’ representation of Homer’s most dexterous speaker. Rather, it explores sophism as but one extreme of a verbal ethos that, though imperfect, still has some pragmatic merit.

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