

Lemnos, Ethics, and Community in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is as much a play of geography as of ideas and community. Indeed, these features may be considered in connection with each other. Lemnos, the island where Philoctetes has been left by his fellow warriors after a snake-bite, is otherwise uninhabited, and Philoctetes' reflections reveal enormous physical and emotional pain. Lemnos is, however, not only attractive, but accessible by sea through a cove amongst the cliffs. By his own admission, Philoctetes has everything he needs (299 πάντα' ἐκπορίζει) except a cure for his disease. This assessment is consistent with Odysseus' description of the amenities of the island (see Webster, 1970) and the suitability of his disguise as a merchant. (Other dramatists depicted Lemnos as inhabited, as it was historically.) For one person, with only fire and a bow, it meets the standard of a small-holder's self-sufficiency, a goal advanced by Athenian politicians such as Solon to provide a broad citizen base. Despite its limitations in practice (Thommen, 2012 *inter alios*), self-sufficiency (τὸ αὐταρκές) is a general *desideratum* in Greek thought; for instance, in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b.25-7 τὸ αὐταρκές is one of the foundations of pleasure (ἡδονή) (Adkins, 1963, Nussbaum, 2001; cf. Lane, 2012). In addition, despite the profane aspects of Philoctetes' illness from the snake bite, he leads a moral life on Lemnos; Odysseus, not Philoctetes, counsels deception and violence (Austin, 2011).

Nevertheless, Philoctetes' stay on Lemnos, however limited his demands on it, is a reminder that the physical environment is rarely depicted in classical Greek literature outside of human referents, or for itself alone (cf. Parry, 1957). As a negative force, the power of nature can be seen most clearly in the snake bite. In a more positive context, when Philoctetes calls upon "harbors, outcroppings, the dwelling-places of wild animals, rocks" (936-7), they are personified as witnesses to Neoptolemus' broken oath (941 ὁμόσας) to take him home. Cursing

Neoptolemus, Philoctetes describes the young man's πανουργίας τέχνημα "masterpiece of villainy" at 928 (*LSJ*; cf. Kamerbeek, 1980) as fire, a source of fear. As Philoctetes showed earlier when describing how he "barely" (296 μόλις) created fire by rubbing rocks together, fire both is and is not under human control.

Philoctetes' ten years of isolation complicates the assessment of his ethical compass. This becomes apparent when the audience hears howls from Philoctetes well before it does words, a touchstone of humanity. In contrast, Neoptolemus and Odysseus are skilled at persuasion (πείθειν and cognates, *passim*). In terms of ethics, Neoptolemus is of good nature (88 ἔφον γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐκ τέχνης πράσσειν κακῆς). After observing the physical agony Philoctetes has endured on Lemnos (see Austin, 2011), Neoptolemus' compassion leads him to the verge of abandoning Troy and taking Philoctetes home. However, both Neoptolemus and the audience receive a foretaste of Odysseus' ignominiousness when he views Lemnos strictly through the lens of potential profit. Instead of wisdom, Odysseus' stratagem (14 σόφισμα) entails persuading Neoptolemus to see a day of shame (83 εἰς ἀναιδῆς) as a means toward the end of becoming the noblest of mortals (85 εὐσεβέστατος βροτῶν) (Austin, 2011). Odysseus has no scruples, let alone the thought of an apology or compensation, any more than he understands beauty or love.

The importance of place in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* can also be connected with the Athenian political context. Some (e.g. Vickers, 2008) have connected Philoctetes' exile with that of Alcibiades. Philoctetes' isolation under conditions of physical torment, to the point that no Greeks have heard of his whereabouts, is also reminiscent of the conditions of the oligarchic coup the year before the play, in which citizens were separated socially and sometimes physically and occasionally executed without a trace (Thucydides VIII.66.2; see DuBois, 1991). In these cases we also see a dearth of balance, morality, and physical and social community.

With democracy restored, can Athens prevail, and, if it does, what kind of πόλις will it be? As the Sophoclean Philoctetes leaves Lemnos to follow Fate to Troy, the audience may remember that the Neoptolemus of myth adopted not Philoctetes' decency but rather the hubris of the Sophoclean Odysseus.

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