

## Philoctetes and Me: Tragedy and the Personal

An excruciating wound inflicted by a viper (*S. Phil.* 266-8) dominates Philoctetes' life. It causes him physical agony as the pain periodically erupts, and it has also brought about his complete exile from society, because his cries of pain and the smell of his wound cause his fellow Greeks to shun him. This wound is, of course, of mythical origin and mythical proportions. Any wound of this level of malignancy would have caused the death of a real human being long before he reached the point of living for ten years on a deserted island. Moreover, the wound is not merely a physical manifestation but a metaphor for the anger and resentment that Philoctetes feels towards the Greeks (Allan 2014: 271.) And yet, although the wound is a literary and mythical creation, Sophocles describes its appearance and effects in a remarkably realistic way. Last year, after an extreme case of cellulitis, I ended up with a highly infected wound some 23 cm in diameter on the back of my leg, caused by a staphylococcus infection. The site became a mass of black and red and yellow: at *Phil.* 1157. Philoctetes refers to his flesh as αἰόλος, and while the term is usually translated as “discolored”, other meanings such as “glittering”, or “sheeny, changeful of hue” (LSJ) could also have described the wound's appearance. It looked as though a portion of my calf had literally been eaten away, recalling the imagery of eating that Sophocles frequently uses to describe the disease and the wound (*S. Phil.* 7, 313. 696-7 705, 745, 1167). It was full of pus (cf. 38-9, 824-5), walking on it was exhausting and painful (cf. 41-2, 203, 283, 291-2) and it sometimes produced an itching sensation as though something was moving through it (cf. 743-4, 758, 785-6). Pseudomonas bacteria also gave it an unpleasant odor (cf. 876, 890-2, 900-1, 1032) which was obvious and embarrassing (cf. 473; Edwards-Jones 2014).

Sophocles' frequent use of medical terminology in his plays is well documented (e.g. Allan 2014: 259, n.2), and his linguistic focus may connect with his association with the cult of Asclepius by some ancient authors, even if that association has recently been examined and found to be dubious (Connolly, 1998). One might speculate that his detailed and accurate description of Philoctetes' wound could have originated in actual observation, since Sophocles had a distinguished record of military service and must have seen many casualties. In this way, lived experience would inform Greek literature. But the process can be reversed as well. Tragedy is increasingly being used by medical practitioners to illuminate mental and physical suffering in the contemporary world, to help modern health workers gain empathy with their patients (Kampourelli 2022; Hackey 2014) and I will suggest in this paper both that patients themselves may also find meaning and comfort for their conditions by reading tragedy, and also that the process has an extra dimension when patients are themselves classical scholars, as tragedy and lived experience, ancient and modern, intertwine (cf. Hallett and van Nortwick 1997). I left the hospital after just 17 days, framing my departure through Philoctetes' final words bidding farewell to the setting of his torment as he prepares to face a new and unknown future (1450-68). I left a place which I both hated and which had been an odd sort of home, reflecting that perhaps I understood one Sophoclean tragedy a little better than I had done before.

## Bibliography

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