

Emotional Pain as an Ethical Guide: Neoptolemus' *Aischunē* in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

When Odysseus commands his subordinate, the adolescent and as-yet unproven Greek warrior Neoptolemus, to lie, scheme, and steal to acquire Philoctetes' invincible bow, the youth's immediate reaction is to express pain: Ἐγὼ μὲν οὐς ἄν τῶν λόγων ἀλγῶ κλύων, / Λαερτίου παῖ, τούσδε καὶ πράσσειν στυγῶ· (“These words that I feel pain hearing, son of Laertius, I would hate to act them out,” 86-87). Only after expressing his distress does Neoptolemus rationalize his feelings, explaining that plotting is not in his nature, that dishonesty is worse than failure, and so on. Neoptolemus follows such a sequence of response—an initial vocalization of emotional anguish following by an explanation thereof—throughout the play's action, as Sophocles consistently prioritizes Neoptolemus' emotional experience in ethical dilemmas, foregrounding the corporeal experience of emotional pain.

In the paper I propose to deliver, I first argue that the pain Neoptolemus here voices is the psychosomatic experience of *aischunē* (as explored in Cairns 1993, Williams 1993, Konstan 2003 & 2006, variously translated as “shame,” “guilt,” “hesitation,” or “dishonor”), the recognition that he is being forced to act in a manner fundamentally at odds with his self-perception, with his understanding of his father's *kleos* and his duty to uphold it. I then explore how Neoptolemus' non-lexical expressions of mental anguish parallel Philoctetes' cries of unbearable physical pain, a significant verbal echo by which Sophocles links the pain of *aischunē* with the Philoctetes' chronic suffering. With a greater appreciation of the depth of Neoptolemus' psychic ills, we can see more clearly how and why Neoptolemus makes decisions based on whether or not they trigger *aischunē*'s agony. By foregrounding Neoptolemus' pain in his replies to Odysseus, Sophocles prioritizes Neoptolemus' emotional anguish over other

considerations in his voiced moral deliberation and thereby shows his hero thinking first with his feelings.

Previous work on the representation of *aischunē* in Greek literature and philosophy, often beginning from Aristotle's discussion of the *pathe* (Fussi 2015, Konstan 2006), has explored the socio-cultural motivations of *aischunē* as an emotion as well as *aischunē* as a means of ethical reasoning (Cairns 1993, Williams 1993). Where my work differs from past scholarship is my insistence—following Sophocles' own, I believe—on the primacy of the corporeal experience of *aischunē*. That is, I seek to highlight Neoptolemus' *papai*'s and *aiai*'s, especially vis-à-vis Philoctetes' experience of illness, as central to the experience of *aischunē*. To the extent that *aischunē* is a “reasoning” emotion, its logic is anguish and its expression parallels Philoctetes' unreasoning yelps.

Works Cited

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