

## The Persuasion of Philoctetes

In their interpretation of the first half of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, scholars have almost universally approached the dialogue from the perspective of Neoptolemus. This approach has proved fruitful for shedding light on the play and has produced many lively debates about the boy's moral standing (see Winnington-Ingram 1979: 10-11). But this focus has unfortunately tended to reduce Philoctetes to little more than a prop in the story of the boy's attempted deceit. Thus, Philoctetes' words are quickly understood and explained as emotional outbursts or unsophisticated begging. For example, Winnington-Ingram, in summarizing the initial exchange between the two, describes the "joy of Philoctetes at hearing a Greek voice; his love and admiration for Achilles; his generous sympathy for Neoptolemus in his supposed wrongs" (1980: 285).

Such readings are only natural, as the audience has been primed by the *prologos* to see the situation in terms of Neoptolemus' task: a boy manipulates an abandoned, disabled wretch. There is, however, another side to the story, another man with a task at hand. Philoctetes has spent years alone on desolate Lemnos. One day, dragging his pungent, festering wound behind him, he returns to his dwelling and finds men dressed in familiar garb, holding familiar weapons, and speaking a familiar tongue. This has happened a few times over the last decade, but never have the passers-by been willing to rescue him (305-311). Philoctetes' task is clear: he must attempt to persuade these men to rescue him.

The task of this paper is to reconsider the deception of Philoctetes (219-914) from the perspective of the deceived in order to show that Philoctetes' words are not adequately understood without adequate consideration of his rhetorical task. I examine his initial exchange

with Neoptolemus (219-253), his introduction speech (254-316), and his bout of intense pain (730-820). Contrary to scholars like R.B. Rutherford, who remarked that Philoctetes “is hiding nothing and can hold back no detail” (2012: 104), I argue that Philoctetes’ words are often better explained as carefully chosen components of his attempt to persuade these potential rescuers than as emotional outbursts. Thus, my analysis tracks closely the rhetorical techniques he employs, the information he reveals, the information he conceals, and the contexts in which he does so, paying close attention to how he navigates the obstacles to his rescue, such as his appearance and stench.

In the initial exchanges between the men, I argue that Philoctetes’ words are largely shaped by his attempts to intervene rhetorically in order to mitigate his audience’s feelings of disgust, and to establish kinship. In his introduction speech, I pay close attention to the way Philoctetes presents himself and his story in order to facilitate his rescue. In his episode of intense pain, I attempt to show that even in his most desperate moments of suffering he does not lose sight of his rhetorical task, and that here most of all Sophocles offers a profound reflection on the rhetorical situation of those who suffer like Philoctetes.

This rhetorical analysis offers new data that will contribute to our understanding of Philoctetes’ characterization, shed new light on the relationship between suffering and rhetoric in Sophocles’ tragedy, and do justice to Philoctetes’ agency.

## Works Cited

- Rutherford, R. B. *Greek Tragic Style: Form, Language, and Interpretation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Winnington-Ingram, R. P. *Sophocles: An Interpretation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Winnington-Ingram, R. P. "Sophoclea." *Bulletin - Institute of Classical Studies* 26, no. 1 (1979): 1-12.