

Unnatural Longing: Nostalgia in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

A discussion of nostalgia may seem more at home in the works of Euripides. Gary Meltzer (2006), for example, has identified Euripidean nostalgia for a simpler, pre-Sophistic, transcendent truth that exposes a fundamental conservatism. This paper will use *Philoctetes* as a case study to discuss the Sophoclean use of nostalgia and to demonstrate that it functions differently than Meltzer's Euripidean definition. Instead of expressing a longing for a (often idealized) past, in *Philoctetes*, Sophocles uses Philoctetes' nostalgia to highlight the dangers of an unhealthy attachment to the past. Neoptolemus functions as a foil to Philoctetes, as the young man's flexibility (part of the change he undergoes noted in Vernant, 1972) highlights the intransigence with which Philoctetes clings to his past. While Neoptolemus can focus on his future (Allan, 2011), Philoctetes refuses to move beyond his past.

This paper argues that Philoctetes' years of isolation on Lemnos and his longing to resume his former life has allowed him to maintain a detrimental and unrealistic expectation of that life. Sophocles depicts his nostalgic longing as having driven him to create an intimate home-like relationship with his new surroundings, which initially seems sympathetic and a healthy reaction to a difficult situation. As his character is developed, however, it becomes apparent that his attachment to the past is jeopardizing his future and that of the Greeks. Philoctetes is, as Rose has argued more broadly of Sophoclean heroes, a hero who has been deprived of markers of his identity (Rose, 1992). But instead of invoking pity for Philoctetes' abandonment, Sophocles uses him to exemplify a true nostalgia: a pervasive sickness for home that impacts his life as much as the festering wound on his foot has.

Segal (1995) has noted the theme of savagery throughout the play as Philoctetes' wound consumes his spirit, and suggests that the only cure is the reconciliation with gods and reacceptance of human society. This paper argues that such a reacceptance of human society would require Philoctetes to move beyond the crippling nostalgia he has for the way his life used to be and to accept the fluid malleability of life. Philoctetes' nostalgia is not an innocuous sentiment that romanticizes the past, but a choice to continue living in the past even above his own rescue and healing.

Philoctetes, produced in 409 BCE, is one of the few securely dated of Sophocles' plays. This paper argues that, having been produced so near the end of Sophocles' life, it represents a reflection on a lifetime of civic involvement and in particular on the individual's role in a society that is ever-changing. It is a focused analysis of the harm that comes from one man's inability to integrate within the changing world. When Philoctetes is faced with forcibly rejoining the Greeks he resists; time has effectively stopped for him since he was abandoned on Lemnos, allowing his hatred of the Greeks to fester and his notion of the outside world in general and home in particular to become unrealistically idealized. Heracles' intervention, however, demonstrates that Philoctetes' resistance has been misguided and counter-productive, in that it has caused him suffering and created difficulties for society. Such difficulties are made explicit through the impact of Philoctetes' suffering on Neoptolemus, the play's internal audience of the hero's current state (Lada-Richards 2009). The anguish Neoptolemus experiences invites the audience to consider the impact of Philoctetes' nostalgia on society as a whole.

Bibliography

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