

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* as Therapeutic Tool

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Ajax* have undergone a revival of sorts in the last few years through the Philoctetes Project which brings these ancient dramas to modern soldiers. The *Philoctetes* and the *Ajax* both resonate with modern soldiers who have gone through similar experiences as the titular characters. Sophocles' plays are thought to be especially relatable for soldiers both ancient and modern as they were originally performed for an audience which would have included many veterans who could benefit from the cathartic effect of these plays (Blair, 2008). I, however, would like to propose that the *Philoctetes* would be beneficial for another group: those who have suffered trauma because of disease or the isolation resulting from such disease.

Though the dating of Sophocles' plays is difficult, the *Philoctetes* is thought to be one of his later plays which would have been performed well after the Athenian plague which devastated Athens. Philoctetes' suffering would have been relatable to Sophocles' initial audience who experienced similar feelings of pain and isolation. Dealing with disease, however, is not just an ancient problem but a modern one as well. The 2014 West Africa Ebola Outbreak and its victims are grappling with the same issues that the *Philoctetes* explores. As in the *Philoctetes*, the effect of the disease goes beyond the physical: Ebola victims often experience isolation and stigma not just while sick but after recovery as well (Diallo, 2014). Sophocles explores the suffering caused by such isolation in his *Philoctetes*. As the *Philoctetes* has resonated with both ancient and modern soldiers who experienced the horrors of war, it may have served as a therapeutic tool for the Athenians who suffered psychological trauma because of the horrors of sickness. I propose it could be used for modern victims during their recovery and reintegration.

I will argue that the *Philoctetes* is relatable to those who have experienced illness for following reasons. The term that is used for Philoctetes' ailment is νόσος, a word which had a wide variety of meanings including ones specific to disease such as sickness, disease, madness, infatuation, as well as more general meanings such as distress, anguish, bane, and mischief. Sophocles does specify that the νόσος was caused by a snake-bite near a shrine to Chryse (1126-1328) but the behavior of the Greeks that abandoned him denotes a sense of pollution in addition to sickness in that his cries were ill-omened and interfered with sacrifices (8-11). By using language which is intentionally open-ended, Sophocles' makes Philoctetes' illness more relatable to a wide audience who has suffered from a variety of ailments.

Though the disease is by no means unimportant, throughout the play it is not the physical aspects of Philoctetes' ailment which are the foci but rather the resulting isolation and loneliness. The chorus emphasizes this aspect in many places, e.g.: “Οἰκτίρω νιν ἔγωγ', ὅπως, / μή του κηδομένου βροτῶν, / μηδὲ ζύντροφον ὄμμ' ἔχων, / δύστανος, μόνος αἰεὶ, / νοσεῖ μὲν νόσον ἀγρίαν, / ἀλύει δ' ἐπὶ παντί τῳ / χρείας ἰσταμένῳ” (169-175). This idea is echoed by Philoctetes himself; when relating how he came to such a state his speech focuses primarily on the trauma of his abandonment by his fellow Greeks rather than on the pain of his disease (269-284). Isolation is not only indicated by specific lines and descriptions in the play but by changes in the structure and cast of the play. Mitchell-Boyask has pointed out that Sophocles increases Philoctetes' isolation by depopulating the setting of Lemnos by changing his chorus to Greek sailors rather than the traditional chorus of Lemnians which were used by Aeschylus and Euripides (Mitchell-Boyask, 2008).

The generic language of Philoctetes' suffering allows for a widely empathetic reading of the texts, especially given the circumstances prior to its first performance. The emphasis on

Philoctetes' isolation would also contribute to the play being relatable to Sophocles' audience. These two factors could allow a performance in which modern patients may benefit from listening to the play in the same manner that the Philoctetes Project uses the text for military PTSD victims. It is my hope that by looking at the *Philoctetes* through the lens of illness and patient experience we can gain a better understanding not only of ancient reactions to the play but utilize it to help modern victims of disease as well.

Select Bibliography

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