

Amicus ex Machina: The Figure of Herakles in Philoctetes

Herakles' appearance at the conclusion of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* divides scholars into two camps: one which believes the ending is fundamentally consistent with the plot and themes of the tragedy, and one which believes it is fundamentally inconsistent. However, both camps oversimplify a complex interaction. Herakles' appearance is consistent with many of the themes present throughout the tragedy (Greengard 1987). Furthermore, his appearance is a physical manifestation of one of the many mythical and epic references made throughout *Philoctetes*, particularly references to Herakles and his friendship with Philoctetes (Kyriakou 2012). However, the arguments Herakles invokes that convince Philoctetes to go to Troy are not new; Neoptolemus offered them just before Herakles' arrival, and Philoctetes rejected them outright (Park 1974). Thus, something in Herakles' appearance, and in his μῦθοι rather than in Neoptolemus' λόγοι, makes Philoctetes immediately, and joyfully, consent to return to Troy. I argue that Sophocles' innovation in the Herakles *deus ex machina* is intentionally disjointed from the rest of the tragedy but fundamentally consistent with the themes of the play to emphasize Philoctetes' break with his contemporary society but his solidarity with traditional society, which Herakles represents as both god and heroic friend, whose double nature helps resolve Philoctetes' uncompromising stubbornness to divine will. This has further ramifications for the societal context that produced this play, and I argue that this disjointed ending emphasizes Sophocles' response to the turmoil of Athens in 409 BCE. My work explores a contentious issue to complicate the earlier conceptions of Sophocles' *deus ex machina* as an *amicus ex machina*.

Philoctetes' choice is at once both surprising and unsurprising: all the audience for this play, both the original audience and the modern one, know that Troy falls. Thus, it is unsurprising that the play ends with Philoctetes returning to Troy. On the other hand, while we

have seen Philoctetes wish to rejoin society and even feel tempted by Neoptolemus' arguments that he might be healed and will certainly be honored at Troy, Philoctetes resolves that these temptations cannot be worth the risk of going to Troy in the company of Odysseus and seeing οἱ μ' ἀπώλεσαν, "Those who destroyed me." (1356). His sudden reversal to joyful acceptance seems at odds with Philoctetes' earlier characterization and, to many scholars, shocking (Segal 1995). These arguments both invoke the gods and the friendship the speaker has with Philoctetes, but only one is successful.

Therefore, we must carefully consider the figure who presents the same arguments from a position of divine authority, but also from a position of a trusted friend and mentor to better reconcile this reversal. My paper will consider the figure of Herakles not only as a divine messenger, but also as a divine friend. Mediating this figure who is both god and mortal, both familiar and strange, concerned both with Philoctetes' personal fate and that of the panhellenic force is difficult. Herakles both tells Philoctetes that he has come only for his sake, τὴν σὴν δ' ἤκω, but also that he has come in order to relay to Philoctetes and Neoptolemus τὰ Διός... βουλεύματα, "the plans of Zeus," and further as a divine friend (1413-1415). Herakles mostly invokes their friendship while speaking, rather than divine will or irresistible fate. He urges Philoctetes to go to Troy for his own glory and health, but also reminds him not to forget to take a portion of the spoils to Herakles' own pyre as a μνημεῖα, a thank-offering, for his bow (1432). Better understanding the figure of Herakles as at once both friend and god, and the complicated relationship between these identities that compels Philoctetes to obey without complaint or hesitation will resolve this apparent conflict between the rest of the tragedy and Sophocles' *deus ex machina*.

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