

Pain Without Purpose: The Trauma of an Erased Identity in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Recent scholarship on Sophocles' *Philoctetes* has noted the connection between Philoctetes' betrayal by Neoptolemus and his loss of identity, and the impact of incommunicable pain, which defies expression in language, on social relationships (e.g., Austin 2011, Scarry 1985). In this paper, I argue that Philoctetes' island isolation and betrayal cause him individual physical and psychological trauma that expands outward to include Neoptolemus and Odysseus in a collective trauma, breaking down personal interactions in their heroic community. I examine the character of Philoctetes in the context of Homeric heroic society and draw comparisons with experiences of pain in the *Iliad* to show how Philoctetes' pain is especially traumatic because it occurs in isolation and not in a community. His petitions to Neoptolemus to bring him home represent his final attempt to regain his identity through his *nostos*, the reward of a successful Homeric hero. However, the interactions of Philoctetes, Neoptolemus, and Odysseus reveal a collective trauma that breaks down the customary relationships in their heroic community.

I begin by examining depictions of emotional and physical pain in the *Iliad* in order to establish a context for heroic suffering. In one episode, Menelaus is struck by an arrow, while surrounded by his brother, Agamemnon, and his companions (4.139-183). Similarly, Achilles learns of Patroclus' death while surrounded by slave women, his mother, and her attendants (*Il.*18.22-90). The heroes in each of these scenes experience pain made bearable by their presence within a community. While they do suffer, their expressions of pain do not reach the incoherent heights of Philoctetes' laments. Rather, their emotional responses are spread among the other characters present, reducing the intensity of general and individual suffering.

Next, I use close reading to argue that Philoctetes' pain in isolation leads to a suppression and erasure of his Homeric heroic identity, causing him to experience individual trauma. As the Homeric warrior essentially exists socially, building his identity on status, respect, and honor in the eyes of other men, Philoctetes' identity as such remains suppressed as long as he lives in solitude and without reputation (Clarke, 2006). This suppression of Philoctetes' identity is highlighted in the introduction of his character where the chorus refers to him only with indefinite pronouns (*Phil.* 157). I will trace how Philoctetes' suffering reveals his fear of desertion and connects solitude with an erasure of identity and intense suffering, similar to the experiences of individuals involved in cultural trauma. The identity-destroying nature of Philoctetes' isolation is reinforced by his repetition of "I have been utterly destroyed" (*ἀπόλωλα*), which extends to his desire for death and threats of suicide (*Phil.* 797, 1002). He attempts to convey the pain of his erasure to Neoptolemus and Odysseus when he curses them with the same word: "may you be utterly destroyed" (*ὄλλομι*, *Phil.* 961, 1019). His curse follows Neoptolemus' worry that he is "leaving his own nature" in betraying Philoctetes (*αὐτοῦ φύσιν λιπών*, *Phil.* 902-3). Philoctetes' use of *ὄλλομι* here suggests that his pain has extended to fracture Neoptolemus' identity and community as well. Thus the locus of trauma in Philoctetes' character expands outward to involve the heroic community in a collective trauma, similar to the experience of displaced people groups.

Bibliography:

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