

2

Philoctetes and Modern Criticism

P. E. EASTERLING

Philoctetes has attracted more critical attention in the last fifteen years than any other play of Sophocles, more perhaps than any other Greek tragedy. This may be partly because its themes—alienation and communication, ends and means—are familiar and important to modern readers, partly because it is a play of remarkable complexity which presents a special challenge to the interpreter. What follows is a brief attempt to take stock, to see how far there are areas of common agreement and where the important problems now seem to lie.

I begin with dramatic technique, on which much of the best recent work has been concentrated,¹ leading us to a deeper understanding of the play's extremely refined and subtle design. We can now make a number of fairly confident assumptions without having to argue from scratch about the nature of Sophocles' methods:

1. Here as in the other extant plays Sophocles releases the crucial information on which the action turns in a piecemeal and ambiguous way. If pressed too literally, as if it were historical evidence, it turns out to be inconsistent; but this is how he gives himself scope for effects of suspense and surprise and progressive revelation. The prophecy of Helenus is expounded in a way which leaves its detail uncertain until late in the play, and (as Robinson has pointed out)² Sophocles makes his characters respond to it as people would in real life, interpreting the cryptic revelation of the future according to their sense of what is actually feasible in the circumstances.

Thus in the Prologue Odysseus argues, from his knowledge that Philoctetes is a man with both a bitter grievance against the Greeks and

¹ Following the trail blazed by Tycho von Wilamowitz in 1917 (*Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles*).

² D. B. Robinson, "Topics in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *C.Q.* 19 (1969) p. 47.

an unyielding bow, that neither persuasion nor force will have any effect (103). To him at this juncture there is only one conceivable approach to Philoctetes, stealth. This attitude is echoed in the False Merchant's story (whether true or false is not important) that when Helenus said that Philoctetes must be persuaded to go to Troy Odysseus volunteered to fetch him: most likely he would do it by persuasion, he said, but if persuasion failed, by force (617 f.). Odysseus is approaching the prophecy in the pragmatic spirit that you do the best you can towards fulfilling what is foretold, crossing your fingers that whatever is beyond your control will somehow fall into place. This is what the Chorus are doing at 833 ff., when they urge Neoptolemus to make off with the bow while Philoctetes sleeps. When he refuses, saying that the god demanded Philoctetes as well as his bow, their answer is "The god will see to that: you get the bow while you can." This flexibility of response is not only convincing; it is also a great source of dramatic interest, which would simply be precluded if the dramatist and his characters treated the future deterministically.

2. It used often to be argued (and here Bowra's³ interpretation was especially influential) that the point of the varying responses to the prophecy was moral and religious, that the real focus of the action was the impious neglect by Odysseus of the god's command. But detailed analysis has shown the weaknesses in this approach; and in any case modern criticism of the other plays of Sophocles has made us more and more aware that a simple moralistic formula is unlikely to work. The impiety of Odysseus as the "real subject" of *Philoctetes* is as inadequate as the *hubris* of Ajax as the key to that play.

3. Analogous with Sophocles' ambiguous treatment of the prophecy is the ambiguity in his treatment of the characters' motivation. What, for example, does Odysseus really want, and what has he in mind at successive points in the play? Is he bluffing or not when he says that with the bow safely in Neoptolemus' possession Philoctetes can be left behind on Lemnos (1054 ff.)? How much truth is told by the False Merchant? Most important of all, how far is Neoptolemus carrying out his plan to deceive, and how far is he moved by pity and shame, *before* the moment at which he breaks? Recent criticism collectively demonstrates how little the audience actually knows—either about the prophecy or about the motivation of everyone but Philoctetes—until late in the play.

In the case of Neoptolemus, Steidle⁴ in particular has drawn attention to a great many places where his words or his silence may hint that he is

³ C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean tragedy* (1944) pp. 261 ff.

⁴ W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama* (1968) pp. 169 ff.

unhappy with the role he is playing; we must also remember that the suffering figure of Philoctetes makes a very powerful impact on our emotions, and therefore, we may suppose, on the emotions of Neoptolemus. But the important point is that almost every detail in Neoptolemus' behaviour can be variously interpreted. For example, at 461 ff., when he says he had better be going: is this simply a device for furthering the deceit, precipitating a plea for rescue on Philoctetes' part by pretending that the interview is over, just like the other interviews with casual callers in the past, or is Steidle right to see in it a hint of Neoptolemus' passivity and reluctance to take more positive action?⁵ The answer is that we have no means of knowing for certain, though each critic or producer or actor will have a strong individual response and feel sure of the tone of voice in which it should be played.

4. Finally, there is the visible stage action. Recent work has taught us to recognise more readily that what we see on the stage is crucially important for the interpretation of the play. Taplin,⁶ for example, has shown how the action of Neoptolemus in physically supporting Philoctetes links two highly significant scenes: 877 ff., where Philoctetes leans on Neoptolemus as he makes ready to leave Lemnos, and 1402 ff., where the same sequence follows Neoptolemus' final agreement that he will take him home. In both cases the action brings the essential situation—Philoctetes trusting Neoptolemus—as directly as possible before our eyes, and the parallelism between the two scenes deepens the meaning of 1402 ff.: *this* time Philoctetes' trust is not misplaced. Seale's⁷ work on the repeated pattern of departures that turn out not to be departures points in the same direction: the play exhibits symmetries of design that ought to make us wary of the once popular view that it is all stops and starts ("Sophocles Improvises" is the title Waldock chose for his chapter on *Philoctetes*).⁸

There is another consideration which in my view needs to be recognised as fundamental, one so obvious that it is easily overlooked. This is that the technique of "deceiving" the audience, or of withholding information in order to build up suspense or create surprise effects, must be sharply distinguished from anything that could be described as confusion. The most striking feature of *Philoctetes* as (I would argue) of all Sophocles' plays is, paradoxically enough, its lucidity. The audience are never allowed to be perplexed by the way the action is presented, though the issues may be

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁶ O. Taplin, "Significant actions in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *G.R.B.S.* 12 (1971) pp. 27 ff.

⁷ D. Seale, "The element of surprise in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *B.I.C.S.* 19 (1972) pp. 94 ff.

⁸ A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the dramatist* (1951) Ch. X.

left extraordinarily imprecise. In the Prologue, for example, the notorious ambiguity created by Sophocles as to the object of the mission—is it the bow alone, or the bow and Philoctetes?—is not perplexing because it is not even noticeable as the scene is played. Its function is to give Sophocles room for manoeuvre later, certainly not to present the audience with a puzzle to be worried over at this stage. At each point in the action the engagement of the audience's emotions is such that they have little attention to spare for questions of conflicting evidence. But audiences *can* be distracted by obscurity or implausibility and will refuse to suspend disbelief if they are; so that this impression of clarity where the situation is in fact shifting and complex depends on very considerable sleight of hand by the dramatist.

There is a good example in the scene with the False Merchant. The detail about the crucial importance of persuasion is made prominent by being set in a context where the means of winning Philoctetes are discussed at some length (610–619), and later in the play it is reaffirmed as an essential requirement by Neoptolemus (1329 ff.), but at this stage, since it is set in a speech which we know to be partly a lie, and spoken by a bogus character, we cannot be sure how valid a point it is. Thus, as Gellie⁹ rightly says, “we know, and we do not know, that Philoctetes must go willingly to Troy.” The gloss I wish to add is that we are not therefore perplexed or confused. This speech certainly confirms our feeling of distrust for Odysseus' methods, which took its cue from Neoptolemus' reactions in the Prologue, but what most occupies our thoughts here is the ordeal of Neoptolemus: is he, or is he not, going to be able to carry through the deception? His progressive insight will be a guide to our own.

It is worth considering how Sophocles creates this impression of lucidity. One important factor is his psychological sureness of touch. There is nothing an audience finds more baffling than motiveless behaviour, but if what the characters do is susceptible of explanation, even of multiple explanation, then we accept it because this is what we are used to in real life. Take the scene where Odysseus goes off saying “We don't need you: we have the bow, and there are good archers like Teucer and myself who know how to use it” (1054 ff.). The situation is so recognisable that we do not need to look for an answer to the question whether Odysseus convinces himself as well as Philoctetes that he really is leaving Lemnos. Different actors will give different nuances to the scene—more or less calculation, more or less frustration and anger on the part of Odysseus—but the real dramatic point is of course the effect of his behaviour on

⁹ G. H. Gellie, *Sophocles: a reading* (1972) p. 144.

Philoctetes. For the audience this must be something absolutely serious, even if at the back of their minds they feel that the play cannot end here, like this.

Another factor which is inseparable from the lucid impact of the play is its structure. Garvie¹⁰ has convincingly shown that there is an essential three-part structure: the parts all overlap, but are still clearly to be seen as three distinct phases in the dramatic movement. First, deceit, which fails because the agent, Neoptolemus, cannot bring himself to carry it through; second, violence, which fails because the person who tries to use it, Odysseus, never succeeds in getting the bow; third, persuasion, which fails when it encounters the full force of Philoctetes' will. Garvie treats the epiphany of Heracles as extraneous to this pattern, but I prefer to see the moment when Philoctetes listens to Heracles' words as the ultimate and paradoxical success of persuasion. Even if we leave aside for the moment the question of the end of the play, it seems clear that at least up to 1407 there is what Garvie calls a "totality of dramatic design,"¹¹ not a mere episodic sequence of stops and starts: the Prologue states the three options (101-103) and the play enacts the trial of each in turn.

This apprehension of the play's plan very much sharpens, or so I have found, the questions of meaning to which we must now turn. If we consider what is the function of the tripartite structure certain obvious answers suggest themselves. For example, that it gives shape to the central sequence of events, the developing relationship between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, with the result that we are made to think very hard about communication between human beings and about ends and means, facing the question *What really matters?* This is pretty clear and uncontroversial, but there is a harder question which demands an answer: if the structure also has the function of relating the human interaction of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes and Odysseus to a broader scheme of things, as it does, through the prophecy and Heracles, what weight does Sophocles give to this broader scheme, or suprahuman level? Is the prophecy a purely formal device, or does it mean something; and if so, what?

Sophocles was not after all obliged to use the prophecy. Admittedly it was there in the myth, the datum that Philoctetes and his bow were essential for the capture of Troy, and he had to find some way of motivating the expedition to fetch Philoctetes. But it would have been possible to

¹⁰ A. F. Garvie, "Deceit, violence, and persuasion in the *Philoctetes*," *Studi Classici in Onore di Quintino Cataudella* vol. I (1972) pp. 213 ff. J.-U. Schmidt, *Sophokles Philoktet, eine Strukturanalyse* (1973) pp. 249 ff. also analyses the play into three phases although his interpretation differs in detail.

¹¹ *Art. cit.*, p. 214.

manage without Helenus and his prediction. For example, Odysseus and Neoptolemus can have come at the instance of the Greek generals, who have decided that they must secure the aid of Philoctetes because he is the most effective archer they know, by virtue of being armed with the bow of Heracles which took Troy once before. Odysseus opts for trickery as the only possible method; when that fails because of the inability of Neoptolemus to carry it through he would like to use force, but Neoptolemus refuses to co-operate; at last Neoptolemus tries the method most congenial to him, persuasion, and offers Philoctetes the promise of glory at Troy. Even without the prophecy this could be made very convincing ("come to Troy and we will find you the best doctors, give you the greatest honours . . ."). Only in the *Exodos* would Sophocles really have needed a revelation of the future, when Heracles makes his dispositions. The crucial interaction of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, the real focus of our interest and sympathy, would hardly be affected by the suppression of the prophecy.

The dramatist, however, thought the prophecy worth the price of fairly major inconsistencies. Why?

The reason can hardly be that this was his only means of conveying the sense of compelling necessity which must be part of the dilemma of Neoptolemus. The struggle within the young man's conscience would be just as real—if anything more immediately recognisable by a modern audience, at least—if that sense of necessity were equated with patriotic duty. If it was loyalty to the state that demanded the ruthless exploitation of Philoctetes then there would still be a fine moral dilemma for Neoptolemus. And clearly (following the lead of Euripides) Sophocles could have made a much more political play out of this story. As it is, he treats the theme of duty with some reserve: Schmidt¹² has pointed out, for example, that in the crucial exchange at 1222 ff. Odysseus has no moral arguments, only threats, in answer to Neoptolemus' claim that it is *δίκαιον* to hand back the bow.

Nor does it seem that Sophocles is using the prophecy in the same way as he treats oracles in *Trachiniae* and *OT*, to make an overt contrast between divine and human knowledge which ironically illustrates the frailty and vulnerability of man. But irony is certainly there, and this perhaps is the direction in which we ought to be looking for a clue to Sophocles' interest in the prophecy.

It has, I think, to be accepted that the final exposition of the future by Heracles is authoritative, and that this validates retrospectively the

¹² Schmidt, *op. cit.* (n. 10 above), pp. 221 ff.

account given by Neoptolemus at 1326 ff. The message is that Troy *will* fall, by the joint endeavour and freely willed co-operation of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, and that Philoctetes will be cured. (The audience know that these things did happen.) All through the play we witness human attempts to achieve these ends, attempts which are based on reasonable, though humanly limited, assessments of the situation, such as Odysseus' claim in the Prologue that nothing but trickery will work. But these attempts successively frustrate themselves. Neoptolemus speaks more truly than he knows at 431 f.: ἀλλὰ χαῖ σοφαὶ | γνῶμαι, Φιλοκτῆτ', ἐμποδίζονται θαμά. His own impassioned attempt to persuade is "tripped up" by the trickery he has earlier employed. There is deep irony in the exchange at 1362 ff. when Philoctetes expresses surprise that he should want to go to Troy and help the Atridae who are his enemies, and Neoptolemus can only say, lamely, λέγεις μὲν εἰκότα (1373) without daring to reveal the whole truth.¹³

There is another sort of irony in the false departures that we witness on stage, particularly in the latter part of the play: Odysseus and Neoptolemus with the bow apparently abandoning Philoctetes (1068 ff.); Philoctetes and Neoptolemus leaving for Malis (1402 ff.). These departures contradict what the audience, reminded by the prophecy, must know actually happened. So in each case we feel that this cannot be the real ending and that something more ought to happen, but it is hard to see what it can be. This is particularly true of the great moment when Neoptolemus sacrifices his own interests to those of Philoctetes, which is enormously deepened by the sense that Neoptolemus is abandoning his destiny. We have to believe in his serious rejection of his future even though we remember that Troy fell. It is an insoluble contradiction, until Heracles comes and solves it.

This final stage in the action seems to me unintelligible if it is not genuinely organic, if it is only Sophocles making a gesture towards the received tradition. The logic of the play's structure and the ironical use of the prophecy surely point to the view that Philoctetes' assent to Heracles in fact fulfils the requirements of Helenus' prediction, though of course in a quite unexpected way. (Unexpected, but not unprepared; many critics have noted the trouble Sophocles has taken to make the visible presence of Heracles the culmination of a major theme.) But is Philoctetes "persuaded" by Heracles, or is he not? This can easily turn into a rather pointless debate if we allow ourselves to be mesmerised by English terminology and make a rigid distinction between obedience to a command

¹³ Cf. Schmidt, pp. 234 ff.

and compliance in response to argument: the Greeks after all used *πειθομαι* for both ideas. When Philoctetes says to Heracles *οὐκ ἀπιθήσω τοῖς σοῖς μύθοις* (1447) and later speaks of the *γνώμη . . . φίλων* (1467) that is one of the causes of his going to Troy, we should surely see the fulfilment of Helenus' words: Philoctetes is going willingly—and his whole tone in the closing anapaests is one of positive, even joyful, acceptance. It is a quibble to insist that he is not persuaded; but there is a larger and more difficult question to be answered: What is the meaning of that culminating persuasion?

If we accept the structural pattern suggested by Garvie, and further, the ultimate effectiveness of persuasion, then there is more sense in the stress that Sophocles seems to lay on Neoptolemus' growing understanding of the prophet's words. As Zwierlein¹⁴ has pointed out, we must not treat the question of what Neoptolemus knows as an historical problem. If we press it logically we are forced to the unwelcome conclusion that despite his apparently ignorant questions in the Prologue Neoptolemus knew the details of the prophecy already. Certainly at the end of the play he can give Philoctetes a most circumstantial account of what Helenus has foretold, but the contrast between his knowledge then and his ignorance earlier emphasises not the factual inconsistency but Neoptolemus' acquisition of insight. He becomes more aware, through his contact with Philoctetes, of the meaning of the prophecy, making sense of what he had already heard but did not understand. Particularly at 839 ff., the famous "oracular" pronouncement in hexameters, Neoptolemus seems to be expressing his "seeing" something that he has not properly seen before: *ἐγὼ δ' ὄρω* . . . This experience is a familiar part of the process of growing up, and it has often been noticed that in Sophocles' Neoptolemus we have a study of a young man coming to maturity through experience. But it is not enough to stop there and adopt a comfortable view of *Philoctetes* as a "character play": Neoptolemus' deepening insight must be seen as part of the play's dramatic movement and must bear on the larger question to which we are seeking an answer. Can his insight be a guide to our own? Does the prophecy have any truth to tell?

The prophecy *could* be offering some sort of illumination of the gods' purposes or some meditation on the relation between man and god, but I should be surprised if it were. The divine activity as such is far less significant in this play than in *OT* with its Apollo or *Trachiniae* with its Zeus; the lack of imaginative detail is striking by contrast. This is why I find it hard to see the real emphasis of *Philoctetes* as *either* on the ultimate

¹⁴ O. Zwierlein, review of Steidle, in *G.G.A.* 222 (1970) pp. 208 ff.

rightness of the gods' purpose *or* on their cruelty in condemning Philoctetes to ten years' agony on Lemnos. Much more telling, it seems to me, is the stress given to the power of persuasion: Neoptolemus' response to Philoctetes, his willingness to be persuaded to sacrifice everything because he respects and pities Philoctetes, is matched by Philoctetes' culminating response to Heracles. And in each case it is the power of *φιλία*—the *φιλία* of *χρηστοί*, who know how to behave—that makes one man bend his will to another's. It is worth adding that Heracles seems to be more important as the *φίλος* and heroic mentor of Philoctetes than as representative of the gods.¹⁵

Steidle¹⁶ perceptively notes the force of Heracles' words describing Neoptolemus and Philoctetes as a pair of lions each protecting the other (*ἀλλ' ὡς λέοντε συννόμω φυλάσσετον | οὔτος σέ καὶ σὺ τόνδ' 1436 f.*): this is one sense in which the prophecy tells the truth, emphasising the importance of the relationship between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes; and their interdependence is visually demonstrated by Neoptolemus supporting Philoctetes as they go. This reading of the play, in which the words of Heracles are seen as the true climax of the dramatic movement, makes Sophocles affirm the values of *φιλία*—of pity and respect and human interdependence—in answer to his implied question What really matters?; but there is a final related problem which needs to be discussed, the meaning of Philoctetes' going to Troy. This after all is an important part of Heracles' revelation, and we must be able to make sense of it if we are to understand the play's morality.

Modern criticism is sharply divided: I quote a few representative views. Robinson¹⁷ argues that the decision of Neoptolemus to take Philoctetes home is the first and "true" conclusion; the second is lighter and slighter, avoiding historical or theological issues, but explaining how Sophocles' version can be fitted into the myth while not essentially detracting from the serious meaning of the first conclusion. Jan Kott¹⁸ goes much further and sees the end as the ultimate absurdity. Just as in *Ajax* there is no meaning in the making of a hero out of Ajax, so in this play Philoctetes' going to Troy is the final horror: "healing is always payment for submission." This attitude is shared by Poe,¹⁹ for whom "Philoctetes' failure becomes a paradigm of the frustration and futility of mankind."

¹⁵ Cf. Taplin, *art. cit.* (n. 6 above), p. 39.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.* (n. 4 above), p. 187; cf. Schmidt, *op. cit.* (n. 10 above), p. 247.

¹⁷ *Art. cit.* (n. 2 above), p. 55.

¹⁸ J. Kott, *The eating of the gods* (1974) pp. 162 ff. The quotation is from p. 169.

¹⁹ J. P. Poe, *Heroism and divine justice in Sophocles' Philoctetes* (1974) = *Mnemosyne* Suppl.

34. The quotation is from p. 51.

At the other end of the spectrum there are the old-fashioned pietists, and more recently and interestingly Vidal-Naquet,²⁰ who sees Philoctetes' going to Troy as the re-integration of the wild man into the city, or Clare Campbell,²¹ who brings out the importance of the themes of disease and cure: "When Heracles now says both men should go to Troy, not home, Philoctetes freely agrees—he has been healed in his social nature, so he can accept physical healing, and it is in the logic of his plight that it will happen at Troy, when he rejoins the Greek body politic which had cut him off just as in despair he used to want to cut off his own foot. . . ."

Since this is a drama we need to use the design of the action and its effect on the spectator's emotions as the basis of any interpretation. Sophocles was at liberty to make the Greeks at Troy stand for whatever he chose: they have no absolute significance independent of the dramatic context. Equally there is no need to suppose that he was concerned to assert the rightness of history because it happened. The important question is What do the audience want for each of the characters as they watch the play?

Philoctetes himself is the focus of nearly all the imagery: the desert island, the wound, the bow, the dead man, are all used as means of exploring his situation and of arousing our emotional response to him. This is overwhelmingly a reaction of pity: for his brute physical suffering, lavishly described and enacted on stage, and for his mental anguish in his isolation. His suffering is the main, almost the only, theme of the lyrics, and the sense of his pitiableness is reinforced by important moments in the action, as at 248 ff., when Neoptolemus pretends never to have heard of him, and Philoctetes is desolated by the thought that even his name has vanished from the memory of the Greeks. We also admire him for his dignity and strength, his generous warmth towards Neoptolemus, his concern at the fate of the other Greek heroes, his delight at the sound of Greek being spoken, his ingenuity in managing for himself on Lemnos, most of all perhaps for his refusal to kowtow.

We badly want him to be cured and to be rescued from isolation. At the same time we understand his hostility towards the Greeks, and we do not want him to sacrifice his self-respect as the price of being healed. His wound is *both* his bitterness and wildness *and* his dignity, just as the desert island symbolises not only his alienation, loneliness and animal-like life but also his purity. Thus our feelings are mixed: we want Philoctetes to be made whole and to be honoured by society, but we do not want him to

²⁰ P. Vidal-Naquet, "Le Philoctète de Sophocle" in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (1973) pp. 161 ff.

²¹ C. Campbell, "A theophany," *Theoria to theory* 6 (1972) pp. 82 f.

compromise with men whose methods the play makes us despise. To introduce the Christian notion of forgiveness and loving one's enemy would be to make Sophocles write a quite different play.

Or Sophocles might have written a different play again, in which going to Troy was a compelling patriotic duty: then Philoctetes' refusal would plainly be a matter of selfish pride; but he has not arranged things like this. The world of the Greeks at Troy is the ordinary world of unheroic politics, whose methods are illustrated by the behaviour of Odysseus and sharply contrasted with the noble standards of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus and the great dead: Achilles, Ajax, Nestor. . .²² When Philoctetes wants nothing to do with this world we cannot blame him.

But it is also true that when Neoptolemus appeals to Philoctetes *as a friend* to go to Troy we begin to fear that he is in danger of becoming inaccessible, permanently alienated, if he will not listen; and although we endorse Neoptolemus' willingness to renounce Troy altogether for his sake we surely must feel that going to Malis is a second best,²³ not because we much care about the fall of Troy, but because it is at Troy that the cure is to be found, and it is very important to us that Philoctetes be cured, both to assuage our pity and to convince us that he is reintegrated into society. For the healing must be a healing of mind as well as body: the language that associates the wound with death,²⁴ with the desert island,²⁵ with Philoctetes' hatred of his enemies,²⁶ requires us to see the cure as relating to his entire being. Being cured will mean coming back from the dead,²⁷ ceasing to be the solitary wild thing who is at the same time predator and prey of the island's beasts and becoming instead one of a "pair of lions, each guarding the other's life" (1436 f.).

As Schmidt has argued,²⁸ Neoptolemus' action in standing by his commitment to Philoctetes has given Philoctetes a new heroic community to which to belong: it is no longer true that all the "real" heroes are dead. So Troy can be used as a symbol *both* of the corrupt unheroic world of politics, which we applaud Philoctetes for rejecting, *and* of society, into which we want him to be reintegrated. This double significance is achieved in ways which illustrate the delicacy of Sophocles' technique. For example,

²² Schmidt, *op. cit.* (n. 10 above), p. 94, brings out the importance of 410–452 for making these standards clear; Philoctetes' hostility is confined to the *κακοί* of the Greek army.

²³ Cf. B. M. W. Knox, *The heroic temper* (1964) p. 139.

²⁴ 796 f.; 861; 945 ff. (cf. 1018; 1030).

²⁵ 182 ff.; 265 ff.; 279 ff.; 311 ff.; 691 ff.

²⁶ 631 f.; 791 ff.; 1043 f.; 1113 ff.

²⁷ Cf. 624 f., 1198 f. and the passages cited in n. 24 above. Knox, *op. cit.* (n. 23 above), p. 141.

²⁸ *Op. cit.* (n. 10 above), p. 246.

he is careful not to raise the question of just how Philoctetes and say, Agamemnon, will greet each other at Troy. This absence of naturalism is essential to the success of the final scene, and the use of anapaests must help to create a distancing that makes credible the apparition of Heracles and the response of Philoctetes.

The double significance of Troy makes equally good sense in Sophocles' treatment of Neoptolemus. What the audience want for him is that he should be willing to be true at last to his real φύσις and sacrifice everything to his sense of what he owes to Philoctetes (καλῶς | δρῶν ἔξαμαρτεῖν μᾶλλον ἢ νικᾶν κακῶς 94 f.); but also that the two of them should do great deeds together. Neoptolemus, we feel, will not be truly fulfilled any more than Philoctetes will if he has no opportunity for the exercise of his ἀρετή in action. Sophocles is not inviting us to reject the whole idea of action in society as inevitably evil or futile, as a modern writer might. So our feelings are mixed for Neoptolemus, too: we want him to put Philoctetes first (and this is another reason why Sophocles makes comparatively little of the patriotic motive), but we also want him to be part of his society. Thus the prophecy can be seen to have more truth to tell than the value of φιλία: it also asserts the possibility of right action.

If this approach to the meaning of Troy is correct it throws some light on Sophocles' treatment of Odysseus. This ambiguous figure represents on stage the ambiguity of the world of the Greek army: he is by no means the simple embodiment of evil that he seems to Philoctetes. His goal, after all, is the restoration of Philoctetes in order that Troy shall be taken; this is the goal to which the prophecy points and which is ultimately achieved through the intervention of Heracles. But the meaning of this goal has been completely redefined by the action of the play, and at the end we are given no sense that Odysseus, to use Gellie's phrase, "has won, yet again;"²⁹ the inadequacy of Odysseus' arguments at 1222 ff. and his decisive defeat at 1293 ff. make it clear that Philoctetes at Troy will be doing neither his bidding nor that of the Atridae.³⁰

The language of Philoctetes himself at the end of the play is not at all the abject language of the broken man who licks the boots of his exploiters: there is joy in his response to Heracles (ὦ φθέγμα ποθεινὸν . . . 1445) and Vidal-Naquet³¹ suggests that in his address to Lemnos and its nymphs we see the wild island given a new significance: the scene is transformed and made almost pastoral, representing the re-entry of Philoctetes into the

²⁹ *Op. cit.* (n. 9 above), p. 157.

³⁰ Cf. Taplin, *art. cit.* (n. 6 above), p. 37; Schmidt, *op. cit.* (n. 10 above), pp. 231; 246.

³¹ *Art. cit.* (n. 20 above), p. 179.

civilised world. Of course there *could* be a sinister irony in the joy of Philoctetes—the audience might be meant to think “poor fool” as the big battalions take over—but in that case it would be hard to explain the feelings that Sophocles has generated about Philoctetes’ wound and the need for cure.

The only disturbing irony at the end of the play, it seems to me, is of a kind that Sophocles uses elsewhere: the hint at 1440 ff. of the subsequent history of Neoptolemus. “Only be careful,” says Heracles, “to show reverence to the gods. . . .” It was Neoptolemus who killed Priam at the altar when Troy was taken, but we have not been reminded of this part of his story until this glancing hint very late in the play, and Kott is surely unjustified in treating him as a war criminal all along. Sophocles likes making these ironical references to other stories at the very end of his dramas; one might compare the end of *O.C.*, where Antigone asks to be allowed to go to Thebes in order to settle her brothers’ quarrel (1769 ff.), or the reference at the end of the *Electra* to “the present and *future* ills of the Pelopidae” (1498).

Almost all critics, I suspect, would agree that the profoundest moment in the play is Neoptolemus’ decision to take Philoctetes home, which as it is enacted on stage, with Neoptolemus supporting Philoctetes, is made more significant through its recall of the earlier scene of his breakdown. At once Neoptolemus’ act of listening to a friend’s persuasion is echoed by Philoctetes listening to Heracles, and Clare Campbell³² is right, I think, to suggest linking these events very closely in the stage action, so that the one shall seem to precipitate the other. Certainly they are linked in meaning: they give the answer to the question What really matters? This answer takes us away from the familiar and perhaps too schematic image of the proudly lonely Sophoclean hero to something more complex, which is echoed in the themes of φίλος and ξένος in the *Coloneus*.³³

Newnham College, Cambridge

³² *Art. cit.* (n. 21 above), pp. 81 ff.

³³ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the triennial conference of the Greek and Roman Societies on 31 July 1975. I am grateful for the criticisms and suggestions which were put forward in the discussion following the paper.