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978-1-107-66469-2 - The Philoctetes of Sophocles: With a Commentary Abridged  
from the Larger Edition of Sir Richard C. Jebb

E. S. Shuckburgh

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ABRIDGED FROM THE LARGER EDITION

OF  
SIR RICHARD C. JEBB

BY  
E. S. SHUCKBURGH

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## PREFACE.

THIS edition of the *Philoctetes* has been formed on the same principles as those of the *Antigone* and *Oedipus Coloneus*. I have only added a few new references and amplifications, principally in the way of translation, which in the larger edition of Sir R. Jebb were unnecessary because a translation of the whole was added. The notes with these exceptions are Sir R. Jebb's, shortened by about a third. I have omitted what seemed to me to contain discussions, however valuable in themselves, which were more elaborate than could be expected to interest ordinary or youthful students. There still remains a commentary unrivalled in its fullness and minute attention to every point of criticism and literary and artistic feeling. It does not, however, supersede for more advanced students the use of the larger edition and translation. Nor is it meant to do so. The selection has sometimes been difficult, and if it has been made without detriment to the usefulness of the book, that is the extent of credit to which I have any pretensions.

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Almost as I was writing these words the blow fell which ended a great career and deprived learning of a most devoted and brilliant servant. I may at least dedicate this book—so far as it is my work—to the beloved memory of a kind and generous friend.

E. S. SHUCKBURGH.

*January, 1906.*

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## INTRODUCTION.

§ 1. After taking Oechalia in Euboea, Heracles was sacrificing on Cape Ceneæ when the fatal robe did its work. He was carried to his home at Trachis; and then he commanded that he should be borne to the top of Mount Oeta, sacred to Zeus, and burnt alive. He was obeyed; as the flames arose on the mountain, they were answered from heaven by the blaze of lightning and the roll of thunder; and by that sign his companions knew that the spirit of the great warrior had been welcomed to the home of his immortal father. Heracles had constrained his son Hyllus to aid in preparing the funeral-pile, but could not prevail upon him to kindle it. The office was performed, at his urgent prayer, by the youthful Philoctetes, son of Poeas, king of Malis. In token of gratitude, Heracles bequeathed to Philoctetes the bow and arrows which he himself had received from Apollo.

The legend in epic poetry.

In the myths relating to the Trojan war a most important part belonged to the man who had thus inherited the invincible weapons. Homer, indeed, does not say much about him; but the *Iliad* contains only an episode in the tenth year of the war: the part played by Philoctetes came before and after that moment. The allusion in the Second Book of the *Iliad* is, however, significant; it glances backwards and forwards. He is there mentioned as a skilful archer, who had sailed from

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Greece in command of seven ships, but had been left behind in Lemnos, wounded by the bite of a deadly water-snake. And then the poet adds that the Greeks at Troy will soon have cause to bethink them of Philoctetes<sup>1</sup>. In the *Odyssey* he is named only twice; in one place, as having been the best bowman at Troy; in another, as one of those heroes who came safely home<sup>2</sup>. But his adventures were fully told in other epics. The events preceding the action of the *Iliad* were contained in the *Cypria*, an epic whose reputed author, Stasinus of Cyprus, lived early in the eighth century B.C. That poem described how Philoctetes was bitten by the snake,—while the Greeks, on their way to Troy, were at Tenedos,—and was abandoned in Lemnos. His later fortunes were narrated in the *Little Iliad*, ascribed to Lesches of Mitylene (circa 700 B.C.), and in the *Iliupersis*, or ‘Sack of Troy,’ by Arctinus of Miletus (c. 776 B.C.). The contents of these lost works are known chiefly from the prose summaries of the grammarian Proclus (140 A.D.), as partly preserved by Photius in his *Bibliotheca*. The following is an outline of the story in its epic form.

§ 2. When the Greeks under Agamemnon were about to sail against Troy, it became known that an oracle had commanded them to offer sacrifice, in the course of their voyage across the Aegean, at the altar of a deity named Chrysè. All the accounts placed this altar somewhere in the north-east of the Archipelago. The prevalent version assigned it to a small island which, like the deity herself, was called Chrysè, and lay close to the eastern shore of Lemnos.

<sup>1</sup> *Il.* 2. 721 ff.:

ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐν νήσῳ κείτῳ κρατέρ' ἄλγεα πάσχων,  
 Λήμνῳ ἐν ἡγαθέῃ, ὅθι μιν λίπον νῆες Ἀχαιῶν,  
 ἔλκει μοχθίζοντα κακῷ δλοόφρονος ὕδρου·  
 ἐνθ' ὁ γὰρ κείτ' ἀχέων· τάχα δὲ μνήσεσθαι ἔμελλον  
 Ἀργεῖοι παρὰ νηυσὶ Φιλοκτῆταο ἄνακτος.

<sup>2</sup> *Od.* 8. 219; 3. 190.



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Jason, it was said, had sacrificed at this altar when he was leading the Argonauts in quest of the golden fleece. Heracles had paid it a like homage when he was levying war against Laomedon.

Philoctetes, with his seven ships, was in the fleet of Agamemnon, and undertook to act as guide. He alone knew where the isle of Chryse was to be found; for, in his early youth, he had been present at the sacrifice offered there by Heracles.

The altar stood in a sacred precinct, under the open sky. When, followed by the Greek chieftains, he approached it, he was bitten in the foot by a serpent. The wound mortified, and became noisome. His cries of pain made it impossible to perform the religious rites, which required the absence of all ill-omened sounds. The fetid odour of his wound also made his presence a distress to the chiefs. They conveyed him from the islet of Chryse to the neighbouring coast of Lemnos, where they put him ashore; and then sailed for Troy.

It should be noticed that the circumstances of this desertion, as set forth in the early legend, were probably less inhuman than they appear in the version adopted by Sophocles. In the first place, it can hardly be doubted that these cyclic poets, like Homer, imagined Lemnos as an inhabited island<sup>1</sup>. And, according to one account, some followers of Philoctetes were left in charge of him<sup>2</sup>.

Ten years elapsed. The sufferer was still languishing in Lemnos; his former comrades were still on the shore of the Hellespont, besieging the city which they could not capture.

<sup>1</sup> See commentary on v. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Philostratus *Heroica* 6: τὰ δὲ τῆς νόσου καὶ τῶν ἰασαμένων αὐτὸν ἑτέρως λέγει (Πρωτεσίλαος). καταλειφθῆναι μὲν γὰρ ἐν Λήμνῳ τὸν Φιλοκτήτην, οὐ μὴν ἔρημον τῶν θεραπευσόντων οὐδ' ἀπερριμμένον τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ· πολλοὺς τε γὰρ τῶν Μελίβοιαν οἰκούντων ξυγκαταμεῖναι (στρατηγὸς δὲ τούτων ἦν), τοῖς τ' Ἀχαιοῖς δάκρυα ἐπέλθειν, ὅτ' ἀπέλιπε σφῶς ἀνὴρ πολεμικὸς καὶ πολλῶν ἀντάξιος.

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*Philoctetes*

Achilles had already fallen; Ajax had died by his own hand. In their despondency, the Atreidae turned to the prophet who had so often admonished or consoled them; but Calchas replied that the fate of Ilium must now be learned from other lips than his. They must consult the Trojan Helenus, son of Priam,—a warrior whom they had often seen in the front of battle on the plain; a seer who, as rumour told, had warned, though he could not save, his brother Hector.

Helenus was made prisoner by a stratagem of Odysseus, and then declared that, before the Greeks could prevail, two things must be done. First, Philoctetes must be brought back from Lemnos: Troy could never fall, until he launched against it the arrows of Heracles. Secondly, Neoptolemus, the youthful son of Achilles, must come from the island of Scyros, and must receive his due heritage, the wondrous armour wrought for his father by the god Hephaestus.

Both injunctions were obeyed. Diomedes went to Lemnos, and brought Philoctetes. Odysseus went to Scyros, and brought Neoptolemus. Philoctetes was healed by the physician Machaon, son of Asclepius. He then slew Paris in single combat, and shared with Neoptolemus the glory of final victory over Troy.

§ 3. In this epic form of the story, two points deserve remark. (1) The mission to Lemnos and the mission to Scyros are entrusted to different persons, and are conceived as simultaneous, or nearly so. In the *Little Iliad* of Lesches, the voyage to Lemnos seems to have been related first. (2) Diomedes has apparently no difficulty in persuading Philoctetes to accompany him. For the purposes of epic narrative, it would evidently suffice that Diomedes should announce an oracle which promised health to the sufferer and honour to the exile. The epic Philoctetes would accept these overtures in a speech of dignified magnanimity; and all would be happily settled.

Character-  
istics of the  
epic version.

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But all this was changed when Philoctetes became a subject of tragic drama. The very essence of the situation, as a theme for Tragedy, was the terrible disadvantage at which the irony of fate had placed the Greeks. Here was a brave and loyal man, guiltless of offence, whom they had banished from their company,—whom they had even condemned to long years of extreme suffering,—because a misfortune,—incurred by him in the course of doing them a service,—had rendered his person disagreeable to them. For ten years he had been pining on Lemnos; and now they learned that their miserable victim was the arbiter of their destinies. It was not enough if, by force or fraud, they could acquire his bow. The oracle had said that the bow must be used at Troy by Philoctetes himself. How could he be induced to give this indispensable aid?

§ 4. Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles—to place their names in the chronological order of their plays on this subject—solved the problem each in his own manner. A comparison of their methods is interesting, and is made to a certain degree possible by the fact that Dion Chrysostom (1st cent. A.D.) has left us a sketch, though an imperfect one, of the two lost plays. In the play of Aeschylus, the task of bringing Philoctetes from Lemnos to Troy was undertaken, not by Diomedes,—as in the epic version,—but by Odysseus. This change at once strikes the key-note of the theme, as Tragedy was to handle it. Odysseus was the man of all others whom Philoctetes detested; no envoy more repulsive to him could have been found. On the other hand, the choice of that wily hero for the mission implies that its success was felt to depend on the use of stratagem. As Dion shows us, Aeschylus boldly brought Odysseus face to face with Philoctetes, and required the spectators to believe that Philoctetes did not recognise his old enemy. The excuse which

The story  
as a theme  
for drama.

The three  
great drama-  
tists.

The  
*Philoctetes* of  
Aeschylus.

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Dion suggests for this improbability is not that the appearance of Odysseus was greatly altered, but that the memory of Philoctetes had been impaired by ten years of suffering. It may be inferred that the text of Aeschylus supplied no better explanation.

The unrecognised Odysseus then proceeded to win the ear of Philoctetes by a false story of misfortunes to the Greeks at Troy; Agamemnon was dead; Odysseus, too, was gone—having been put to death for an atrocious crime (Dion does not say what): and the whole army was in extremities. This story having won the confidence of Philoctetes, the Aeschylean Odysseus perhaps seized the arms while the sick man was in a paroxysm of his disease. A fragment indicates that Aeschylus described the bow as hanging on a pine-tree near the cave. How Philoctetes was finally brought away, we do not know: but it may be assumed that there was no *deus ex machina*, and also that Odysseus had no accomplice.

§ 5. The *Philoctetes* of Euripides was produced in 431 B.C., —some forty years or more, perhaps, after that of Aeschylus. Euripides combined the epic precedent with the Aeschylean by sending Diomedes along with Odysseus to Lemnos. A soliloquy by Odysseus opened the play<sup>1</sup>. The astute warrior was in a highly nervous state of mind. ‘Such,’ he said in effect, ‘are the consequences of ambition! I might have stayed at Troy, with a reputation secured; but the desire of increasing it has brought me here to Lemnos, where I am in great danger of

<sup>1</sup> Dion’s 59th discourse bears the title ΦΙΛΟΚΤΗΤΗΣ. ΕΣΤΙ ΔΕ ΠΑΡΑΦΡΑΣΙΣ. It is simply a prose paraphrase—without preface or comment—of the soliloquy and the subsequent dialogue, down to the point at which Philoctetes invites Odysseus to enter his cave. Although it would be easy to turn Dion’s prose into iambics (as Bothe and others have done), it is evident that, at least in several places, the paraphrase has been a free one. The whole passage, in its original form, cannot have been much shorter than the πρόλογος in the play of Sophocles.

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losing it altogether, by failing in this most ticklish business.' He then explained that, when the Atreidae had first proposed the mission to him, he had declined, because he knew that all his resources of persuasion would be thrown away on Philoctetes, the man to whom he had done a wrong so terrible. His first appearance would be the signal for an arrow from the unerring bow. But afterwards his guardian goddess Athena had appeared to him in a dream, and had told him that, if he would go to Lemnos, she would change his aspect and his voice, so that his enemy should not know him. Thus reassured, he had undertaken the task.

He had reason to know, however, that a rival embassy was coming to Philoctetes from the Trojans, who hoped by large promises to gain him for their side. Here, then, was a crisis that demanded all his energies. At this moment, he saw Philoctetes approaching, and, with a hasty prayer to Athena, prepared to meet him. Philoctetes limped slowly forward,—clad (according to Dion's paraphrase) in the skins of wild beasts which he had shot. On finding that his visitor is a Greek from Troy, Philoctetes pointed an arrow at him. But he was quickly appeased by learning that the stranger was a cruelly wronged fugitive,—a friend of that Palamedes whom the unscrupulous malice of Odysseus had brought to death on a false charge of treason. 'Will Philoctetes befriend him?' 'Hapless man!'—was the reply—'the ally whom you invoke is more forlorn than yourself. But you are welcome to share his wretched abode, until you can find some better resource.' Philoctetes then invited his new friend into his cave.

Presently the Chorus entered,—composed, as in the Aeschylean play, of Lemnians. They began by excusing themselves for their long neglect of the sufferer. This was another glance at Aeschylus, whose Lemnians had made no such apologies. But Euripides had a further expedient for redeeming the character of the islanders; he introduced a Lemnian called Actor, who had occasionally visited the sick man. The

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*Philoctetes*

climax of dramatic interest must have been marked by the arrival of that Trojan embassy which Odysseus had foreshadowed in the prologue. It came, probably, before the seizure of the bow, and while, therefore, Odysseus was still disguised. Two verses, spoken by him in the play, run thus :—

ὑπέρ γε μέντοι παντός Ἑλλήνων στρατοῦ  
αἰσχρὸν σιωπᾶν βαρβάρους δ' εἶαν λέγειν.

Such words would be fitting in the mouth of a Greek speaker who pretended to have been wronged by his countrymen. They suggest a context of the following kind ;—‘(Although I have been badly treated by the Greek chiefs,) yet, in the cause of the Greek army at large, I cannot be silent, while barbarians plead.’ The leader of the Trojan envoys—perhaps Paris—would urge Philoctetes to become their ally. Then the appeal to Hellenic patriotism would be made with striking effect by one who alleged that, like Philoctetes himself, he had personal injuries to forget. This scene would end with the discomfiture and withdrawal of the Trojan envoys.

This play of Euripides struck Dion as a masterpiece of declamation, and as a model of ingenious debate,—worthy of study, indeed, as a practical lesson in those arts. When he speaks of the ‘contrast’ to the play of Aeschylus, he is thinking of these qualities. With regard to the plot, no student of Euripides will be at a loss to name the trait which is most distinctive of his hand. It is the invention of the Trojan embassy,—a really brilliant contrivance for the purpose which he had in view. We cannot wonder if, in the period of classical antiquity during which controversial rhetoric chiefly flourished, the *Philoctetes* of Euripides was more generally popular than either of its rivals.

§ 6. The originality of Sophocles can now be estimated.

**Sophocles.** Hitherto, one broad characteristic had been common to epic and dramatic treatments of the subject. The fate of Philoctetes had been considered

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solely as it affected the Greeks at Troy. The oracle promised victory to them, if they could regain him: to him it offered health and glory. This was an excellent prospect for him: if he would not embrace it voluntarily, he must, if possible, be compelled to submission. But there had been no hint that, outside of this prospect, he had any claim on human pity. Suppose him to say,—‘I refuse health and glory, at the price of rejoining the men who cast me forth to worse than death; but I pray to be delivered from this misery, and restored to my home in Greece.’ Would not that be a warrantable choice, a reasonable prayer? Not a choice or a prayer, perhaps, that could win much sympathy from a Diomedes or an Odysseus, men who had consented to the act of desertion, and who now had their own objects to gain. But imagine some one in whom a generous nature, or even an ordinary sense of justice and humanity, could work without hindrance from self-interest;—might not such a man be moved by the miseries of Philoctetes, and recognise that he had human rights which were not extinguished by his refusal to obey the summons of the Atreidae?

Again, the two plays on this subject which Sophocles found existing, both depended, for their chief dramatic interest, on the successful execution of a plan laid by the envoys. The Odysseus of Aeschylus, the Odysseus and Diomedes of Euripides, alike carry a stratagem to a triumphant issue.

In associating Odysseus with Neoptolemus, the youthful son of Achilles, Sophocles chose the person who, if any change was to be made in that respect, might most naturally be suggested by the epic version of the fable. But this new feature was no mere variation on the example of his predecessors. It prepared the way for a treatment of the whole story which was fundamentally different from theirs.

This will best be shown by a summary of the plot. The events supposed to have occurred before the commencement of the play can be told in a few words. Achilles having fallen, his armour had been awarded to Odysseus, and Ajax had

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*Philoctetes*

committed suicide. Then Helenus had declared the oracle. Phoenix and Odysseus had gone to Scyros, and had brought the young Neoptolemus thence to Troy; where his father's armour was duly given to him. Then he set out with Odysseus for Lemnos,—knowing that the object was to bring Philoctetes, but not that any deceit was to be used. The chiefs had told him that he himself was destined to take Troy; but not that the aid of Philoctetes was an indispensable condition.

§ 7. The scene is laid on the lonely north-east coast of Lemnos. Odysseus and Neoptolemus have just landed, and have now walked along the shore to a little distance from their ships<sup>1</sup>, which are no longer visible. Odysseus tells his young comrade that here, long ago, he put Philoctetes ashore, by command of the Atreidae. He desires the youth to examine the rocks which rise above their heads, and to look for a cave, with a spring near it. Neoptolemus presently finds the cave, with traces in it which show that it is still inhabited.

A seaman, in attendance on Neoptolemus, is then despatched to act as sentry, lest Philoctetes should come on them by surprise.

Odysseus explains that it is impossible for *him* to face Philoctetes; he must remain concealed, on peril of his life; Neoptolemus must conduct the parley. Neoptolemus must tell Philoctetes truly who he is—but must pretend that he has quarrelled with the Greeks at Troy, for depriving him of his father's arms, and is sailing home to Greece.

The youth at first refuses to utter such a falsehood; but

<sup>1</sup> Odysseus comes in one ship, and Neoptolemus in another. Each chief has his own men. Hence Odysseus can threaten to sail at once, leaving Neoptolemus behind, and denounce him to the Greek army (1257 f.). And Neoptolemus can propose to sail with Philoctetes, but without Odysseus, for Malis (1402 ff.). Where the singular *ναῦς* is used, with or without the definite article, it refers to the ship of Neoptolemus (e.g. 125, 461, 527, 881, 1076, 1180).



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yields at last to the argument that otherwise he cannot take Troy. Odysseus now departs to his ship,—promising that, after a certain time, he will send an accomplice to help Neoptolemus in working on the mind of Philoctetes. This will be the man who had been acting as sentry; he will be disguised as a sea-captain.

The Chorus of fifteen seamen (from the ship of Neoptolemus) now enters. They ask their young chief how they are to aid his design. He invites them to look into the cave, and instructs them how they are to act when Philoctetes returns. In answer to their words of pity for the sufferer, he declares his belief that heaven ordains those sufferings only till the hour for Troy to fall shall have come.

Philoctetes appears. He is glad to find that the strangers are Greeks; he is still more rejoiced when he learns that the son of Achilles is before him. He tells his story; and Neoptolemus, in turn, relates his own ill-treatment by the chiefs. The Chorus, in a lyric strophe, confirm their master's fiction. After some further converse about affairs at Troy, Philoctetes implores Neoptolemus to take him home. The Chorus support the prayer. Neoptolemus consents. They are on the point of setting out for their ship, when two men are seen approaching.

The supposed sea-captain (sent by Odysseus) enters, with a sailor from the ship of Neoptolemus. He describes himself as master of a small merchant-vessel, trading in wine between Peparethus (an island off the south coast of Thessaly) and the Greek camp at Troy. He announces that the Greeks have sent emissaries in pursuit of Neoptolemus:—also that Odysseus and Diomedes have sailed in quest of Philoctetes. He then departs.

Philoctetes is now more anxious than ever to start at once. Accompanied by Neoptolemus, he enters his cave, in order to fetch his few necessities.

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*Philoctetes*

In the choral ode which follows, the seamen give full expression to their pity for Philoctetes. They have heard of Ixion, but they have never seen any doom so fearful as that of this unoffending man.

Stasimon:  
676—729.

Just as he is leaving the cave with Neoptolemus, Philoctetes is seized with a sharp attack of pain. He vainly seeks to hide his agony. Neoptolemus is touched, and asks what he can do. Philoctetes, feeling drowsy, says that, before he falls asleep, he wishes to place the bow and arrows in his friend's hands. Thus Neoptolemus (still with treason in his heart) gets the bow into his keeping.

III. Second  
episode:  
730—826.

A second and sharper paroxysm now comes upon Philoctetes. In his misery, he prays for death—he beseeches his friend to cast him into the crater of the burning mountain which can be seen from the cave. Neoptolemus is deeply moved. He solemnly promises that he will not leave the sick man; who presently sinks into slumber.

Invoking the Sleep-god to hold Philoctetes prisoner, the Chorus urge Neoptolemus to desert the sleeper, and quit Lemnos with the bow. Neoptolemus replies that such a course would be as futile as base,—since the oracle had directed them to bring not only the bow, but its master.

Kommos  
(taking the  
place of a  
second  
stasimon):  
827—864.

Philoctetes awakes, and, aided by Neoptolemus, painfully rises to his feet. They are ready to set out for their ship. And now Neoptolemus has reached the furthest point to which the deception can be carried; for at the ships Philoctetes will find Odysseus. Shame and remorse prevail. He tells Philoctetes that their destination is Troy.

IV. Third  
episode:  
865—1080.

The unhappy man instantly demands his bow—but Neoptolemus refuses to restore it. And then the despair of Philoctetes finds terrible utterance. The youth's purpose is shaken. He is on the point of giving back the weapon, when

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suddenly Odysseus starts forth from a hiding-place near the cave, and prevents him. Philoctetes—whom Odysseus threatens to take by force—is about to throw himself from the cliffs, when he is seized by the attendants. In answer to his bitter reproaches, Odysseus tells him that he can stay in Lemnos, if he chooses:—other hands can wield the bow at Troy. Odysseus then departs to his ship, ordering his young comrade to follow; but, by the latter's command, the Chorus stay with Philoctetes, in the hope that he may yet change his mind.

In a lyric dialogue, Philoctetes bewails his fate, while the Chorus remind him that it is in his own power to escape from Lemnos. But at the bare hint of Troy, his anger blazes forth, and he bids them depart. They are going, when he frantically recalls them. Once more they urge their counsel—only to elicit a still more passionate refusal. He craves but one boon of them—some weapon with which to kill himself.

They are about to leave him—since no persuasions avail—when Neoptolemus is seen hurrying back, with the bow in his hand,—closely followed by Odysseus, who asks what he means to do. Neoptolemus replies that he intends to restore the bow to its rightful owner. Odysseus remonstrates, blusters, threatens, and finally departs, saying that he will denounce this treason to the army.

The youth next calls forth Philoctetes, and gives him the bow. Odysseus once more starts forth from ambush—but this time he is too late. The weapon is already in the hands of Philoctetes, who bends it at his foe, and would have shot him, had not Neoptolemus interposed. Odysseus hastily retires, and is not seen again.

Philoctetes now hears from Neoptolemus the purport of the oracle; he is to be healed, and is to share the glory of taking Troy. He hesitates for a moment—solely because he

Second  
Kommos  
(taking the  
place of a  
third  
stasimon):  
1081—1217.

V. Exo-  
dos: 1218—  
1471.

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*Philoctetes*

shrinks from paining his friend by a refusal. But he cannot bring himself to go near the Atreidae. And so he calls upon Neoptolemus to fulfil his promise—to take him home.

Neoptolemus consents. He forbodes the vengeance of the Greeks—but Philoctetes reassures him: the arrows of Heracles shall avert it. They are about to set forth for Greece, when a divine form appears in the air above them.

Heracles has come from Olympus to declare the will of Zeus. Philoctetes must go to Troy with Neoptolemus, there to find health and fame. He yields to the mandate of heaven, brought by one who, while on earth, had been so dear to him. He makes his farewell to Lemnos; and the play closes as he moves with Neoptolemus towards the ships, soon to be sped by a fair wind to Sigeum.

§ 8. Even a mere outline of the plot, such as the above, will serve to exhibit the far-reaching consequences of the change made by Sophocles, when he introduced Neoptolemus as the associate of Odysseus. The man who retains the most indelible memory of a wrong may be one who still preserves a corresponding depth of sensibility to kindness; the abiding resentment can coexist with undiminished quickness of gratitude for benefits, and with loyal readiness to believe in the faith of promises. Such is the Philoctetes of Sophocles; he has been cast forth by comrades whom he was zealously aiding; his occasional visitors have invariably turned a deaf ear to his prayers; but, inexorably as he hates the Greek chiefs, all the ten years in Lemnos have not made him a Timon. He is still generous, simple, large-hearted, full of affection for the friends and scenes of his early days; the young stranger from the Greek camp, who shows pity for him, at once wins his warmest regard, and receives proofs of his absolute confidence. It is the combination of this character with heroic fortitude under misery that appeals with such irresistible pathos to the youthful son of Achilles, and gradually alters his resolve. But this

General  
scope of the  
treatment.

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character could never have been unfolded except in a sympathetic presence. The disclosure is possible only because Neoptolemus himself, a naturally frank and chivalrous spirit, is fitted to invite it. In converse with Diomedes or Odysseus, only the sterner aspects of Philoctetes would have appeared.

Nor, again, was it dramatically possible that Diomedes or Odysseus should regard Philoctetes in any other light than that of an indispensable ally: they must bring him to Troy, if possible: if not, then he must remain in Lemnos. Hence neither Aeschylus nor Euripides could have allowed the scheme of Odysseus to fail; for then not even a *deus ex machina* could have made the result satisfactory. It was only a person like Neoptolemus, detached from the past policy of the chiefs, who could be expected to view Philoctetes simply as a wronged and suffering man, with an unconditional claim to compassion. The process by which this view of him gains upon the mind of Neoptolemus, and finally supersedes the desire of taking him to Troy, is delineated with marvellous beauty and truth. Odysseus is baffled; but the decree of Zeus, whose servant he called himself, is performed. The supernatural agency of Heracles is employed in a strictly artistic manner, because the dead-lock of motives has come about by a natural process: the problem now is how to reconcile human piety, as represented by the decision of Neoptolemus, with the purpose of the gods, as declared in the oracle of Helenus. Only a divine message could bend the will of Philoctetes, or absolve the conscience of the man who had promised to bring him home.

Thus it is by the introduction of Neoptolemus that Sophocles is enabled to invest the story with a dramatic interest of the deepest kind. It is no longer only a critical episode in the Trojan war, turning on the question whether the envoys of the Greeks can conciliate the master of their fate. It acquires the larger significance of a pathetic study in human character,—a typical illustration of generous fortitude

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under suffering, and of the struggle between good and evil in an ambitious but loyal mind. Dion, in his comparison of the three plays on this subject, gives unstinted praise to the respective merits of Aeschylus and of Euripides; but he reserves for Sophocles the epithet of 'most tragic.' Sophocles was indeed the poet who first revealed the whole capabilities of the fable as a subject for Tragedy.

§ 9. The management of the Chorus deserves notice.

**The Chorus.** If Sophocles had followed the example of Aeschylus and Euripides, he would have composed it of Lemnians. He felt, probably, that it was better to avoid raising the question which was then suggested,—viz., why some effective succour had not been rendered to Philoctetes in the course of the ten years. But there was a further motive for the change. The attitude of a Lemnian Chorus would be that of a sympathetic visitor, leading Philoctetes to recount his sufferings, and speaking words of comfort in return; while, with respect to the scheme of Odysseus for bringing him to Troy, it would be neutral. But the dramatic effect of the situation is heightened by every circumstance that contributes to the isolation of the central figure. As in the *Antigone* the heroine is the more forlorn because the Theban elders support Creon, so here the loneliness of Philoctetes becomes more complete when the Chorus is formed of persons attached to the Greek chiefs. In these ten years he has seen no human face, and heard no voice, save when some chance vessel put in at the coast, only to mock him with a gleam of delusive hope. And now he stands alone against all.

The Chorus of this play is essentially an active participator in the plot—aiding the strategy of Neoptolemus, and endeavouring to alter the purpose of Philoctetes (1081—1217). Hence it is natural that there should be only one stasimon. The other lyrics subsequent to the Parodos either form parentheses in the dialogue (391 ff., 507 ff.), or belong to the *κομμοί*.

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§ 10. It is interesting to compare the Odysseus of this play—one of the poet's latest works—with that of the *Ajax*, which was one of the earliest. There, Odysseus appears as one who has deeply taken to heart the lesson of moderation, and of reverence for the gods, taught by Athena's punishment of his rival; and, if there is no great elevation in his character, at least he performs a creditable part in dissuading the Atreidae from refusing burial to the dead. Here, he is found avowing that a falsehood is not shameful, if it brings advantage (v. 109); he can be superlatively honest, he says, when there is a prize for honesty; but his first object is always to gain his end (1049 ff.). He is not content with urging Neoptolemus to tell a lie, but adds a sneer at the youth's reluctance (84 f.). Yet, as we learn from Dion, he is 'far gentler and simpler' than the Odysseus who figured in the *Philoctetes* of Euripides. The Homeric conception of the resourceful hero had suffered a grievous decline in the later period of the Attic drama; but Sophocles, it would seem, was comparatively lenient to him.

In the *Ajax*, it will be remembered, Odysseus is terrified at the prospect of meeting his insane foe, and Athena reproves his 'cowardice' (74 f.). His final exit in the *Philoctetes* is in flight from the bent bow of the hero, who remarks that he is brave only in words (1305 ff.). And, at an earlier moment in the play, he is ironically complimented by Neoptolemus on his prudence in declining to fight (1259). All these passages indicate that the conventional stage Odysseus to whom Attic audiences had become accustomed was something of a poltroon. But it is instructive to remark the delicate reserve of Sophocles in hinting a trait which was so dangerously near to the grotesque. For it is no necessary disparagement to the courage of Odysseus that he should shrink from confronting Ajax,—a raging maniac intent on killing him,—or that he should decline to be a target for the 'unerring' shafts of

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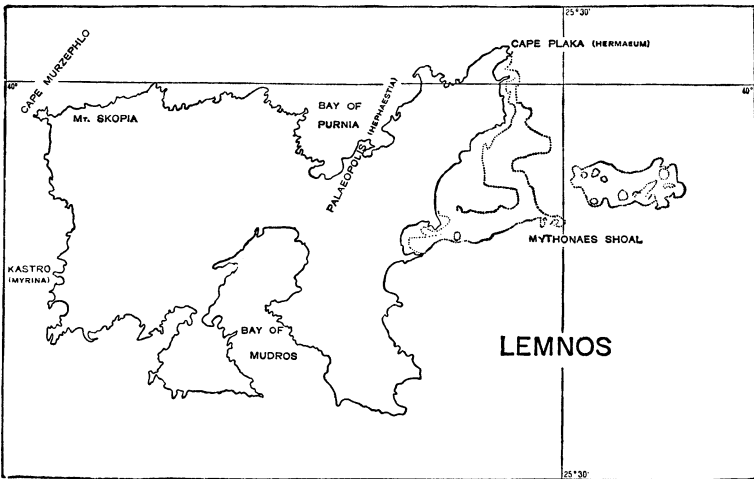
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*Philoctetes*

Philoctetes,—or that he should refrain from drawing his sword on a young comrade, Neoptolemus.

§ 11. A few words must be added concerning the topography of the play. Mount Hermaeum, which re-echoed the cries of Philoctetes, may safely be identified with the north-eastern promontory of Lemnos, now Cape Plaka. His cave was imagined by the poet as situated in the cliffs on the north-east coast, not far south of Hermaeum (cp. 1455 ff.), and at some height above the shore (v. 1000 :



cp. v. 814). The east coast is probably that on which the volcano Mosychlus (visible from the cave) once existed; and the islet called Chrysè lay near it. Philoctetes describes Lemnos as uninhabited (v. 220), and as affording no anchorage (v. 302). This raises a curious point as to the degree of licence that a dramatist of that age would have allowed himself in a matter of this sort,—and as to the choice which he would have made between two kinds of improbability. In the time of Sophocles, Lemnos had long been a possession of Athens, and



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it was a fact familiar to Athenians that the island possessed excellent harbours on every side except the east. Then, if an Athenian audience were required to suppose that, in the heroic age, Lemnos was a desert island, they would at once remember the 'well-peopled' Lemnos of the *Iliad*. Hence, the simplest supposition—viz., that Sophocles chose to make Lemnos desolate for the nonce—is not really so easy as it might appear. One asks, then, did he mean us to remember, here also, the maimed condition of Philoctetes, who could not move many yards from his cave in the eastern cliffs? The centres of population, in ancient times, were on the west and north coasts. The area of Lemnos has been computed as about a hundred and fifty square miles, or nearly the same as that of the Isle of Wight. It would not, then, be absurd to suppose that, even in the space of many years, no Lemnian had chanced to find that particular spot, at the extreme verge of a desolate region, in which the sick man was ensconced.

The adventures of Philoctetes after the Trojan war were related by Euphron of Chalcis (c. 220 B.C.), in a short epic (*Φιλοκτήτης*), of which only five lines, preserved by Stobaeus, are extant, but of which the contents are partly known from a note of Tzetzes on Lycophron. Philoctetes arrived in southern Italy, and there founded the city of Cremissa, near Crotona. He raised a shrine to Apollo the protector of wanderers, and dedicated in it the bow of Heracles. He was slain while aiding an expedition of Rhodians against some Achaeans of Pellene who had settled in Italy.

§ 12. Besides plays by other Greek tragedians, in the best age of Roman Tragedy, Attius (c. 140 B.C.) composed a *Philocteta*, of which some small fragments remain,—less than fifty lines in all. Much ingenuity has been expended on conjectures as to the plot. But the evidence is too scanty to warrant any conclusion. Many of the verses have a rugged power,—as these, for instance, spoken

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*Philoctetes*

by the hero in his agony:—

Heu! qui salsis fluctibu' mandet  
 Me ex sublimo vertice saxi?  
 Iamiam absumor: conficit animam  
 Vis vulneris, ulceris aestus.

Once, at least, in modern literature the story of Philoctetes has been treated with a really classical grace. Fénelon's *Télémaque*, 1699. The mind of Fénelon was in natural sympathy with the spirit of ancient Greek poetry; and the twelfth book of the *Télémaque*, where Philoctetes relates his fortunes to Telemachus, is marked by this distinction. Fénelon varies the earlier part of the legend, following a version which is given by Servius. Heracles, when about to perish on Mount Oeta, wished that the resting-place of his ashes should remain unknown. Philoctetes swore to keep the secret. Odysseus afterwards came in search of Heracles, and at last prevailed on Philoctetes to reveal the spot,—not, indeed, by words, but by stamping upon it. It was for this that Philoctetes was punished by the gods. One of the arrows of Heracles—tinged with the venom of the Lernaean hydra—dropped from his hand, and wounded the offending foot. For almost all that part of the story which passes in Lemnos, Fénelon has closely followed the play of Sophocles. Many passages are translated or paraphrased with happy effect. He wished, however, to present the father of Telemachus in a more favourable light; and so it is Odysseus, not Neoptolemus, who restores the bow.

§ 13. The legend of Philoctetes, as embodied in classical poetry, is illustrated at every step by extant monuments of classical art,—vase-paintings, engraved gems, reliefs, or wall-paintings,—ranging in date from the fifth century B.C. to the second or third century of the Christian era. He is seen assisting, in his youth, at the sacrifices offered to Chrysè by Heracles and by Jason;—standing beside the pyre of Heracles on Oeta;—wounded by the serpent, at his second visit to Chrysè's shrine;—abandoned

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in Lemnos;—finally, tended by the ‘healing hands’ at Troy, and victorious over Paris.

But the most valuable contribution of art to the interpretation of the play is a vase-painting of Philoctetes wounded at the shrine of Chryse. This incident, like the personality of Chryse herself, is left indistinct by the allusions in the poet’s text; and much indistinctness,—easily tolerated by ancient audiences in matters which lay ‘outside of the tragedy,’—tends to weaken a modern reader’s grasp of the story. It is therefore interesting to know how the whole scene



was conceived by a Greek artist nearly contemporary with Sophocles. The painting occurs on a round wine-jar (*στάμνος*), found at Caere in southern Etruria, and now in the Campana collection of the Louvre: the date to which it is assigned is about 400 B.C.<sup>1</sup>

The place is the sacred precinct of Chryse—‘the roofless sanctuary’ of which Sophocles speaks—in the island of the same name, near the eastern coast of Lemnos. Philoctetes

<sup>1</sup> Milani, *Il Mito di Filottete*, p. 68.

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*Philoctetes*

who has just been bitten in the foot by the snake, is lying on the ground, overcome by pain, and crying aloud, as the open mouth indicates. The laurel-wreath worn by him, as by all the other persons of the group, denotes that he had been sacrificing. A beardless youth who bends over the sufferer, as if about to raise him in his arms, is probably Palamedes; his chlamys is girt about his loins in the manner used by sacrificers. On the left, the image of Chryse is seen behind her burning altar; the snake, 'the lurking guardian' of her shrine (v. 1327 f.),—which had crept forth as Philoctetes approached—is again seeking its hiding-place, while Agamemnon strikes at it with his sceptre. Next to him on the right is the beardless Achilles, with chlamys girt at the waist, and a piece of flesh, roasted for the sacrifice, on a spit (*ὄβελος*) in his hand: then the bearded Diomedes, wrapt in his himation: and, on the extreme right, a similar form, possibly Menelaus. The attitudes express horror at the disaster. If the followers of the Greek chiefs are imagined as gathered around this group, awe-struck spectators of the interrupted rite, nothing is wanting to a picture of the moment indicated by Sophocles, when the 'ill-omened cries' of Philoctetes 'filled the camp,' and at length prompted the cruel resolve to carry him across the narrow strait, and abandon him on the lonely shore of Lemnos.

§ 14. The *Philoctetes* was produced at the Great Dionysia, late in March, 409 B.C., and gained the first prize. Sophocles, according to the tradition, would then have been eighty-seven. Able critics have favoured the view that his choice of this subject was in some way connected with the return of Alcibiades. It was in 411 B.C. that Thrasybulus had prevailed on the democratic leaders at Samos to send for Alcibiades, and to elect him one of the ten generals<sup>1</sup>,—a measure by which, as Grote says, 'he

<sup>1</sup> Thuc. 8. 81, 82. The first overtures of Alcibiades had been made to the oligarchs in the army at Samos (*ib.* 47), and had led to the Revolution of the Four Hundred.

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was relieved substantially, though not in strict form,' from the penalties of banishment. In 410 Alcibiades had been the principal author of the Athenian victory at Cyzicus. Thus, at the date of the *Philoctetes*, men's minds had already been prepared for his formal restitution to citizenship—which took place on his return to Athens in 407 B.C. It is easy to draw a parallel between the baffled army at Troy, with their fate hanging on an estranged comrade, and the plight of Athens, whose hopes were centred on an exile. The coincidence of date is really remarkable, and it is not impossible that Sophocles' thoughts may have been first turned to this theme by the analogy which he perceived in it to events of such deep interest for his country-men<sup>1</sup>. But the play itself is the best proof that, having chosen his subject, he treated it for itself alone.

§ 15. The diction of the *Philoctetes* has been regarded by

**Diction.** Schneidewin and others as somewhat deficient in the lofty force of earlier compositions. But

this criticism is not warranted by those passages which gave the fittest scope for such a quality,—as the invocation of the Great Mother (391—402),—the noble stasimon (676—729),—and the denunciations by Philoctetes of the fraud practised against him (927—962 : 1004—1044). If, in the larger part of the play, the language is of a less elevated strain, this results from the nature of the subject; since the gradual unfolding of character, to which the plot owes its peculiar interest, is effected by the conversations of Neoptolemus with Odysseus or with Philoctetes, in which a more familiar tone necessarily predominates.

**Versification.** The versification, however, clearly shows, in one respect, the general stamp of the later period. If *Philoctetes* is compared (for example) with the

<sup>1</sup> There is one passage in the *Philoctetes*, which, though it should not be regarded as a direct allusion to recent events, might certainly suggest that they were present to the poet's mind: see commentary on vv. 385 ff.

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*Philoctetes*

*Antigone*, it will be apparent that the structure of the iambic trimeter has become more Euripidean. The use of tribrachs is very large. Two such feet occur consecutively in the same verse (1029 καὶ νῦν τί μ' ἄγετε; τί μ' ἀπάγεσθε; τοῦ χάριν); a tribrach precedes a dactyl (1232 παρ' οὐπερ ἔλαβον τάδε τὰ τόξ', αὐθις πάλιν): or follows it (932 ἀπόδος, ἰκνοῦμαί σ', ἀπόδος, ἰκετεύω, τέκνον). In two instances a verse ends with a single word which forms a 'paeon quartus' (1302 πολέμιον, 1327 ἀκαλυφῆ),—a licence used, indeed, by Aeschylus, but in a trimeter which belongs to a lyric passage (*Eum.* 780). An anapaest in the first place of the verse occurs not less than thirteen times (308, 470, 486, 544, 742, 745, 749, 898, 923, 939, 941, 967, 1228),—without counting 815 (τί παραφρονεῖς, where the first foot may be a tribrach), 549 (a proper name), or 585 (ἐγὼ εἰμ', a case of synizesis). Not a single instance occurs in the *Antigone*; and in no other play are there more than five. These relaxations of metre in the *Philoctetes* may be partly explained, perhaps, by the more colloquial tone which prevails in much of the dialogue. But at any rate the pervading tendency to greater freedom is unmistakable, and is certainly more strongly marked than in any other of the poet's plays.