Philoktetes

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INTRODUCTION

When Sophokles produced the Philoktetes in 408 B.C., three years before his death at the age of ninety, the ancient story of the tragic archer, abundantly represented in Greek literature, achieved a dramatic and psychological sophistication of a kind never before seen on the classical stage: the theater of violent action and suddenly reversed fortunes (the Oresteia, Ajax, Hippolytos) gave way, for a brilliant moment, to a strangely quiet, contemplative drama that centered not on deeds but ideas, not on actions but words.

Foremost among Sophokles's concerns in the play, one that demanded such thoughtful consideration, is the question of human character and its origins. Indeed, the Philoktetes might well be regarded as the first literary expression of what has been termed the "nature-nurture controversy," a debate that continues to rage in the closing days of the twentieth century. In his drama, Sophokles places himself squarely among those who hold that one's character is determined not by environment or custom but by inborn nature (physis), and that one's greatest dishonor is to act, for whatever end, in ways not consonant with that essence.

The tale itself, reached in medias res, is uncomplicated: Philoktetes, to whom the demigod Herakles bequeathed his magical bow, is recruited by the Achaean generals to serve in the war against Troy. On the way to the battle, Philoktetes, in the company of Odysseus and his crew, puts in at a tiny island to pray at a local temple to Apollo, the god of war. Wandering from the narrow path to the temple, Philoktetes is bitten by a sacred serpent, the warden of the holy precinct. The wound, divinely inflicted as it is and not admitting of mortal healing techniques, festers; and Philoktetes fills his companions' days with an unbearably evil stench and awful cries. His screams of agony prevent the Greeks from offering proper sacrifices to the gods (the ritual utterance eu phemeton, from which our word "euphemism" derives, means not "speak well," as it is sometimes translated, but "keep silent," in fitting attitude of respect). Finally, in desperation, Odysseus—never known as a patient man—puts in at the desert island of Lemnos and there casts Philoktetes away.

Ten years of savage warfare pass, whereupon a captured Trojan oracle, Helenos, reveals to the Greeks that they will not be able to overcome Troy without Philoktetes (his name means "lover of possessions") and his magical bow. Ordered to fetch the castaway and escort him to the Greek battlefield, Odysseus, in keeping with his trickster nature, commands his lieutenant, Neoptolemos, the teenaged son of the newly slain Achilles, to win Philoktetes over to the Greek cause by treachery, promising the bowman a homeward voyage, when in truth he is to be bound once again into the service of those who marooned him. Neoptolemos is surprised at this turn of events, for until then he had been promised that he alone could finish his father's work and conquer Troy. Nonetheless, he accepts the orders of Odysseus and the Atreids, Agamemnon and Menelaos.

Here lies the crux of the tale, for Neoptolemos learns through the course of the Philoktetes that he is simply unable, by virtue of his noble birth, to obey the roguish Odysseus's commands: his ancestry and the nature it has given him do not permit him to act deceitfully, no matter what profit might tempt him. Odysseus, on the other hand, cannot help but behave treacherously, for in Sophokles's account it is in his base, "slavelike" nature to do so. The resolution of Neoptolemos's conflict—and for all his ambivalence, the young man is the real hero of the story—forms the dramatic heart of the play.

Edmund Wilson, in his famous essay "The Wound and the Bow," sought to read the Philoktetes as Sophokles's universal statement on the role of the artist in society: wounded, outcast, lacking some inner quality that might permit him or her to engage in the mundane events of life. Whatever the considerable merits of Wilson's analysis, argued with great sophistication and learning, in the end to read the bowman as a suffering artist seems more an act of anachronistic self-projection than the drama will admit. Instead, it is more likely that a brace of contemporary events propelled Sophokles to create the Philoktetes. The first involves a curious lawsuit that, as some ancient accounts have it, one of Sophokles's sons filed against him, charging that the old man was incapable of managing his affairs and that his estate, therefore, should be ceded to his heir. Sophokles's defense consisted entirely of a recitation from Oedipos at Kolonos, the masterpiece he was then composing. The Athenian jury instantly dismissed the son's suit, holding that no artist of such readily apparent gifts could be judged senile. Although modern scholars doubt the authenticity of this tale, it surely

helps explain the tragedian's preoccupation in his final years with the origins of character, and whether a noble parent could in fact produce ignoble offspring.

The second motivation may have been Sophokles's scorn for the rising generation of Athenian aristocrats, trained by a herd of eager, expensive philosophers—those whom Sokrates reviled in his Apology—in the arts of sophistry and corruption. These young men, the scions of reputedly noble families, quickly proved themselves to be willing to bring their city to ruin rather than surrender any of the privileges of their class; they argued that greatness of character was the exclusive province of the aristocracy to which they belonged, and that no common-born man (women did not enter into the question) could ever hope to be more than a vassal, brutish by nature and situation; and they governed Athens accordingly, destroying the constitutional foundations of the city and inaugurating the reign of terror of the Thirty Tyrants, under whose year-long rule some 1500 Athenian democrats, the noblest minds of a generation, were executed. For Sophokles, these actions, from which Athens was never able to recover, made it abundantly clear that one's social class had nothing whatever to do with greatness of character—quite the reverse, it must have seemed; but by the time he had crafted the Philoktetes, the humane, mature culture that Sophokles represented so well had been condemned to death by its own children.

Kenneth Rexroth has written that in Sophokles's work "men suffer unjustly and learn little from suffering except to answer unanswerable questions with a kind of ultimate courtesy, an Occidental Confucianism that never pretends to solution. The
ages following Sophokles have learned from him the definition of nobility as an essential aristocratic irony which forms the intellect and sensibility." The Philoktetes stands as a splendid application of that ultimate courtesy, addressing timeless problems with a depth of emotion and tragic beauty that is unrivalled in the literature of the stage. (In particular, Sophokles's use of the chorus as the tormented inner voice of conscience is without peer.) It stands as one of the great accomplishments of the Greek mind, a striking depiction of the human soul's rising above seemingly insurmountable hardships to manifest its nobility. One of the fundamental documents in the history of the imagination, Philoktetes is alive, and it speaks to all of us.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Odysseus
Chorus
Trader (Spy)
Neoptolemos
Philoktetes
Herakles

PHILOKTETES

ODYSSEUS

This is the shore of jagged Lemnos, a land bound by waves, untrodden, lonely. Here I abandoned Poias's son, Philoktetes of Melos, years ago. Neoptolemos, child of Lord Achilles, the greatest by far of our Greek fighters, I had to cast him away here: our masters, the princes,