

# PHILOCTETES

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

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## INTRODUCTION TO PHILOCTETES

THE *Philoctetes* is the second-last play that Sophocles wrote. It probably came out in 409 B.C., and the last play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, in 404, the year of Sophocles' death. Aristotle in the *Poetics* criticizes the *Philoctetes* for its happy ending, and many commentators since have been annoyed, or puzzled, or both by the solution of the play, which involves the God from the machine. Latterly, however, it has been more appreciated. There have been performances on the radio, and a surprising amount has been written about it, including a very interesting essay by Edmund Wilson in the *Wound and the Bow*. It is perhaps the most modern in feeling of all Sophocles' tragedies, and Sophocles is the most modern, the nearest to us, of the three Greek tragedians.

We may see the play simply as a duel between Philoctetes and Odysseus, with Neoptolemus as a pawn in the contest. But this play has a theme and a pattern which become deeper and more complicated, if we realize that in many of its aspects the story is the same as that of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Each play, seen in the light of the other, makes more comprehensible Sophocles' tragic vision. Out of what personal suffering or vicarious experience he wrote this story twice in his last years, we shall never know. It is not only a preoccupation with the end of his life. With certain important differences the *Ajax*, written more than thirty years earlier than the *Philoctetes*, shows him thinking in the same way. Of course, each of these plays is individual in tone and character. What I mean is that, in both, the story is of a man offensive to his own society and banished by it, who, at last, must be reinstated and who becomes again miraculously potent, both alive and dead. And this story is the same in both plays in all its significant aspects.

Philoctetes is afflicted by some divine power without having committed a crime or being guilty of anything which the words "conscious guilt" mean, either to the fifth-century Greek or to ourselves.

He had unconsciously stumbled into a precinct or shrine of a God. Such shrines must not be thought of in the light of the Christian associations with the word. This was probably an unmarked and unfenced place, similar to the grove of the Eumenides in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. A snake—very often in Greece a symbol of a God's power—bit him in the foot and left him crippled. It is worth noting that Philoctetes' offense against the Gods is left at this. We are not allowed by the dramatist to speculate on any symbolic significance of his act of guilt or to construe it in any way as peculiar to Philoctetes. It is, in fact, an accident. He thus becomes burdened with the mark of God's resentment without any explanation for it humanly cogent either for himself or for others. The smell of his wound and his cries of agony render him so offensive to his comrades that he is marooned on a desert island for ten years, at the end of which time the Gods intervene to rescue him as mysteriously as they had injured him at the first. A glance at the *Oedipus* figure later and that of the *Ajax* in the earlier play shows a similar emphasis on the hero's innocence. It is true that *Ajax* is driven mad in the commission of an attempted murder against his generals, but Sophocles never tries to emphasize the matter of the murder afterward; it is only the performance of his act of frustration and misery by *Ajax* that we are likely to concern ourselves with.

Philoctetes is now an outcast from human sympathy but also the future conqueror of Troy. In both destruction and triumph, his lot does not make sense for ordinary men. This troubles them very little. They discarded him out of disgust at his affliction, when it looked as though God's hatred of him made that a safe course as well as a convenient one for themselves. Now that, with similar incomprehensibility, the divine purpose insists on the value of his bow and himself for the capture of Troy, they are prepared to restore him again to their society, particularly as the God has also arranged for his healing. In the *Philoctetes* Sophocles expresses what it feels like to be a man so isolated, so impersonally, so instrumentally used by his fellows.

The moment chosen is when the restoration to potency is near. Characteristically, Odysseus, who had marooned him originally and had taken advantage of Philoctetes when off his guard, plans to re-

capture him by similar strategic means. Neither time is he concerned to establish any human contact with the strange magical monster, so tormented and so honored by the non-human forces of the world. In this, Odysseus is blood-brother of Creon, who, in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, plays a similar role with the terrifying old beggar, Oedipus. In neither play does this cynical inhumanity have success. But neither are Philoctetes' brooding hatred and resentment allowed to have their way entirely. Here is where the role of Neoptolemus is important.

By trying to obey Odysseus, this boy comes to realize what cruelty is being inflicted on Philoctetes. So he undoes his offense and gives back the bow. However, when the deception is over and when the opportunity of healing and renown are offered Philoctetes again, by Neoptolemus this time, and as equal to equal, Philoctetes still refuses. The issue is clearly joined. Philoctetes' final refusal is the refusal of a man so wounded as to be unwilling to resume normal life itself because, with that life, will come new and unpredictable suffering. Better the old known pain, with the old known remedies, than the new hurt as unforeseeable as the future itself:

It is not the sting of wrongs past,  
but what I must look for in wrongs to come.

This is all understandable, and, more than understandable, it claims our sympathy. But it is also irreconcilable with the vital principle which in anyone's life involves change and risk. It is easy for young Neoptolemus to face the future confidently. He has not yet been hurt enough to know what it feels like. Philoctetes' refusal is a great tragic human truth.

So Heracles is invoked not as an ordinary God from the machine but as the influence of a hero and old comrade, similarly injured, similarly restored, whose example must force Philoctetes to a step which will bring him healing and renown—but also more suffering. It is not that, as Aeschylus says, "out of suffering comes learning," but that only at the cost of suffering does life itself exist. As Philoctetes' final refusal is the mark of the play's truth to humanity, so is his final acquiescence in Heracles' order the mark of a truth to a univer-

sal principle, more imperative than humanity. But it is not the Philoctetes of the island, whom we have come to know so well, who goes to Troy with Odysseus and Neoptolemus. The significant part of that Philoctetes died, persisting to the end not to surrender his resentment and to risk new wrongs. This tragedy ends with his renewed refusal of Neoptolemus. What follows is what might well happen in the world as in the theater—the surrender of the individual life to the universal demands of life itself. As Hamlet must die and Fortinbras succeed, the new Philoctetes succeeds the old; but with the other Philoctetes of the island are buried all the years of wrong and of suffering and also the meaning that they had rendered to his agony.

CHARACTERS

*Odysseus*

*Chorus of Sailors under the Command of Neoptolemus*

*The Spy Disguised as a Trader*

*Neoptolemus, Prince of Scyrus and Son of Achilles*

*Philoctetes*

*Heracles*

PHILOCTETES

SCENE: *A lonely spot on the island of Lemnos. Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus.*

*Odysseus*

This is it; this Lemnos and its beach  
down to the sea that quite surrounds it; desolate,  
no one sets foot on it; there are no houses.  
This is where I marooned him long ago,  
the son of Poias, the Melian, his foot  
diseased and eaten away with running ulcers.

Son of our greatest hero,  
son of Achilles, Neoptolemus,  
I tell you I had orders for what I did:  
my masters, the princes, bade me do it.

We had no peace with him: at the holy festivals,  
we dared not touch the wine and meat; he screamed  
and groaned so, and those terrible cries of his  
brought ill luck on our celebrations; all  
the camp was haunted by him.

Now is no time to talk to you of this,  
now is no time for long speeches.  
I am afraid that he may hear of my coming  
and ruin all my plans to take him.

It is you who must help me with the rest. Look about  
and see where there might be a cave with two mouths.  
There are two niches to rest in, one in the sun  
when it is cold, the other a tunneled passage  
through which the breezes blow in summertime.

A man can sleep there and be cool. To the left,  
a little, you may see a spring to drink at—  
if it is still unchoked—go this way quietly,  
see if he's there or somewhere else and signal.  
Then I can tell you the rest. Listen:  
I shall tell you. We will both do this thing.

*Neoptolemus*

What you speak of is near at hand, Odysseus.  
I think I see such a cave.

*Odysseus*

Above or below? I cannot see it myself.

*Neoptolemus*

Above here, and no trace of a footpath.

*Odysseus*

See if he is housed within, asleep.

*Neoptolemus*

I see an empty hut, with no one there.

*Odysseus*

And nothing to keep house with?

*Neoptolemus*

A pallet bed, stuffed with leaves, to sleep on, for someone.

*Odysseus*

And nothing else? Nothing inside the house?

*Neoptolemus*

A cup, made of a single block, a poor  
workman's contrivance. And some kindling, too.

*Odysseus*

It is his treasure house that you describe.

*Neoptolemus*

And look, some rags are drying in the sun  
full of the oozing matter from a sore.

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*Odysseus*

Yes, certainly he lives here, even now  
is somewhere not far off. He cannot go far,  
sick as he is, lame cripple for so long.  
It's likely he has gone to search for food  
or somewhere that he knows there is a herb  
to ease his pain. Send your man here to watch,  
that he may not come upon me without warning.  
For he would rather take me than all the Greeks.

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*Neoptolemus*

Very well, then, the path will be watched.  
Go on with your story; tell me what you want.

*Odysseus*

Son of Achilles,  
our coming here has a purpose; to it be loyal  
with more than with your body. If you should hear  
some strange new thing, unlike what you have heard  
before, still serve us; it was to serve you came here.

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*Neoptolemus*

What would you have me do?

*Odysseus*

Ensnare

the soul of Philoctetes with your words.  
When he asks who you are and whence you came,  
say you are Achilles' son; you need not lie.  
Say you are sailing home, leaving the Greeks  
and all their fleet, in bitter hatred. Say  
that they had prayed you, urged you from your home,  
and swore that only with your help  
could Troy be taken. Yet when you came and asked,  
as by your right, to have your father's arms,  
Achilles' arms, they did not think you worthy  
but gave them to Odysseus. Say what you will  
against me; do not spare me anything.

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Nothing of this will hurt me; if you will not do this, you will bring sorrow on all the Greeks. If this man's bow shall not be taken by us, you cannot sack the town of Troy.

Perhaps you wonder why you can safely meet him, why he would trust you and not me. Let me explain. You have come here unforced, unpledged by oaths, made no part of our earlier expedition. The opposite is true in my own case; at no point can I deny his charge. If, when he sees me, Philoctetes still has his bow, there is an end of me, and you too, for my company would damn you. For this you must sharpen your wits, to become a thief of the arms no man has conquered.

I know, young man, it is not your natural bent to say such things nor to contrive such mischief. But the prize of victory is pleasant to win. Bear up: another time we shall prove honest. For one brief shameless portion of a day give me yourself, and then for all the rest you may be called most scrupulous of men.

*Neoptolemus*

Son of Laertes, what I dislike to hear I hate to put in execution. I have a natural antipathy to get my ends by tricks and stratagems. So, too, they say, my father was. Philoctetes I will gladly fight and capture, bring him with us, but not by treachery. Surely a one-legged man cannot prevail against so many of us! I recognize that I was sent with you to follow your instructions. I am loath to have you call me traitor. Still, my lord,

I would prefer even to fail with honor than win by cheating.

*Odysseus*

You are a good man's son. I was young, too, once, and then I had a tongue very inactive and a doing hand. Now as I go forth to the test, I see that everywhere among the race of men it is the tongue that wins and not the deed.

*Neoptolemus*

What do you bid me do, but to tell lies?

*Odysseus*

By craft I bid you take him, Philoctetes.

*Neoptolemus*

And why by craft rather than by persuasion?

*Odysseus*

He will not be persuaded; force will fail.

*Neoptolemus*

Has he such strength to give him confidence?

*Odysseus*

The arrows none may avoid, that carry death.

*Neoptolemus*

Then even to encounter him is not safe?

*Odysseus*

Not if you do not take him by craft, as I told you.

*Neoptolemus*

Do you not find it vile yourself, this lying?

*Odysseus*

Not if the lying brings our rescue with it.

*Neoptolemus*

How can a man not blush to say such things?

*Odysseus*

When one does something for gain, one need not blush.

*Neoptolemus*

What gain for me that he should come to Troy?

*Odysseus*

His weapons alone are destined to take Troy.

*Neoptolemus*

Then I shall not be, as was said, its conqueror?

*Odysseus*

Not you apart from them nor they from you.

*Neoptolemus*

They must be my quarry then, if this is so.

*Odysseus*

You will win a double prize if you do this.

*Neoptolemus*

What? If I know, I will do what you say.

*Odysseus*

You shall be called a wise man and a good.

*Neoptolemus*

Well, then I will do it, casting aside all shame.

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*Odysseus*

You clearly recollect all I have told you?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, now that I have understood it.

*Odysseus*

Stay

and wait his coming here; I will go  
that he may not spy my presence.

I will take with me to the ship this guard.

If you are too slow, I will send him back again,  
disguise him as a sailor; Philoctetes  
will never know him.

Whatever clever story he give you, then

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fall in with it and use it as you need.

Now I will go to the ship and leave you in charge.

May Hermes, God of Craft, the Guide, for us

be guide indeed, and Victory and Athene,

the City Goddess, who preserves me ever.

(Exit *Odysseus*.)

*Chorus*

Sir, we are strangers, and this land is strange;

what shall we say and what conceal from this suspicious man?

Tell us.

For cunning that passes another's cunning

and a pre-eminent judgment lie with the prince,

in whose sovereign keeping is Zeus's holy scepter.

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To you, young lord, all this has come,

all the power of your forefathers. Tell us now

what we must do to serve you.

*Neoptolemus*

Now—if you wish to see where he sleeps

on his crag at the edge—look, be not afraid.

But when the terrible wanderer returns,

be gone from the hut, but come to my beckoning.

Take your cues from me. Help when you can.

*Chorus*

Sir, this we have always done,

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have kept a watchful eye over your safety.

But now

tell us what places he inhabits

and where he rests. It would not be amiss

for us to know this,

lest he attack us unawares.

Where does he live? Where does he rest?

What footpath does he follow? Is he in the house or not?

*Neoptolemus*

This, that you see, is his two-fronted house,

and he sleeps inside on the rock.

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*Chorus*

Where is he gone, unhappy creature?

*Neoptolemus*

I am sure

he has gone to find food somewhere near here;  
stumbling, lame, dragging along the path,  
he is trying to shoot birds to prolong his miserable life.  
This indeed, they say, is how he lives.  
And no one comes near to cure him.

*Chorus*

Yes, for my part I pity him:  
how unhappy, how utterly alone, always  
he suffers the savagery of his illness  
with no one to care for him,  
with no friendly face near him,  
but bewildered and distraught at each need as it comes.  
God pity him, how has he kept a grip on life?

Woe to the contrivances of death-bound men,  
woe to the unhappy generations of death-bound men  
whose lives have known extremes!

Perhaps this man is as well born as any,  
second to no son of an ancient house.  
Yet now his life lacks everything,  
and he makes his bed without neighbors  
or with spotted shaggy beasts for neighbors.  
His thoughts are set continually on pain and hunger.  
He cries out in his wretchedness;  
there is only a blabbering echo,  
that comes from the distance speeding  
from his bitter crying.

*Neoptolemus*

I am not surprised at any of this:  
this is a God's doing, if I have any understanding.

These afflictions that have come upon him  
are the work of Chryse, bitter of heart.  
As for his present loneliness and suffering,  
this, too, no doubt is part of the God's plan  
that he may not bend against Troy  
the divine invincible bow  
until the time shall be fulfilled, at which it is decreed,  
that Troy, as they say, shall fall to that bow.

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*Chorus*

Hush.

*Neoptolemus*

What is it?

*Chorus*

Hush! I hear a footfall,  
footfall of a man that walks painfully.  
Is it here? Is it here?  
I hear a voice, now I can hear it clearly,  
voice of a man, crawling along the path,  
hard put to it to move. It's far away,  
but I can hear it; I can hear the sound well  
the voice of a man wounded; it is quite clear now.

No more now, my son.

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*Neoptolemus*

No more of what?

*Chorus*

Your plots and plans. He is here, almost with us.  
His is no cheerful marching to the pipe  
like a shepherd with his flock.  
No, a bitter cry.  
He must have stumbled far down on the path,  
and his moaning carried all the way here.  
Or perhaps he stopped to look at the empty harbor,  
for it was a bitter cry.

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*Philoctetes*

Men, who are you that have put in, rowing  
to a shore without houses or anchorage?  
What countrymen may I call you without offense?  
What is your people? Greeks, indeed, you seem  
in fashion of your clothing, dear to me.  
May I hear your voice? Do not be afraid  
or shrink from such as I am, grown a savage.  
I have been alone and very wretched,  
without friend or comrade, suffering a great deal.  
Take pity on me; speak to me; speak,  
speak if you come as friends.

No—answer me.

If this is all  
that we can have from one another, speech,  
this, at least, we should have.

*Neoptolemus*

Sir, for your questions, since you wish to know,  
know we are Greeks.

*Philoctetes*

Friendliest of tongues!

That I should hear it spoken once again  
by such a man in such a place! My boy,  
who are you? Who has sent you here? What brought you?  
What impulse? What friendliest of winds?  
Tell me all this, that I know who you are.

*Neoptolemus*

I am of Scyrus that the sea surrounds;  
I am sailing home. My name is Neoptolemus,  
Achilles' son. Now you know everything.

*Philoctetes*

Son of a father—that I loved so dearly—  
and of a country that I loved, you that were reared  
by that old man Lycomedes, what kind of venture  
can have brought you to port here? Where did you sail from?

*Neoptolemus*

At present bound from Troy.

*Philoctetes*

From Troy? From Troy!  
You did not sail with us to Troy at first.

*Neoptolemus*

You, then, are one that also had a share  
in all that trouble?

*Philoctetes*

Is it possible  
you do not know me, boy, me whom you see here?

*Neoptolemus*

I never saw you before. How could I know you?

*Philoctetes*

You never heard my name then? Never a rumor  
of all the wrongs I suffered, even to death?

*Neoptolemus*

I never knew a word of what you ask me.

*Philoctetes*

Surely I must be vile! God must have hated me  
that never a word of me, of how I live here,  
should have come home through all the land of Greece.  
Yet they that outraged God casting me away  
can hold their tongues and laugh! While my disease  
always increases and grows worse. My boy,  
you are Achilles' son. I that stand here  
am one you may have heard of, as the master  
of Heracles' arms. I am Philoctetes  
the son of Poias. Those two generals  
and Prince Odysseus of the Cephalenians  
cast me ashore here to their shame, as lonely  
as you can see me now, wasting with my sickness  
as cruel as it is, caused by the murderous bite  
of a viper mortally dangerous.

I was already bitten when we put in here  
on my way from sea-encircled Chryse.  
I tell you, boy, those men cast me away here  
and ran and left me helpless. They were happy  
when they saw that I had fallen asleep on the shore  
in a rocky cave, after a rough passage.

They went away and left me with such rags—  
and few enough of them—as one might give  
an unfortunate beggar and a handful of food.  
May God give them the like!

Think, boy, of that awakening when I awoke  
and found them gone; think of the useless tears  
and curses on myself when I saw the ships—  
my ships, which I had once commanded—gone,  
all gone, and not a man left on the island,  
not one to help me or to lend a hand  
when I was seized with my sickness, not a man!  
In all I saw before me nothing but pain;  
but of that a great abundance, boy.

Time came and went for me. In my tiny shelter  
I must alone do everything for myself.  
This bow of mine I used to shoot the birds  
that filled my belly. I must drag my foot,  
my cursed foot, to where the bolt  
sped by the bow's thong had struck down a bird.  
If I must drink, and it was winter time—  
the water was frozen—I must break up firewood.  
Again I crawled and miserably contrived  
to do the work. Whenever I had no fire,  
rubbing stone on stone I would at last produce  
the spark that kept me still in life.  
A roof for shelter, if only I have fire,  
gives me everything but release from pain.

Boy, let me tell you of this island.  
No sailor by his choice comes near it.

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There is no anchorage, nor anywhere  
that one can land, sell goods, be entertained.  
Sensible men make no voyages here.  
Yet now and then someone puts in. A stretch  
of time as long as this allows much to happen.  
When they have come here, boy, they pity me—  
at least they say they do—and in their pity  
they have given me scraps of food and cast-off clothes;  
that other thing, when I dare mention it,  
none of them will—bringing me home again.

310

It is nine years now that I have spent dying,  
with hunger and pain feeding my insatiable  
disease. That, boy, is what they have done to me,  
the two Atridae, and that mighty Prince  
Odysseus. May the Gods that live in heaven  
grant that they pay, agony for my agony.

*Chorus*

In this, I too resemble your other visitors.  
I pity you, son of Poias.

*Neoptolemus*

I am a witness,  
I also, of the truth of what you say.  
I know it is true. I have dealt with those villains,  
the two Atridae and the prince Odysseus.

320

*Philoctetes*

Are you, as well as I, a sufferer  
and angry? Have you grounds against the Atridae?

*Neoptolemus*

Give me the chance to gratify my anger  
with my hand some day!  
Then will Mycenae know and Sparta know  
that Scyrus, too, breeds soldiers.

*Philoctetes*

Well said, boy!

You come to me with a great hate against them.  
Because of what?

*Neoptolemus*

I will tell you, Philoctetes—  
for all that it hurts to tell it—  
of how I came to Troy and what dishonor  
they put upon me. 330  
When fatefully Achilles came to die. . . .

*Philoctetes*

O stop! tell me no more. Let me understand  
this first. Is he dead, Achilles, dead?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, he is dead; no man his conqueror  
but bested by a god, Phoebus the archer.

*Philoctetes*

Noble was he that killed and he that died.  
Boy, I am at a loss which to do first,  
ask for your story or to mourn for him.

*Neoptolemus*

God help you, I would think that your own sufferings  
were quite enough without mourning for those of others. 340

*Philoctetes*

Yes, that is true. Again, tell me your story  
of how they have insulted you.

*Neoptolemus*

They came  
for me, did great Odysseus and the man  
that was my father's tutor, with a ship  
wonderfully decked with ribbons. They had a story—  
be it truth or lie—that it was God's decree  
since he, my father, was dead, I and I only  
should take Troy town.

This was their story. Sir, you can imagine  
it did not take much time, when they had told it, 350  
for me to embark with them.  
Chiefly, you know, I was prompted by love of him,  
the dead man. I had hope of seeing him  
while still unburied. Alive I never had.  
We had a favoring wind; on the second day  
we touched Sigeion. As I disembarked,  
all of the soldiers swarmed around me, blessed me,  
swore that they saw Achilles alive again,  
now gone from them forever. But he still lay  
unburied. I, his mourning son, wept for him; 360  
then, in a while, came to the two Atridae,  
my friends, as it seemed right to do, and asked them  
for my father's arms and all that he had else.  
They needed brazen faces for their answer:  
"Son of Achilles, all that your father had,  
all else, is yours to take, but not his arms.  
Another man now owns them, Laertes' son."  
I burst into tears, jumped up, enraged,  
cried out in my pain, "You scoundrels, did you dare  
to give those arms that were mine to someone else 370  
before I knew of it?" Then Odysseus  
spoke—he was standing near me—"Yes, and rightly,"  
he said, "they gave them, boy. For it was I  
who rescued them and him, their former owner."  
My anger got the better of me; I cursed him outright  
with every insult that I knew, sparing none,  
if he should take my arms away from me.  
He is no way given to quarreling, but at this  
he was stung by what I said. He answered:  
"You were not where we were. You were at home,  
out of the reach of duty. Since, besides,  
you have so bold a tongue in your head, never 380  
will you possess them to bring home to Scyrus."

There it was, abuse on both sides. But I lost  
 what should be mine and so sailed home. Odysseus,  
 that filthy son of filthy parents, robbed me.  
 Yet I do not blame him even so much as the princes.  
 All of a city is in the hand of the prince,  
 all of an army; unruly men become so  
 by the instruction of their betters.  
 This is the whole tale. May he that hates the Atridae  
 be as dear in the Gods' sight as he is in mine.

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*Chorus*

Earth, Mountain Mother, in whom we find sustenance,  
 Mother of Zeus himself,  
 Dweller in great golden Pactolus,  
 Mother that I dread:  
 on that other day, too, I called on thee, Thou Blessed One,  
 Thou that rides on the Bull-killing Lions,  
 when all the insolence of the Atridae assaulted our Prince,  
 when they gave his arms, that wonder of the world,  
 to the son of Laertes.

400

*Philoctetes*

You have sailed here, as it seems, with a clear tally;  
 your half of sorrow matches that of mine.  
 What you tell me rings in harmony. I recognize  
 the doings of the Atridae and Odysseus.  
 I know Odysseus would employ his tongue  
 on every ill tale, every rascality,  
 that could be brought to issue in injustice.  
 This is not at all my wonder, but that Ajax  
 the Elder should stand by, see and allow it.

410

*Neoptolemus*

He is no longer living, sir; never, indeed,  
 if he were, would they have robbed me of the arms.

*Philoctetes*

What! Is he, too, dead and gone?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, dead and gone. As such now think of him.

*Philoctetes*

But not the son of Tydeus nor Odysseus  
 whom Sisyphus once sold to Laertes,  
 they will not die; for they should not be living.

*Neoptolemus*

Of course, they are not dead; you may be sure  
 that they are in their glory among the Greeks.

420

*Philoctetes*

What of an old and honest man, my friend,  
 Nestor of Pylos? Is he alive? He used  
 to check their mischief by his wise advice.

*Neoptolemus*

Things have gone badly for him. He has lost  
 his son Antilochus, who once stood by him.

*Philoctetes*

Ah!  
 You have told me the two deaths that most could hurt me.  
 Alas, what should I look for  
 when Ajax and Antilochus are dead,  
 and still Odysseus lives, that in their stead  
 ought to be counted among the dead?

430

*Neoptolemus*

A cunning wrestler; still, Philoctetes,  
 even the cunning are sometimes tripped up.

*Philoctetes*

Tell me, by the Gods, where was Patroclus,  
 who was your father's dearest friend?

*Neoptolemus*

Dead, too.

In one short sentence I can tell you this.  
 War never takes a bad man but by chance,  
 the good man always.

*Philoctetes*

You have said the truth.

So I will ask you of one quite unworthy  
but dexterous and clever with his tongue.

440

*Neoptolemus*

Whom can you mean except Odysseus?

*Philoctetes*

It is not he: there was a man, Thersites,  
who never was content to speak once only,  
though no one was for letting him speak at all.  
Do you know if he is still alive?

*Neoptolemus*

I did not know him,  
but I have heard that he is still alive.

*Philoctetes*

He would be; nothing evil has yet perished.  
The Gods somehow give them most excellent care.  
They find their pleasure in turning back from Death  
the rogues and tricksters, but the just and good  
they are always sending out of the world.  
How can I reckon the score, how can I praise,  
when praising Heaven I find the Gods are bad?

450

*Neoptolemus*

For my own part, Philoctetes of Oeta,  
from now on I shall take precautions.  
I shall look at Troy and the Atridae both  
from very far off. I shall never abide  
the company of those where the worse man  
has more power than the better, where the good  
are always on the wane and cowards rule.  
For the future, rocky Scyrus will content me  
to take my pleasure at home.  
Now I will be going to my ship. Philoctetes,  
on you God's blessing and goodbye. May the Gods

460

recover you of your sickness, as you would have it!  
Let us go, men, that when God grants us sailing  
we may be ready to sail.

*Philoctetes*

Boy, are you going,

going now?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, the weather favors.

We must look to sail almost at once.

*Philoctetes*

My dear—I beg you in your father's name,  
and in your mother's, in the name of all  
that you have loved at home, do not leave me here  
alone, living in sufferings you have seen  
and others I have told you of.

470

I am not your main concern; give me a passing thought.  
I know that there is horrible discomfort  
in having me on board. Put up with it.  
To such as you and your nobility,  
meanness is shameful, decency honorable.  
If you leave me here, it is an ugly story.  
If you take me, men will say their best of you,  
if I shall live to see Oetean land.

Come! One day, hardly one whole day's space  
that I shall trouble you. Endure this much.

480

Take me and put me where you will,  
in the hold, in the prow or poop, anywhere  
where I shall least offend those that I sail with.  
By Zeus himself, God of the Suppliants,  
I beg you, boy, say "Yes," say you will do it.  
Here I am on my knees to you, poor cripple,  
for all my lameness. Do not cast me away  
so utterly alone, where no one even walks by.  
Either take me and set me safe in your own home,  
or take me to Chalcedon in Euboea.

From there it will be no great journey for me  
to Oeta or to ridgy Trachis or  
to quick-flowing Spercheius,  
and so you show me to my loving father.  
For many a day I have feared that he is dead.  
With those who came to my island I sent messages,  
and many of them, begging him to come  
and bring me home himself. Either he's dead,  
or, as I rather think, my messengers  
made little of what I asked them and hurried home.  
Now in you I have found both escort and messenger;  
bring me safe home. Take pity on me.  
Look how men live, always precariously  
balanced between good and bad fortune.  
If you are out of trouble, watch for danger.  
And when you live well, then consider the most  
your life, lest ruin take it unawares.

*Chorus*

Have pity on him, prince.  
He has told us of a most desperate course run.  
God forbid such things should overtake friends of mine.  
And, prince, if you hate the abominable Atridae  
I would set their ill treatment of him  
to his gain and would carry him  
in your quick, well-fitted ship  
to his home and so avoid offense before the face of God.

*Neoptolemus*

Take care that your assent is not too ready,  
and that, when you have enough of his diseased company,  
you are no longer constant to what you have said.

*Chorus*

No. You will never be able in this  
to reproach me with justice.

490

500

510

520

*Neoptolemus*

I should be ashamed  
to be less ready than you to render a stranger service.  
Well, if you will then, let us sail. Let him  
get ready quickly. My ship will carry him.

May God give us a safe clearance from this land  
and a safe journey where we choose to go.

*Philoctetes*

God bless this day!  
Man, dear to my very heart,  
and you, dear friends, how shall I prove to you  
how you have bound me to your friendship!  
Let us go, boy. But let us first kiss the earth,  
reverently, in my homeless home of a cave.  
I would have you know what I have lived from,  
how tough the spirit that did not break. I think  
the sight itself would have been enough for anyone  
except myself. Necessity has taught me,  
little by little, to suffer and be patient.

530

*Chorus*

Wait! Let us see. Two men are coming.  
One of them is of our crew, the other a foreigner.  
Let us hear from them and then go in.

540

*(Enter the Sailor disguised as a Trader.)*

*Trader*

Son of Achilles, I told my fellow traveler here—  
he with two others were guarding your ship—  
to tell me where you were. I happened on you.  
I had no intentions this way. Just by accident  
I came to anchor at this island.  
I am sailing in command of a ship outward bound  
from Ilium, with no great company, for Peperethus—  
a good country, that, for wine. When I heard  
that all those sailors were the crew of your ship,

550

I thought I should not hold my tongue and sail on until I spoke with you—and got my reward, a fair one, doubtless. Apparently you do not know much of your own affairs, nor what new plans the Greeks have for you. Indeed, not only plans, actions in train already and not slowly.

*Neoptolemus*

Thank you for your consideration, sir. I will remain obliged to your kindness unless I prove unworthy. Please tell me what you have spoken of. I would like to know what are these new plans of the Greeks.

*Trader*

Old Phoenix and the two sons of Theseus are gone, pursuing you with a squadron.

*Neoptolemus*

Do they intend to bring me back with violence or persuade me?

*Trader*

I do not know. I tell you what I heard.

*Neoptolemus*

Are Phoenix and his friends in such a hurry to do the bidding of the two Atridae?

*Trader*

It is being done. There is no delay about it. That you should know.

*Neoptolemus*

How is it that Odysseus was not ready to sail as his own messenger on such an errand? It cannot be he was afraid?

*Trader*

When I weighed anchor, he and Tydeus' son were in pursuit of still another man.

*Neoptolemus*

Who was this other man that Odysseus himself should seek him?

*Trader*

There was a man—perhaps you will tell me first who this is; and say softly what you say.

*Neoptolemus*

This, sir, is the famous Philoctetes.

*Trader*

Do not ask me any further questions. Get yourself out, as quickly as you can, out of this island.

*Philoctetes*

What does he say, boy? Why in dark whispers does he bargain with you about me, this sailor?

*Neoptolemus*

I do not know yet what he says, but he must say it, openly, whatever it is, to you and me and these.

*Trader*

Son of Achilles, do not slander me, speaking of me to the army as a tattler. There's many a thing I do for them and in return get something from them, as a poor man may.

*Neoptolemus*

I am the enemy of the Atridae. This is my greatest friend because he hates the Atridae. You have come to me as a friend, and so you must hide from me nothing that you heard.

*Trader*

Well, watch what you are doing, sir.

*Neoptolemus*

I have.

*Trader*

I put the whole responsibility squarely upon yourself.

Neoptolemus

Do so; but speak.

590

Trader

Well, then. The two I have spoken of,  
the son of Tydeus and the Prince Odysseus,  
are in pursuit of Philoctetes.  
They have sworn, so help them God, to bring him with them  
either by persuasion or by brute force.  
And this all the Greeks heard clearly announced  
by Prince Odysseus; for he was much surer  
of success than was the other.

Neoptolemus

What can have made  
the Atridae care about him after so long—  
one whom they, years and years since, cast away?  
What yearning for him came over them? Was it the Gods  
who punish evil doings that now have driven them  
to retribution for injustice?

600

Trader

I will explain all that. Perhaps you haven't heard.  
There was a prophet of very good family,  
a son of Priam indeed, called Helenus.  
He was captured one night in an expedition  
undertaken singlehanded by Odysseus,  
of whom all base and shameful things are spoken,  
captured by stratagem. Odysseus brought  
his prisoner before the Greeks, a splendid prize.  
Helenus prophesied everything to them  
and, in particular, touching the fortress of Troy,  
that they could never take it till they persuaded  
Philoctetes to come with them and leave his island.  
As soon as Odysseus heard the prophet say this,  
he promised at once to bring the man before them,  
for all to see—he thought, as a willing prisoner,  
but, if not that, against his will. If he failed,

610

"any of them might have his head," he declared. My boy,  
that is the whole story; that is why I urge you  
and him and any that you care for to make haste.

620

Philoctetes

Ah!  
Did he indeed swear that he would persuade me  
to sail with him, did he so, that utter devil?  
As soon shall I be persuaded, when I am dead,  
to rise from Death's house, come to the light again,  
as his own father did.

Trader

I do not know about that. Well, I will be going now  
to my ship. May God prosper you both!

(Exit Trader.)

Philoctetes

Is it not terrible, boy, that this Odysseus  
should think that there are words soft enough to win me,  
to let him put me in his boat, exhibit me  
in front of all the Greeks?

630

No! I would rather listen to my worst enemy,  
the snake that bit me, made me into this cripple.  
But he can say anything, he can dare anything.  
Now I know that he will come here.  
Boy, let us go, that a great sea may sever  
us from Odysseus' ship.  
Let us go. For look, haste in due season shown  
brings rest and peace when once the work is done.

Neoptolemus

When the wind at our prow falls, we can sail, no sooner.  
Now it is dead against us.

640

Philoctetes

It is always fair sailing, when you escape evil.

Neoptolemus

Yes, but the wind is against them, too.



*Philoctetes*

For pirates  
when they can thief and plunder, no wind is contrary.

*Neoptolemus*

If you will, then, let us go. Take from your cave  
what you need most and love most.

*Philoctetes*

There are some things I need, but no great choice.

*Neoptolemus*

What is there that you will not find on board?

*Philoctetes*

A herb I have, the chief means to soothe my wound,  
to lull the pain to sleep.

650

*Neoptolemus*

Bring it out then.

What else is there that you would have?

*Philoctetes*

Any arrow  
I may have dropped and missed. For none of them  
must I leave for another to pick up.

*Neoptolemus*

Is this, in your hands, the famous bow?

*Philoctetes*

Yes, this,

this in my hands.

*Neoptolemus*

May I see it closer,  
touch and adore it like a god?

*Philoctetes*

You may have it  
and anything else of mine that is for your good.

*Neoptolemus*

I long for it, yet only with such longing

660

that if it is lawful, I may have it, else  
let it be.

*Philoctetes*

Your words are holy, boy. It is lawful.  
for you have given me, and you alone,  
the sight of the sun shining above us here,  
the sight of my Oeta, of my old father, my friends.  
You have raised me up above my enemies,  
when I was under their feet. You may be confident.  
You may indeed touch my bow, give it again  
to me that gave it you, proclaim that alone  
of all the world you touched it, in return  
for the good deed you did. It was for that,  
for friendly help, I myself won it first.

670

*Neoptolemus*

I am glad to see you and take you as a friend.  
For one who knows how to show and to accept kindness  
will be a friend better than any possession.  
Go in.

*Philoctetes*

I will bring you with me. The sickness in me  
seeks to have you beside me.

*Chorus*

In story I have heard, but my eyes have not seen  
him that once would have drawn near to Zeus's bed.  
I have heard how he caught him, bound him on a running wheel,  
Zeus, son of Kronos, invincible.  
But I know of no other,  
by hearsay, much less by sight, of all mankind  
whose destiny was more his enemy when he met it  
than Philoctetes', who wronged no one, nor killed  
but lived, just among the just,  
and fell in trouble past his deserts.  
There is wonder, indeed, in my heart  
how, how in his loneliness,

680

listening to the waves beating on the shore,  
how he kept hold at all  
on a life so full of tears.

690

He was lame, and no one came near him.  
He suffered, and there were no neighbors for his sorrow  
with whom his cries would find answer,  
with whom he could lament the bloody plague  
that ate him up.

No one who would gather  
fallen leaves from the ground  
to quiet the raging, bleeding sore,  
running, in his maggot-rotten foot.  
Here and there he crawled  
writhing always—  
suffering like a child  
without the nurse he loves—  
to what source of ease he could find  
when the heart-devouring suffering gave over.

700

No grain sown in holy earth was his, nor other food  
of all enjoyed by us, men who live by labor,  
save when with the feathered arrows shot by the quick bow  
he got him fodder for his belly.

710

Alas, poor soul,  
that never in ten years' length  
enjoyed a drink of wine  
but looked always for the standing pools  
and approached them.

But now he will end fortunate. He has fallen in  
with the son of good men. He will be great, after it all.  
Our prince in his seaworthy craft will carry him  
after the fulness of many months, to his father's home  
in the country of the Malian nymphs,  
by the banks of the Spercheius,

720

where the hero of the bronze shield ascended  
to all the Gods, ablaze in holy fire  
above the ridges of Oeta.

*Neoptolemus*

Come if you will, then. Why have you nothing to say?  
Why do you stand, in silence transfixed?

730

*Philoctetes*

Oh! Oh!

*Neoptolemus*

What is it?

*Philoctetes*

Nothing to be afraid of. Come on, boy.

*Neoptolemus*

Is it the pain of your inveterate sickness?

*Philoctetes*

No, no, indeed not. Just now I think I feel better.  
O Gods!

*Neoptolemus*

Why do you call on the Gods with cries of distress?

*Philoctetes*

That they may come as healers, come with gentleness.  
Oh! Oh!

*Neoptolemus*

What ails you? Tell me; do not keep silence.  
You are clearly in some pain.

740

*Philoctetes*

I am lost, boy.  
I will not be able to hide it from you longer.  
Oh! Oh!  
It goes through me, right through me!  
Miserable, miserable!  
I am lost, boy. I am being eaten up. Oh!

By God, if you have a sword, ready to hand, use it!  
Strike the end of my foot. Strike it off, I tell you, now.  
Do not spare my life. Quick, boy, quick.

750

(A long silence.)

Neoptolemus

What is this thing that comes upon you suddenly,  
that makes you cry and moan so?

Philoctetes

Do you know, boy?

Neoptolemus

What is it?

Philoctetes

Do you know, boy?

Neoptolemus

What do you mean?

I do not know.

Philoctetes

Surely you know. Oh! Oh!

Neoptolemus

The terrible burden of your sickness.

Philoctetes

Terrible it is, beyond words' reach. But pity me.

Neoptolemus

What shall I do?

Philoctetes

Do not be afraid and leave me.

She comes from time to time, perhaps when she has had  
her fill of wandering in other places.

Neoptolemus

You most unhappy man,  
you that have endured all agonies, lived through them,  
shall I take hold of you? Shall I touch you?

760

Philoctetes

Not that, above everything. But take this bow,  
as you asked to do just now, until the pain,  
the pain of my sickness, that is now upon me, grows less.  
Keep the bow, guard it safely. Sleep comes upon me  
when the attack is waning. The pain will not end till then.  
But you must let me sleep quietly.  
If they should come in the time when I sleep,  
by the Gods I beg you do not give up my bow  
willingly or unwillingly to anyone.  
And let no one trick you out of it, lest you prove  
a murderer—your own and mine that kneeled to you.

770

Neoptolemus

I shall take care; be easy about that. It shall not pass  
except to your hands and to mine. Give it to me now,  
and may good luck go with it!

Philoctetes

Here,

take it, boy. Bow in prayer to the Gods' envy  
that the bow may not be to you a sorrow  
nor as it was to me and its former master.

Neoptolemus

You Gods, grant us both this and grant us  
a journey speedy with a prosperous wind  
to where God sends us and our voyage holds.

780

Philoctetes

An empty prayer, I am afraid, boy:  
the blood is trickling, dripping murderously  
from its deep spring. I look for something new.  
It is coming now, coming. Ah!

You have the bow. Do not go away from me.

Ah!

O man of Cephallenia, would it were you,  
Would it were your breast that the pains transfix.

Ah!

790

Agamemnon and Menelaus, my two generals,  
would it were your two bodies that had fed  
this sickness for as long as mine has. Ah!

Death, death, how is it that I can call on you,  
always, day in, day out, and you cannot come to me?  
Boy, my good boy, take up this body of mine  
and burn it on what they call the Lemnian fire.  
I had the resolution once to do this for another,  
the son of Zeus, and so obtained the arms  
that you now hold. What do you say?  
What do you say? Nothing? Where are you, boy?

*Neoptolemus*

I have been in pain for you; I have been  
in sorrow for your pain.

*Philoctetes*

No, boy, keep up your heart. She is quick in coming  
and quick to go. Only I entreat you, do not  
leave me alone.

*Neoptolemus*

Do not be afraid. We shall stay.

*Philoctetes*

You will?

*Neoptolemus*

You may be sure of it.

*Philoctetes*

Your oath,

I do not think it fit to put you to your oath.

*Neoptolemus*

I may not go without you, Philoctetes.

*Philoctetes*

Give me your hand upon it.

*Neoptolemus*

Here I give it you,  
to remain.

*Philoctetes*

Now—take me away from here—

*Neoptolemus*

What do you mean?

*Philoctetes*

Up, up.

*Neoptolemus*

What madness is upon you? Why do you look  
on the sky above us?

*Philoctetes*

Let me go, let me go.

*Neoptolemus*

Where?

*Philoctetes*

Oh, let me go.

*Neoptolemus*

Not I.

*Philoctetes*

You will kill me if you touch me.

*Neoptolemus*

Now I shall let you go, now you are calmer.

*Philoctetes*

Earth, take my body, dying as I am.  
The pain no longer lets me stand.

820

*Neoptolemus*

In a little while, I think,  
sleep will come on this man. His head is nodding.  
The sweat is soaking all his body over,  
and a black flux of blood and matter has broken  
out of his foot. Let us leave him quiet, friends,  
until he falls asleep.

*Chorus*

Sleep that knows not pain nor suffering  
kindly upon us, Lord,  
kindly, kindly come.  
Spread your enveloping radiance,  
as now, over his eyes.  
Come, come, Lord Healer.

830

Boy, look to your standing,  
look to your going, look to your plans  
for the future. Do you see? He sleeps.  
What is it we are waiting to do?  
Ripeness that holds decision over all things  
wins many a victory suddenly.

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, it is true he hears nothing, but I see we have hunted in vain,  
vainly have captured our quarry the bow, if we sail without him.  
His is the crown of victory, him the God said we must bring.  
Shame shall be ours if we boast and our lies still leave victory  
unwon.

840

*Chorus*

Boy, to all of this the God shall look.  
Answer me gently;  
low, low, whisper,  
whisper, boy.  
The sleep of a sick man has keen eyes.  
It is a sleep unsleeping.

But to the limits of what you can,  
look to this, look to this secretly,  
how you may do it.  
You know of whom I speak.  
If your mind holds the same purpose touching this man,  
the wise can see trouble and no way to cure it.  
It is a fair wind, boy, a fair wind:  
the man is eyeless and helpless,

850

outstretched under night's blanket—  
asleep in the sun is good—  
neither of foot nor of hand nor of anything is he master,  
but is even as one that lies in Death's house.  
Look to it, look if what you say  
is seasonable. As far as my mind,  
boy, can grasp it, best is the trouble taken  
that causes the least fear.

860

*Neoptolemus*

Quiet, I tell you! Are you mad? He is stirring,  
his eyes are stirring; he is raising his head.

*Philoctetes*

Blessed the light that comes after my sleep,  
blessed the watching of friends.  
I never would have hoped this,  
that you would have the pity of heart to support  
my afflictions, that you should stand by me and help.  
The Atridae, those brave generals, were not so,  
they could not so easily put up with me.  
You have a noble nature, Neoptolemus,  
and noble were your parents. You have made light  
of all of this—the offense of my cries and the smell.  
And now, since it would seem I can forget  
my sickness for a while and rest, raise me yourself,  
raise me up, boy, and set me on my feet,  
that when my weariness releases me,  
we can go to the ship and sail without delay.

870

880

*Neoptolemus*

I am glad to see you unexpectedly,  
eyes open, free of pain, still with the breath of life.  
With suffering like yours, all the signs pointed  
to your being dead. Now, lift yourself up.  
If you would rather, these men will lift you. They  
will spare no trouble, since you and I are agreed.

*Philoctetes*

Thanks, boy. Lift me yourself, as you thought of it.  
Do not trouble them, let them not be disquieted  
before they need by the foul smell of me; living  
on board with me will try their patience enough.

*Neoptolemus*

Very well, then; stand on your feet; take hold yourself.

*Philoctetes*

Do not be afraid; old habit will help me up.

*Neoptolemus*

Now is the moment. What shall I do from now on?

*Philoctetes*

What is it, boy? Where are your words straying?

*Neoptolemus*

I do not know what to say. I am at a loss.

*Philoctetes*

Why are you at a loss? Do not say so, boy.

*Neoptolemus*

It is indeed my case.

*Philoctetes*

Is it disgust at my sickness? Is it this  
that makes you shrink from taking me?

*Neoptolemus*

All is disgust when one leaves his own nature  
and does things that misfit it.

*Philoctetes*

It is not unlike your father, either in word  
or in act, to help a good man.

*Neoptolemus*

I shall be shown to be dishonorable:  
I am afraid of that.

*Philoctetes*

Not in your present actions. Your words make me hesitate.

*Neoptolemus*

Zeus, what must I do? Twice be proved base,  
hiding what I should not, saying what is most foul?

*Philoctetes*

Unless I am wrong, here is a man who will  
betray me, leave me—so it seems—and sail away.

*Neoptolemus*

Not I; I will not leave you. To your bitterness,  
I shall send you on a journey—and I dread this.

*Philoctetes*

What are you saying, boy? I do not understand.

*Neoptolemus*

I will not hide anything. You must sail to Troy  
to the Achaeans, join the army of the Atridae.

*Philoctetes*

What! What can you mean?

*Neoptolemus*

Do not cry yet

until you learn.

*Philoctetes*

Learn what? What would you do with me?

*Neoptolemus*

First save you from this torture, then with you  
go and lay waste the land of Troy.

*Philoctetes*

You would?

This is, in truth, what you intend?

*Neoptolemus*

Necessity,  
a great necessity compels it. Do not be angry.

890

900

910

920

*Philoctetes*

Then I am lost. I am betrayed. Why, stranger,  
have you done this to me? Give me back my bow.

*Neoptolemus*

That I cannot. Justice and interest  
make me obedient to those in authority.

*Philoctetes*

You fire, you every horror, most hateful engine  
of ruthless mischief, what have you done to me,  
what treachery! Have you no shame to see me  
that kneeled to you, entreated you, hard of heart?

930

You robbed me of my livelihood, taking my bow.  
Give it back, I beg you, give it back, I pray, my boy!  
By your father's Gods, do not take my livelihood.  
He does not say a word,  
but turns away his eyes. He will not give it up.

Caverns and headlands, dens of wild creatures,  
you jutting broken crags, to you I raise my cry—  
there is no one else that I can speak to—  
and you have always been there, have always heard me,  
Let me tell you what he has done to me, this boy,  
Achilles' son. He swore to bring me home;  
he brings me to Troy. He gave me his right hand,  
then took and keeps my sacred bow,  
the bow of Heracles, the son of Zeus,  
and means to show it to the Argives,  
as though in me he had conquered a strong man,  
as though he led me captive to his power.  
He does not know he is killing one that is dead,  
a kind of vaporous shadow, a mere wraith.  
Had I had my strength, he had not conquered me,  
for, even as I am, it was craft that did it.  
I have been deceived and am lost.  
What can I do?

940

Give it back. Be your true self again. Will you not?  
No word. Then I am nothing.

950

Two doors cut in the rock, to you again,  
again I come, enter again, unarmed,  
no means to feed myself! Here in this passage  
I shall shrivel to death alone. I shall kill no more,  
neither winged bird nor wild thing of the hills  
with this my bow. I shall myself in death  
be a feast for those that fed me. Those that I hunted  
shall be my hunters now.

Life for the life I took, I shall repay  
at the hands of this man that seemed to know no harm.

960

My curse upon your life!—but not yet still  
until I know if you will change again;  
if you will not, may an evil death be yours!

*Chorus*

What shall we do? Shall we sail? Shall we do as he asks?  
Prince, it is you must decide.

*Neoptolemus*

A kind of compassion,  
a terrible compassion, has come upon me  
for him. I have felt for him all the time.

*Philoctetes*

Pity me, boy, by the Gods; do not bring on yourself  
men's blame for your crafty victory over me.

*Neoptolemus*

What shall I do? I would I had never left  
Scyrus, so hateful is what I face now.

970

*Philoctetes*

You are not bad yourself; by bad men's teaching  
you came to practice your foul lesson. Leave it to others  
such as it suits, and sail away. Give me my arms.

*Neoptolemus*

What shall we do, men?

(*Odysseus appears.*)

*Odysseus*

Scoundrel, what are you doing? Give me those arms.

*Philoctetes*

Who is this? Is that Odysseus' voice?

*Odysseus*

It is.

Odysseus certainly; you can see him here.

*Philoctetes*

Then I have been sold indeed; I am lost. It was he who took me prisoner, robbed me of my arms.

*Odysseus*

Yes, I, I and no other. I admit that.

980

*Philoctetes*

Boy, give me back my bow, give it back to me.

*Odysseus*

That he will never be able to do now, even if he wishes it. And you must come with the bow, or these will bring you.

*Philoctetes*

Your wickedness and impudence are without limit. Will these men bring me, then, against my will?

*Odysseus*

Yes, if you do not come with a good grace.

*Philoctetes*

O land of Lemnos and all mastering brightness, Hephaestus-fashioned, must I indeed bear this, that he, Odysseus, drags me from you with violence?

*Odysseus*

It is Zeus, I would have you know, Zeus this land's ruler, who has determined. I am only his servant.

990

*Philoctetes*

Hateful creature, what things you can invent! You plead the Gods to screen your actions and make the Gods out liars.

*Odysseus*

They speak the truth. The road must be traveled.

*Philoctetes*

I say No.

*Odysseus*

I say Yes. You must listen.

*Philoctetes*

Are we slaves and not free? Is it as such our fathers have begotten us?

*Odysseus*

No, but as equals of the best, with whom it is destined you must take Troy, dig her down stone by stone.

*Philoctetes*

Never, I would rather suffer anything than this. There is still my steep and rugged precipice here.

1000

*Odysseus*

What do you mean to do?

*Philoctetes*

Throw myself down, shatter my head upon the rock below.

*Odysseus*

Hold him. Take this solution out of his power.

*Philoctetes*

Hands of mine, quarry of Odysseus' hunting, now suffer in your lack of the loved bowstring!

You who have never had a healthy thought nor noble, you Odysseus, how you have hunted me, how you have stolen upon me with this boy



as your shield, because I did not know him, one  
 that is no mate for you but worthy of me,  
 who knows nothing but to do what he was bidden,  
 1010 and now, you see, is suffering bitterly  
 for his own faults and what he brought on me.  
 Your shabby, slit-eyed soul taught him step by step  
 to be clever in mischief against his nature and will.  
 Now it is my turn, now to my sorrow you have me  
 bound hand and foot, intend to take me away,  
 away from this shore on which you cast me once  
 without friends or comrades or city, a dead man among the living.

My curse on you! I have often cursed you before,  
 but the Gods give me nothing that is sweet to me.  
 1020 You have joy to be alive, and I have sorrow  
 because my very life is linked to this pain,  
 laughed at by you and your two generals,  
 the sons of Atreus whom you serve in this.  
 And yet, when you sailed with them, it was by constraint  
 and trickery, while I came of my own free will  
 with seven ships, to my undoing, I  
 whom they dishonored and cast away—  
 you say it was they that did it and they you.

But now why are you taking me? For what?  
 I am nothing now. To you all I have long been dead.  
 1030 God-hated wretch, how is it that now I am not  
 lame and foul-smelling? How can you burn your sacrifice  
 to God if I sail with you? Pour your libations?  
 This was your excuse for casting me away.

May death in ugly form come on you! It will so come,  
 for you have wronged me, if the Gods care for justice.  
 And I know that they do care for it, for at present  
 you never would have sailed here for my sake  
 and my happiness, had not the goad of God,

a need of me, compelled you.  
 Land of my fathers, Gods that look on men's deeds,  
 1040 take vengeance on these men, in your own good time,  
 upon them all, if you have pity on me!  
 Wretchedly as I live, if I saw them  
 dead, I could dream that I was free of my sickness.

*Chorus*

He is a hard man, Odysseus, this stranger,  
 and hard his words: no yielding to suffering in them.

*Odysseus*

If I had the time, I have much I could say to him.  
 As it is, there is only one thing. As the occasion  
 demands, such a one am I.  
 1050 When there is a competition of men just and good,  
 you will find none more scrupulous than myself.  
 What I seek in everything is to win  
 except in your regard: I willingly yield to you now.

Let him go, men. Do not lay a finger on him.  
 Let him stay here. We have these arms of yours  
 and do not need you, Philoctetes.  
 Teucer is with us who has the skill and I,  
 who, I think, am no meaner master of them  
 and have as straight an aim. Why do we need you?  
 1060 Farewell: pace Lemnos. Let us go. Perhaps  
 your prize will bring me the honor you should have had.

*Philoctetes*

What shall I do? Will you appear  
 before the Argives in the glory of my arms?

*Odysseus*

Say nothing further to me. I am going.

*Philoctetes*

Your voice has no word for me, son of Achilles?  
 Will you go away in silence?

*Odysseus*

Come, Neoptolemus.

Do not look at him. Your generosity  
may spoil our future.

*Philoctetes*

You, too, men, will you go  
and leave me alone? Do you, too, have no pity?

1070

*Chorus*

This young man is our captain. What he says to you  
we say as well.

*Neoptolemus (to the Chorus)*

Odysseus will tell me  
that I am full of pity for him. Still  
remain, if he will have it so, as long  
as it takes the sailors to ready the tackle  
and until we have made our prayer to the Gods.  
Perhaps, in the meantime, he will have better thoughts  
about us. Let us go, Odysseus.

You, when we call you, be quick to come.

1080

*(Exeunt Odysseus and Neoptolemus.)*

*Philoctetes*

Hollow in the rock, hollow cave, sun-warmed, ice cold,  
I was not destined, after all, ever to leave you.  
Still with me, you shall be witness to my dying.  
Passageway, crowded with my cries of pain,  
what shall be, now again, my daily life with you?  
What hope shall I find of food to keep my wretched life alive?  
Above me, in the clouds, down the shrill winds  
the birds; no strength in me to stop them.

1090

*Chorus*

It was you who doomed yourself,  
man of hard fortune. From no other,  
from nothing stronger, came your mischance.  
When you could have chosen wisdom,

with better opportunity before you,  
you chose the worse.

1100

*Philoctetes*

Sorrow, sorrow is mine. Suffering has broken me,  
who must live henceforth alone from all the world,  
must live here and die here;  
no longer bringing home food nor winning  
it with strong hands. Unmarked, the crafty words  
of a treacherous heart stole on me. Would I might see him,  
contriver of this trap,  
for as long as I am, condemned to pain.

1110

*Chorus*

It was the will of the Gods  
that has subdued you, no craft  
to which my hand was lent.  
Turn your hate, your ill-omened curses, elsewhere.  
This indeed lies near my heart,  
that you should not reject my friendship.

1120

*Philoctetes*

By the shore of the gray sea he sits and laughs at me.  
He brandishes in his hand the weapon which kept me alive,  
which no one else had handled. Bow that I loved,  
forged from the hands that loved you, if you could feel,  
you would see me with pity, successor to Heracles,  
that used you and shall handle you no more.  
You have found a new master, a man of craft, and shall be bent  
by him.  
You shall see crooked deceits and the face of my hateful foe,  
and a thousand ill things such as he contrived against me.

1130

*Chorus*

A man should give careful heed to say what is just;  
and when he has said it, restrain his tongue from rancor and taunt.  
Odysseus was one man, appointed by many,  
by their command he has done this, a service to his friends.

1140

*Philoctetes*

Birds my victims, tribes of bright-eyed wild creatures,  
tenants of these hills, you need not flee from me or my house.  
No more the strength of my hands, of my bow, is mine. 1150  
Come! It is a good time  
to glut yourselves freely on my discolored flesh.  
For shortly I shall die here. How shall I find means of life?  
Who can live on air without any of all that life-giving earth sup-  
plies? 1160

*Chorus*

In the name of the gods, if there is anything that you hold in re-  
spect,  
draw near to a friend that approaches you in all sincerity.  
Know what you are doing, know it well.  
It lies with you to avoid your doom.  
It is a destiny pitiable to feed  
with your body. It cannot learn how  
to endure the thousand burdens with which it is coupled.

*Philoctetes*

Again, again you have touched my old hurt, 1170  
for all that you are the best of those that came here.  
Why did you afflict me? What have you done to me?

*Chorus*

What do you mean by this?

*Philoctetes*

Yes, you have hoped to bring me  
to the hateful land of Troy.

*Chorus*

I judge that to be best.

*Philoctetes*

Then leave me now at once.

*Chorus*

Glad news, glad news.  
I am right willing to obey you.  
Let us go now to our places in the ship. 1180

*Philoctetes*

No, by the God that listens to curses, do not go,  
I beseech you.

*Chorus*

Be calm!

*Philoctetes*

Friends, stay!

I beg you to stay.

*Chorus*

Why do you call on us?

*Philoctetes*

It is the God, the God. I am destroyed.  
My foot, what shall I do with this foot of mine  
in the life I shall live hereafter?  
Friends, come to me again. 1190

*Chorus*

What to do that is different  
from the tenor of your former bidding?

*Philoctetes*

It is no occasion for anger  
when a man crazy with storms of sorrow  
speaks against his better judgment.

*Chorus*

Unhappy man, come with us, as we say.

*Philoctetes*

Never, never! That is my fixed purpose.  
Not though the Lord of the Lightning, bearing his fiery bolts,  
come against me, burning me  
with flame and glare.  
Let Ilium go down and all that under its walls 1200  
had the heart to cast me away, crippled!  
Friends, grant me one prayer only.

*Chorus*

What is it you would seek?

*Philoctetes*

A sword, if you have got one,  
or an ax or some weapon—give it me!

*Chorus*

What would you do with it?

*Philoctetes*

Head and foot,  
head and foot, all of me, I would cut with my own hand.  
My mind is set on death, on death, I tell you.

*Chorus*

Why this?

1210

*Philoctetes*

I would go seek my father.

*Chorus*

Where?

*Philoctetes*

In the house of death.  
He is no longer in the light.  
City of my fathers, would I could see you.  
I who left your holy streams,  
to go help the Greeks, my enemies,  
and now am nothing any more.

*Chorus*

I should have been by now on my way to the ship,  
did I not see Odysseus coming here  
and with him Neoptolemus.

1220

*(Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus in front of the cave, talking.  
Philoctetes withdraws into the cave.)*

*Odysseus (to Neoptolemus)*

You have turned back, there is hurry in your step.  
Will you not tell me why?

*Neoptolemus*

I go to undo the wrong that I have done.

*Odysseus*

A strange thing to say! What wrong was that?

*Neoptolemus*

I did wrong when I obeyed you and the Greeks.

*Odysseus*

What did we make you do that was unworthy?

*Neoptolemus*

I practiced craft and treachery with success.

*Odysseus*

On whom? Would you do some rash thing now?

*Neoptolemus*

Nothing rash. I am going to give something back.

1230

*Odysseus*

What? I am afraid to hear what you will say.

*Neoptolemus*

Back to the man I took it from, this bow.

*Odysseus*

You cannot mean you are going to give it back.

*Neoptolemus*

Just that. To my shame, unjustly, I obtained it.

*Odysseus*

Can you mean this in earnest?

*Neoptolemus*

Yes, unless  
it is not in earnest to tell you the truth.

*Odysseus*

What do you mean, Neoptolemus, what are you saying?

*Neoptolemus*

Must I tell you the same story twice or thrice?

*Odysseus*

I should prefer not to have heard it once.

*Neoptolemus*

You can rest easy. You have now heard everything.

1240

*Odysseus*

Then there is someone who will prevent its execution.

*Neoptolemus*

Who will that be?

*Odysseus*

The whole assembly  
of the Greeks and among them I myself.

*Neoptolemus*

You are a clever man, Odysseus, but  
this is not a clever saying.

*Odysseus*

In your own case  
neither the words nor the acts are clever.

*Neoptolemus*

Still  
if they are just, they are better than clever.

*Odysseus*

How can it be just to give to him again  
what you won by my plans?

*Neoptolemus*

It was a sin,  
a shameful sin, which I shall try to retrieve.

*Odysseus*

Have you no fear of the Greeks if you do this?

1250

*Neoptolemus*

I have no fear of anything you can do,  
when I act with justice; nor shall I yield to force.

*Odysseus*

Then we shall fight  
not with the Trojans but with you.

*Neoptolemus*

Let that be as it will.

*Odysseus*

Do you see my hand,  
reaching for the sword?

*Neoptolemus*

You shall see me do as much  
and that at once.

*Odysseus*

I will let you alone;  
I shall go and tell this to the assembled Greeks,  
and they will punish you.

*Neoptolemus*

That is very prudent.  
If you are always as prudent as this,  
perhaps you will keep out of trouble.

1260

*(Exit Odysseus.)*

I call on you, Philoctetes, son of Poias,  
come from your cave.

*(Philoctetes appears at the mouth of the cave.)*

*Philoctetes*

What cry is this at the door?  
Why do you call me forth, friends? What would you have?  
Ah! This is a bad thing. Can there be some fresh mischief  
you come to do, to top what you have done?

*Neoptolemus*

Be easy. I would only have you listen.

*Philoctetes*

I am afraid of that.  
I heard you before, and they were good words, too.  
But they destroyed me when I listened.

*Neoptolemus*

Is there no place, then, for repentance?

1270

*Philoctetes*

You were just such a one in words when you stole my bow,  
inspiring confidence, but sly and treacherous.

*Neoptolemus*

I am not such now. But I would hear from you  
whether you are entirely determined  
to remain here, or will you go with us?

*Philoctetes*

Oh, stop! You need not say another word.  
All that you say will be wasted.

*Neoptolemus*

You are determined?

*Philoctetes*

More than words can declare.

*Neoptolemus*

I wish that I could have persuaded you.  
If I cannot speak to some purpose, I have done.

*Philoctetes*

You will say it all  
to no purpose, for you will never win my heart  
to friendship with you, who have stolen my life  
by treachery, and then came and preached to me,  
bad son of a noble father. Cursed be you all,  
first the two sons of Atreus, then Odysseus,  
and then yourself!

1280

*Neoptolemus*

Do not curse me any more.  
Take your bow. Here I give it to you.

*Philoctetes*

What can you mean? Is this another trick?

*Neoptolemus*

No. That I swear by the holy majesty  
of Zeus on high!

*Philoctetes*

These are good words,  
if only they are honest.

1290

*Neoptolemus*

The fact is plain.  
Stretch out your hand; take your own bow again.

(*Odysseus appears.*)

*Odysseus*

I forbid it, as the Gods are my witnesses,  
in the name of the Atridae and the Greeks.

*Philoctetes*

Whose voice is that, boy? Is it Odysseus?

*Odysseus*

Himself and near at hand.  
And I shall bring you to the plains of Troy  
in your despite, whether Achilles' son  
will have it so or not.

*Philoctetes*

You will rue your word  
if this arrow flies straight.

*Neoptolemus*

No, Philoctetes, no!

1300

Do not shoot.

*Philoctetes*

Let me go, let go my hand, dear boy.

*Neoptolemus*

I will not.

(*Exit Odysseus.*)

*Philoctetes*

Why did you prevent me killing my enemy,  
with my bow, a man that hates me?

*Neoptolemus*

This is not to our glory, neither yours nor mine.

*Philoctetes*

Well, know this much, that the princes of the army,  
the lying heralds of the Greeks, are cowards  
when they meet the spear, however keen in words.

*Neoptolemus*

Let that be. You have your bow. There is no further cause  
for anger or reproach against me.

*Philoctetes*

None.

You have shown your nature and true breeding,  
son of Achilles and not Sisyphus. 1310  
Your father, when he still was with the living,  
was the most famous of them, as now he is of the dead.

*Neoptolemus*

I am happy to hear you speak well of my father  
and of myself. Now listen to my request.  
The fortunes that the Gods give to us men  
we must bear under necessity.  
But men that cling wilfully to their sufferings  
as you do, no one may forgive nor pity. 1320  
Your anger has made a savage of you. You will not  
accept advice, although the friend advises  
in pure goodheartedness. You loathe him, think  
he is your enemy and hates you.  
Yet I will speak. May Zeus, the God of Oaths,  
be my witness! Mark it, Philoctetes, write it in your mind.  
You are sick and the pain of the sickness is of God's sending  
because you approached the Guardian of Chryse,  
the serpent that with secret watch protects  
her roofless shrine to keep it from violation.  
You will never know relief while the selfsame sun  
rises before you here, sets there again, 1330  
until you come of your own will to Troy,  
and meet among us the Asclepiadae,

who will relieve your sickness; then with the bow  
and by my side, you will become Troy's conqueror.

I will tell you how I know that this is so.

There was a man of Troy who was taken prisoner,  
Helenus, a good prophet. He told us clearly  
how it should be and said, besides, that all Troy  
must fall this summer. He said, "If I prove wrong  
you may kill me." 1340

Now since you know this, yield and be gracious.

It is a glorious heightening of gain.

First, to come into hands that can heal you,  
and then be judged pre-eminent among the Greeks,  
winning the highest renown among them, taking  
Troy that has cost infinity of tears.

*Philoctetes*

Hateful life, why should I still be alive and seeing?

Why not be gone to the dark?

What shall I do? How can I distrust 1350

his words who in friendship has counseled me?

Shall I then yield? If I do so, how come

before the eyes of men so miserable?

Who will say word of greeting to me?

Eyes of mine, that have seen all, can you endure

to see me living with my murderers,

the sons of Atreus? With cursed Odysseus?

It is not the sting of wrongs past

but what I must look for in wrongs to come.

Men whose wit has been mother of villainy once 1360

have learned from it to be evil in all things.

I must indeed wonder at yourself in this.

You should not yourself be going to Troy

but rather hold me back. They have done you wrong

and robbed you of your father's arms. Will you go and help them

fight and compel me to the like?

No, boy, no; take me home as you promised.

Remain in Scyrus yourself; let these bad men  
die in their own bad fashion. We shall both thank you,  
I and your father. You will not then, by helping  
the wicked, seem to be like them.

1370

*Neoptolemus*

What you say  
is reasonable; yet I wish that you would trust  
the Gods, my word, and, with me as friend, fare forth.

*Philoctetes*

What, to the plains of Troy, to the cursed sons  
of Atreus with this suffering foot of mine?

*Neoptolemus*

To those that shall give you redress,  
that shall save you and your rotting foot from its disease.

*Philoctetes*

Giver of dread advice, what have you said!

1380

*Neoptolemus*

What I see fulfilled will be best for you and me.

*Philoctetes*

And saying it, do you not blush before God?

*Neoptolemus*

Why should one feel ashamed to do good to another?

*Philoctetes*

Is the good for the Atridae or for me?

*Neoptolemus*

I am your friend, and the word I speak is friendly.

*Philoctetes*

How, then, do you wish to betray me to my enemies?

*Neoptolemus*

Sir, learn not to be defiant in misfortune.

*Philoctetes*

You will ruin me, I know it by your words.

*Neoptolemus*

Not I. You do not understand, I think.

*Philoctetes*

Do I not know the Atridae cast me away?

1390

*Neoptolemus*

They cast you away; will, now again, restore you.

*Philoctetes*

Never, if of my will I must see Troy.

*Neoptolemus*

What shall we do, since I cannot convince you  
of anything I say? It is easiest for me  
to leave my argument, and you to live,  
as you are living, with no hope of cure.

*Philoctetes*

Let me suffer what I must suffer.  
But what you promised to me and touched my hand,  
to bring me home, fulfil it for me, boy.  
Do not delay, do not speak again of Troy  
I have had enough of sorrow and lamentation.

1400

*Neoptolemus*

If you will then, let us go.

*Philoctetes*

Noble is the word you spoke.

*Neoptolemus*

Brace yourself, stand firm on your feet.

*Philoctetes*

To the limit of my strength.

*Neoptolemus*

How shall I avoid the blame of the Greeks?

*Philoctetes*

Give it no thought.



*Neoptolemus*

What if they come and harry my country?

*Philoctetes*

I shall be there.

*Neoptolemus*

What help will you be able to give me?

*Philoctetes*

With the bow of Heracles.

*Neoptolemus*

Will you?

*Philoctetes*

I shall drive them from it.

*Neoptolemus*

If you will do what you say,  
come now; kiss this ground farewell, and come with me.

*(Heracles appears standing on the rocks above the cave of Philoctetes.)*

*Heracles*

Not yet, not until you have heard  
my words, son of Poias.

I am the voice of Heracles in your ears;

I am the shape of Heracles before you.

It is to serve you I come and leave my home among the dead.

I come

to tell you of the plans of Zeus for you,

to turn you back from the road you go upon.

Hearken to my words.

Let me reveal to you my own story first,  
let me show the tasks and sufferings that were mine,  
and, at the last, the winning of deathless merit.

All this you can see in me now.

All this must be your suffering too,

the winning of a life to an end in glory,

out of this suffering. Go with this man to Troy.

First, you shall find there the cure of your cruel sickness,  
and then be adjudged best warrior among the Greeks.

Paris, the cause of all this evil, you shall kill  
with the bow that was mine. Troy you shall take.

You shall win the prize of valor from the army  
and shall send the spoils to your home,

to your father Poias, and the land of your fathers, Oeta.

From the spoils of the campaign you must dedicate  
some, on my pyre, in memory of my bow.

Son of Achilles, I have the same words for you.

You shall not have the strength to capture Troy

without this man, nor he without you,

but, like twin lions hunting together,

he shall guard you, you him. I shall send Asclepius

to Ilium to heal his sickness. Twice

must Ilium fall to my bow. But this remember,

when you shall come to sack that town, keep holy in the sight of  
God.

All else our father Zeus thinks of less moment.

Holiness does not die with the men that die.

Whether they die or live, it cannot perish.

*Philoctetes*

Voice that stirs my yearning when I hear,

form lost for so long,

I shall not disobey.

*Neoptolemus*

Nor I.

*Heracles*

Do not tarry then.

Season and the tide are hastening you on your way.

*Philoctetes*

Lemnos, I call upon you:

Farewell, cave that shared my watches,

nymphs of the meadow and the stream,

« SOPHOCLES »

the deep male growl of the sea-lashed headland  
where often, in my niche within the rock,  
my head was wet with fine spray,  
where many a time in answer to my crying  
in the storm of my sorrow the Hermes mountain sent its echo! 1460  
Now springs and Lycian well, I am leaving you,  
leaving you.

I had never hoped for this.

Farewell Lemnos, sea-encircled,  
blame me not but send me on my way  
with a fair voyage to where a great destiny  
carries me, and the judgment of friends and the all-conquering  
Spirit who has brought this to pass.

*Chorus*

Let us go all  
when we have prayed to the nymphs of the sea 1470  
to bring us safe to our homes. 1471