Sophocles

Four Tragedies

Ajax
Women of Trachis
Electra
Philoctetes

Translated, with Introduction and Notes, by
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INTRODUCTION

other, our hero, has chosen hers. Clytemnestra’s divided reaction to news of Orestes’ death is fascinating but too short to make for drama. We see only enough of Aegisthus to recognize him as the stage tyrant familiar from Sophocles’ other plays, who plans to hold the people in submission by means of fear (1458-63).

The chorus have the only role that approaches Electra’s in importance. As citizens of Mycenae, they represent the good sense of the community without being involved in the political life of the state (Gardiner 1987, p. 163). They support Electra’s cause from the start, but they feel that she goes too far in her emotions, and they see both sides of her debate with Chrysothemis (370-1). They care about the ruling family, but they too long for justice and an end to the tyranny that Aegisthus has brought to them. But in their passivity they show more than anyone why the play belongs to the one person whose feelings are powerful enough to bring change to Mycenae—Electra.

Philoctetes

Philoctetes was Heracles’ dear friend. Years ago, Philoctetes had lit the funeral pyre that released Heracles from his slow, painful death and raised him to semidivine status. In return for that favor Heracles had given Philoctetes his own famous bow, along with a stock of arrows dipped in the same poison that inadvertently caused Heracles’ death. Later, Philoctetes started out for Troy with the Greek army, but he was bitten by a snake as he approached a shrine. The wound festered, stank, and made Philoctetes scream in pain; it did not kill him, but it never healed, and it made him miserable company for the army. The Greek leaders decided to leave him on the northeastern shore of the island of Lemnos, far from any village or usable harbor, and to sail on to Troy, about a day’s sail north along the coast of Asia Minor (see Sophoclean Geography). There Philoctetes lived in a cave with two entrances, hunting for game with his bow. He

made no attempt to seek out human company but nevertheless yearned to return to his home in Malis (the area where Women of Trachis is set).

Odysseus and the sons of Atreus were the leaders in this betrayal. Now, after nine years, Odysseus is back on Lemnos because the army has learned that it cannot win the war without Philoctetes and his bow. Apparently, Philoctetes must come willingly; he must be persuaded, not kidnapped, and Odysseus is the champion persuader in the army. But Philoctetes hates Odysseus, and he has a weapon of such power that even a braver man than Odysseus would balk at confronting him directly. Zeus has decreed that Philoctetes will rejoin the army, but, like most of Zeus’ decrees in Sophocles’ plays, this one will have to be carried out by human agency. So how will Odysseus achieve his end?

Two other great playwrights had put this story onstage before Sophocles, and, luckily, we know roughly how they did it. Both of them put Philoctetes on a populated part of the island and gave the play a chorus of Lemnians; only Sophocles thought to isolate Philoctetes on a deserted mountainside and bring onstage a chorus of Greek sailors, representing the army that had abandoned Philoctetes. Philoctetes had longed for the company of Greeks from the army, and yet he was furious with their leaders for leaving him alone. So how will he react to this delegation from the Greek army?

Here Sophocles’ second great innovation lifts the story to a higher level of tension and human interest. Odysseus has not come alone; as the play opens, we see that he has brought with him the Greek army’s latest recruit, Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. Achilles was not implicated in marooning Philoctetes on the island; he had, moreover, a record of solid honesty. Anyone would be inclined to believe the son of Achilles: “I know for certain that he’s telling us the truth” (319), Philoctetes will say after hearing a web of lies and half-truths. Odysseus’ rhetoric would be too artful to be convincing, as it was in the embassy scene of the Iliad (Book 9). But who would expect an unschooled youth to be capable of subtlety?

32. Sophocles, alone among early tellers of this tale, emphasizes the loneliness of Philoctetes before the Greeks arrive. Lemnos was large and inhabited in all periods, as his audience knew, so he places the hero in a remote part of the island (Jebb 1898/2004). The other playwrights, in writing on this theme, gave the play a chorus of Lemnians; Sophocles’ chorus of Greeks both isolates Philoctetes and brings him back into the world of the army.

33. Dio Chrysostom summarizes and comments on the three plays in his Discourse 52; he apparently paraphrases the opening of Euripides’ play on the subject in Discourse 59.
Neoptolemus is the pivot of the play. Odysseus tries to teach him the art of deception, so that he can trick Philoctetes into giving up the bow and going aboard ship. But Philoctetes plays on the young man's sympathies, so that the great conflict of the play takes place not merely onstage but in the mind of the young man.

The trick is this: Neoptolemus will tell a half-truth—that his father's armor was given to Odysseus. It was, but when Neoptolemus reached the army, it was taken from Odysseus and given to him. Still, he is instructed to say that he has left Troy in a rage against the Greek leaders and is now stopping off at Lemnos on his way home. He is supposed to offer Philoctetes a lift to Malis along the way. The chorus of his sailors are supposed to support his story, and they do. But first the chorus and then Neoptolemus are swayed by pity for the suffering hero.

For the Athenian audience in 409, this play would have struck a special chord. Teachers of rhetoric had turned out a generation of wealthy young men who had learned the art of Odysseus, of speaking winning words without much regard for the truth. Ten years later, Socrates would be executed on a charge of corrupting the youth, partly because he was believed to teach the art of verbal deception. But Neoptolemus was born to be honest; he had a painfully honest soldier for a father. Alongside the contest for Philoctetes and his bow, then, we will be watching the contest for the soul of a young man, between his inborn nature and the instruction he receives from Odysseus under the pressure of circumstance.

Another pressure will weigh on him: compassion for the wounded hero. The chorus express it first (169), and Neoptolemus will be ashamed not to follow them (524–5). Greek ethical texts of the time say little about the capacity for compassion as a virtue, but no one could read this play and not realize that Athenian culture was fertile ground for an ethics of compassion. We are impressed by the young man's goodness when he finally does give in to fellow feeling, although only a heart of stone could be unmoved by Philoctetes' agony. Sophocles has made the wound fester for everyone in the audience through repeated episodes of pain broadcast by the unbearable screams of the hero.

Odysseus removes himself from these scenes of agony. He has no room in his plans for pity. "I am whatever kind of man I have to be" (1049), he says. He knows from the start that his young friend has a nobler nature than he does (79), but he promises that Neoptolemus will have to surrender to deceptive practices for only one day, after which the boy can resume a life of virtue (83–5). Neoptolemus resists at first: "My lord, I would rather / Do right and fail than do wrong to win" (94–5). But later he plunges fully into the planned deception. He easily wins the sympathy of Philoctetes, so easily that he hardly needs to ask for the bow to come into his hands. When it does, he makes a promise he may not intend to keep ("No one else but you and I / Will hold this bow"; 774–5), but then he hedges it with a carefully worded double meaning: "Gods, grant . . . smooth sailing to wherever heaven wills" (779–80). He knows that heaven wills them to return to Troy and not, as he has promised, to their homes on the mainland.

Neoptolemus' nature is still too fresh to yield completely to Odysseus' design. He admits that he finds himself disgusting for changing from his nature (900), but he sticks to his purpose and, now that he has the power of the bow in his hands, reveals the deception to its victim. Still, late in the play, offstage, he apparently has a crisis of conscience and, when he returns, gives the bow to Philoctetes. This is a moment of high theatre: Odysseus vehemently protests, and Philoctetes adamantly refuses to change his mind, but Neoptolemus gives Philoctetes back his bow nonetheless (1288).

Here we expect the play to end, with a moral success for the young man, a failure for the devious old warrior, and a homecoming for the wounded hero. That would be satisfying in many ways: the good would triumph over the bad, the values of peace would rise above those of war, and the Greek army would simply have to give up its bloodthirsty ambition. But that is not Zeus' plan, and somehow Zeus' plan must prevail. The audience at this point is on tenterhooks, suspended between its knowledge of Zeus' plan and its sense of the rightness of the conclusion that

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34. "How then is the gulf to be got over between the ineffective plight of the bowman and the proper use of his bow, between his ignominy and his destined glory? Only by the intervention of one who is guileless enough and human enough to treat him, not as a monster, nor yet as a magical property which is wanted for accomplishing some end, but simply as another man, whose sufferings elicit his sympathy and whose courage he admires" (Wilson 1947, p. 241).

35. See Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a comic play presented in 421, in which Socrates is represented as such a teacher.
now seems inevitable. "Then say good-bye to this place, and let's go" (1409), says Neoptolemus, prepared to take his new friend home to Malis.

But Heracles appears and changes everything. He is much like a deus ex machina here—a device that Euripides often used to resolve plots but Sophocles almost never used. The term refers to a device for flying an actor who plays a god or goddess into the audience’s field of sight on top of the scene building. We do not know for sure that the machine was used for this scene, but we do know that Heracles must actually make an appearance. Philoctetes is delighted to see his dear old friend. He has heard before what Heracles has to say about Zeus’ plan, but he did not believe it then. Gods can deceive through prophecies, and human beings can certainly lie about what the prophecies are, so he has good reason to doubt Odysseus’ self-seeking story. But this time he believes it, coming (rom Heracles—perhaps because Heracles comes straight from Zeus, now that he is a demigod, or perhaps because he is a trusted friend.

The actor playing Odysseus is now playing Heracles. Earlier, he had played the Trader, and we suspected with good reason that he was Odysseus in disguise. Could this be Odysseus again, letting his Heracles mask slip a little so that we can see the other mask behind? Could this be one last trick from the master of deceit—coupled with a trick by the playwright, poking fun at Euripides? That’s not impossible, but we cannot be sure.

More likely, we are meant to take this late arrival for the demi-god himself, because Odysseus would have no reason to give a homily on reverence, a homily that looks to a dark future:

Be warned: When you lay waste to the land,
Show true respect for the things of the gods.
This is paramount to my father, Zeus.
Reverence does not die when men do;
In life as in death it is immortal. (1440–4)

The play ends in an ominous success: the powerful weapon and its user will return to the Greek army at Troy, and Troy will be sacked—but not without moral cost. The audience knew that

36. Credit for this point goes to Peter Meineck, who found, through producing the play, that audiences did indeed suppose that Heracles was yet another of Odysseus’ manipulative disguises.

37. For the thought, which Sophocles may have shared, see Thucydides 3.82.

38. Roberts (1988) makes a good case for the view that Sophocles’ endings point toward future events known to the audience but not explicitly mentioned in the play. This is especially striking in Philoctetes, though not all scholars recognize it. Segal, in his study of Electra, sees Philoctetes as ending on a clear positive note (1966, p. 542).
Philoctetes
**Philoctetes: Cast of Characters**

**ODYSSEUS**
A Greek commander from Ithaca

**NEOPTOLEMUS**
The son of Achilles

**CHORUS**
Of Neoptolemus' warriors

**PHILOCTETES**
A Greek warrior marooned on Lemnos

**TRADER**
Neoptolemus' crewmate dressed as a trader (possibly Odysseus in disguise)

**HERACLES**
The demigod (possibly Odysseus in disguise)

**SAILOR**
From Neoptolemus' ship

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**Casting**

In the original production at the Theatre of Dionysus, the division of roles between the three speaking actors may have been as follows:

1. Odysseus, Trader, Heracles
2. Neoptolemus
3. Philoctetes

This translation is based on a version developed by Peter Meineck for the Aquila Theatre Company in 1994 for a U.S. tour. The original cast included Nina Lucking, Celia Nelson, Steve Owen, Robert Richmond, and Karlyn Stephen.

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**Philoctetes**

**Scene:** The rocky coast of the island of Lemnos during the last year of the Trojan War.

(Enter Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and a warrior through the stage right wing into the orchestra.)

**Odysseus:**
The peninsula of sea-washed Lemnos, Deserted: no one sets foot here. Neoptolemus, true-bred son of Achilles, Your father was the best of the Greeks. It was here I marooned the Malian, The son of Poeas, under orders. His wounded foot was weeping disease, And no libation nor sacrifice Could be made in peace while he cursed The fleet with his horrendous wailing, Constantly screaming and shouting.

1: Lemnos—an island of about 150 square miles in the northeastern Aegean Sea between the peninsulas of Chalcidice (northern Greece) and the coast of Asia Minor (Turkey).

1-2: See endnote.

3: Neoptolemus—The name means "new warrior," which is apt for a character depicted as an ephebe—a young man undergoing initiation into adulthood through a test of martial or hunting prowess. Achilles was the finest Greek warrior at Troy and had recently been killed.

5-6: Malis is a territory on the northeast coast of mainland Greece ruled by King Poeas, the father of Philoctetes.

7-11: "His wounded foot . . . shouting"—Ten years earlier the Greeks had abandoned Philoctetes on Lemnos on their way to Troy. He was bitten by a poisonous snake at the tomb of the goddess Chryse, and that caused his festering wound.
I shouldn’t speak about such things; this is no
Time for talk. If he finds out I’m here, my plan
To take him by surprise will be wasted.
Now to work—you must undertake this task:
Search this place for a cave with two mouths,
Both kissed by warming winter sun and cooled
By summer breezes wafting through the tunnel.
Beneath, a little to the left, you will find
A freshwater spring, if it still flows.
Move stealthily and signal whether he is still there
Or we should be searching in some other place.
Do this and I will explain our mission.
Once you understand, we will complete it together.

(Neoptolemus and his attendant climb the steps and mount the
stage. Then Neoptolemus calls down to the orchestra.)

Neoptolemus:
Lord Odysseus, your task will not take long.
I think I can see the cave you described.

Odysseus:
Above or below you? I cannot see.

Neoptolemus:
Up here. And there’s a trail, but not a sound.

Odysseus:
Look inside. He could be sleeping.

Neoptolemus:
I’m looking. It’s empty, not a soul.

(Neoptolemus staris toward the skene door.)

Odysseus:
No signs of habitation?

17-9: “A cave . . . through the tunnel”—This description suggests that the
cave is a passageway through the rocks with an entrance on either side.

Neoptolemus and his attendant . . . to the orchestra: Neoptolemus may have
climbed the steps up onto the stage, indicating the open doors of the
skene as Philoctetes’ cave. Odysseus remains in the orchestra.

28: See endnote.

38: “Rags! Out here”—Neoptolemus has been peering into the skene and
reporting back to Odysseus. It would not have been necessary to place
real rags outside the cave. Sophocles creates a textual picture of the
scene, provoking the audience’s imagination.

Neoptolemus returns to . . . stage right wing: The attendant stays onstage
and is posted off stage left. Neoptolemus returns to the orchestra.
Should you hear something different or another plan
Unfold, you must still serve; you are here to serve.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What are your orders?

ODYSSEUS:
You must maneuver the mind
Of Philoctetes and deceive him with beguiling words.
When he asks who you are and where you come from,
Tell him you’re the son of Achilles—that should never be hidden—
But say you are heading home and you have abandoned
The Greek war fleet, bearing a great grudge.
Say they implored you to leave home and join them
As the only man who could bring down Troy,
But they did not regard you worthy of Achilles’ arms
When you claimed them by true right of birth; instead
They awarded them to Odysseus. Say what you will,
As bad as bad can be, the worst things imaginable;
It will do me no harm. But if you fail in this task,
You will inflict terrible pain on your fellow Greeks.
If you cannot capture his bow,
You will never bring down Troy.

You know I could never speak to him as you can;
He will trust you, and you will stay safe.
You were not forced to sail, you swore no oath,
Nor did you have any part in the first voyage here;

62: “Achilles’ arms”—In Sophocles’ Ajax, the Greeks honored Odysseus by awarding him the arms of Achilles. Ajax tries but fails to kill the Greek leaders to avenge the dishonor of not having been awarded the arms and commits suicide.

68: “His bow”—Philoctetes lit the funeral pyre that allowed Heracles to become a demigod. As a reward, he was given the bow. For the death of Heracles, see Women of Trachis.

72: “You swore no oath”—The suitors of Helen, Odysseus among them, all swore an oath to uphold her marriage to Menelaus. Odysseus pretended to be mad to avoid leaving Ithaca and going to Troy; but his trick was uncovered, and he was forced to join the expedition.

73: “The first voyage here”—when the Greeks marooned Philoctetes ten years earlier.

I cannot deny any of those charges. If he should sense
My presence while he has his bow, I am a dead man,
And as my companion you will share my fate.
No, this must be expertly contrived so you
Can take his unassailable weapon by stealth.
Son, I know that it’s not in your nature
To consider or articulate such cunning,
But victory is sweet, and he who dares, wins.
One day it will be revealed that we were right.
Now give me just one little day of shamelessness,
And for the rest of time you will be known
As the most virtuous of all living men.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
When words are too painful to hear, son of Laertes,
Then I hate to have to put them into action.
And it is not in my nature to practice treachery,
Nor, so I am told, was it my father’s.
I am more than ready to take this man by force,
But not by deception. He is just one man, with one foot.
How could he hope to ever defeat so many of us?
But I was sent to serve alongside you, and I fear
Being called a traitor. My lord, I would rather
Do right and fail than do wrong to win.

ODYSSEUS:
You are your father’s son. When I was young,
Like you, I had a reticent tongue and a quick hand.
Now, when I consider all I’ve seen, I know
That men are mastered by words, not deeds.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What are you telling me then? That I should lie?

ODYSSEUS:
I am saying that you must take Philoctetes by deception.

79: “Nature”—physis, a person’s inborn character, as opposed to learned traits. One of the main themes of the play is Neoptolemus’ struggle between two opposing views of himself advocated by the equivocating Odysseus and the intransigent Philoctetes. Neoptolemus may have been born to be a straight talker, but he is learning to deceive from Odysseus.
NEOPTOLEMUS:
Why must I deceive him? I could persuade him.

ODYSSEUS:
He will not listen, and you won’t take him by force.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What terrifying power makes him so bold?

ODYSSEUS:
Inescapable arrows that send certain death.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Will no one dare go near him?

ODYSSEUS:
As I said, he will be taken only by deception.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Don’t you think it shameful to lie?

ODYSSEUS:
Not if the lie brings deliverance.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
How can such a liar ever show his face?

ODYSSEUS:
Never hide when there’s profit to be gained.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
How do I profit if he comes to Troy?

ODYSSEUS:
Troy can be taken only with his bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
But you said I would take Troy, didn’t you?

ODYSSEUS:
Neither you without the bow, nor the bow without you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then if that’s the way it’s to be, I should hunt him down.

ODYSSEUS:
Do this and you could gain two rewards.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What are they? Show me how I can accept this task.

ODYSSEUS:
You would be called shrewd and courageous.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then come what may, I’ll put my shame aside and do it.

ODYSSEUS:
Will you remember what I’ve taught you?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Absolutely, now that we’ve agreed.

ODYSSEUS:
Then remain here in wait for him—
I’ll leave so he doesn’t see me with you.
Order your sentry back to the ship—
If I think you are taking too long,
I’ll send him back disguised
As the master of a trading vessel.
We have secrecy on our side.
And, son, as he spins his story,
Take your cues from his speech,
And turn them to your advantage.
I must get back to the ship; the rest is up to you.
Hermes, trickster-god, guide us.

ODYSSEUS:
Athena, my constant savior, bring victory.

(Exit Odysseus through the stage right wing. Enter the chorus of warriors through the stage right wing.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Of warriors through the stage right wing.

116: “Hunt him down”—The language of hunting and trapping is indicative of the schooling by which a young warrior (an ephebe) was initiated through wilderness training and feats of cunning.

115: Neither you without the bow, nor the bow without you.

134: Hermes—the messenger god, crosser of boundaries, and guide to the dead on their way to Hades. He protected heralds and traders and was also the patron god of thieves and tricksters.

135: Athena—the goddess of strategy and craft and often associated with Odysseus. She is invoked here by her cult title polias, which means “of the city,” perhaps because Odysseus believes he is acting for the greater good of the Greeks. A large statue of Athena Polias stood before the Parthenon, Athena’s temple on the Acropolis above the Theatre of Dionysus.

Enter the chorus . . . wing: See endnote.
Parodos (Entry-song)

[Strophe a]

CHORUS:
What can I do? What can I do?
A stranger in a strange land.
What to hide? What to say
To a man who knows not to trust?
Sir, give us your advice; your skills
In judgment surpass ours.
You hold the god-given scepter of Zeus
And ancient sovereignty handed down.
How best can we serve you?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
You want to see where he lives?
Up there, clinging to the coastline.
There's nothing to fear here
When this dreaded drifter returns.
Watch out for my signal,
And come and help when I need you.

[Antistrophe a]

CHORUS:
I always look out for you, sir,
And I'll keep a careful eye on you now.
But describe to us this shelter
He has made his home.
And where do you think he is now?
We need to find out;
This could be an ambush.
Where does he go? When does he rest?
Is he here now or somewhere else?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
You see the cave with two entrances in the rocks?
That is where he lives.

CHORUS:
A poor place—and where's the occupant?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Scavenging for food? Dragging that twisted limb.
He can't be that far away.
I've heard it said that he lives
By feeding on wild beasts
Felled by his poisoned arrows.
Misery and more misery—
And never the hope of a cure.

CHORUS:

[Strophe b]

I feel sorry for him. To think
He's had no one to care for him;
He's never seen a friendly face—
Alone, always alone,
Ravaged by a foul disease,
Adrift at meeting his needs.
How does he even survive?
What schemes the gods have a hand in!
Poor humanity, when life can
Become more than one can bear.

[Antistrophe b]

This man was born nobility,
From a house second to none.
Now he has lost everything,
Alone without a friend in the world,
Living among beasts in the wilds—
Miserable, hungry, and desperate,
Suffering incurable, endless agony.
The only answer to his hopeless cries
Is the perpetual call of Echo,
Far, far away in the distance.

189: Echo—in Greek mythology, Echo was confined to a cave and forced to repeat all she heard after Hera discovered her affair with Zeus. Echo fell in love with Narcissus; but he refused her, and she withered away until only her voice remained, calling from the mountains.
NEOPTOLEMUS:

None of this amazes me;
It was the will of the gods,
If I am any kind of judge.
Savage Chryse sent this lonely,
Solitary suffering.
It must have been ordained
To prevent him from bending
His god-given bow against Troy
Until that time when
The city is destined to fall.

(An offstage moan is heard.)

[Strophe c]

CHORUS:

Be quiet, boy!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What is it?

CHORUS:

A sound!

Falling on the air, a broken moan,
It came from . . . over there . . . somewhere?
It falls again, and again. There—up the trail!
A man crawling in agony, there's no mistaking
Those cries; I know the sound of suffering.
But wait, my son . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What? Speak!

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194: Chryse—a goddess who had a shrine on Chryse Island, off the coast of Lemnos. She has been identified with Athena, Artemis, and the Thracian moon goddess Bendis. Her name means “golden.” Philoctetes was bitten by a snake that guarded her shrine. (See endnote on lines 194–5.)

194–5: See endnote.

198: This bow was a gift to Heracles by Apollo. In Greek mythology, the bow is a symbol of hunting, ancient technology, and male initiation, and archers are both feared for their deadly accuracy and reviled for their reluctance to stand and fight.

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PHILOCTETES

[Antistrophe c]

Another thought:

He’s not far off now and getting closer—
This isn’t some country bumpkin
Coming home playing his pipe.
Do you hear that howling?
He’s fallen, hobbling home, racked by pain!
He’s groaning in anguish,
Or he’s seen a ship anchored off these inhospitable shores.
Those are terrible cries.

(Enter Philoctetes carrying the bow and a quiver of arrows.)

PHILOCTETES:

Strangers.
Who are you? Where did you come from?
Why did you beach your ship
On these desolate, inhospitable shores?
What’s your country, your people?
You look like Greeks to me—Greeks!
What a sight for sore eyes! Say something; Let me hear you speak. Don’t be scared!
I know, I must look like a wild man,
But have a heart for what I’ve endured.
I have no one, nothing; I’m all alone.
Speak to me please if you’re friendly;
Go on, say something! Don’t let me down.
Not now; it’d be bad for the both of us.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Stranger, I can tell you what you want to know:
We are indeed Greeks.

PHILOCTETES:

Oh, what a beautiful sound! I can’t believe,
After all this time, a Greek is speaking to me!

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Enter Philoctetes . . . quiver of arrows: Though it is not clear from which entrance Philoctetes enters, the length of the description of his entrance would strongly suggest that it is from the wing entrance. He may have also emerged from the doorway of the skene, because his cave is described as having two entrances, one at either end of a tunnel (see line 17).
What's brought you to these shores, my lad?
What kind wind and what bold venture drew you here?
Speak up! Tell me everything; tell me who you are.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I come from the island of Skyros,
And I'm homeward bound. My name
Is Neoptolemus. I am the son of Achilles.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh, son of a beloved father and a fine country!
You must have been raised by old Lycomedes.
What brings you here? Where did you sail from?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I put out from Troy.

PHILOCTETES:
What are you saying? You weren't with us
When we launched on Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
You were a part of that campaign?

PHILOCTETES:
My son, have you no idea who I am?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
How could I know someone I've never seen before?

PHILOCTETES:
Have you never heard my name
Nor anyone speak of my suffering?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
You're asking me questions I know nothing about.

239: Skyros—An island in the western Aegean Sea just off the coast of Euboea, Skyros is one of four islands called the Northern Sporades. Thetis, knowing that her son was destined to die at Troy, hid the young Achilles on Skyros, dressed as a girl. Achilles slept with Deidamia, the daughter of King Lycomedes, and Neoptolemus was conceived.
243: Lycomedes—the king of Skyros. He hid Achilles in his palace and raised Neoptolemus to young manhood.

PHILOCTETES:
I must be the most detested of men, hated by the gods,
When no word of my plight has reached home
And nothing is known throughout all of Greece!
Those depraved men who marooned me here
Cackle at each other—their secret safe—
As my sickness surges on in strength.
O my boy, son of Achilles,
You must have heard of me. I am the one
Called "Master of the Bow of Heracles,"
The son of Poeas—Philoctetes—
Whom the twin commanders and that Cephallenian
King shamefully discarded into desolation.
A fierce plague was eating away at me,
The vicious brand of a murderous serpent's bite.
With that for company, son, they brought me here
And deserted me. The fleet put in on this coast
After leaving Chryse Island. At sea, all I could do
Was writhe in pain. We came ashore, and I found
Shelter in this cave. Finally I fell asleep, exhausted.
And they, they abandoned me, leaving nothing—
A few filthy rags and food not fit for a beggar!
May the gods one day send them the same fate!
O my lad, can you imagine what it was like
When I woke to find that they had gone?
Oh, the cruel tears I shed, the anguished cries.
The ships I sailed with had completely disappeared,
And not another single soul remained behind,
None to help me, none to tend my overpowering
Sickness. I tried to explore, but
All I discovered was terrible pain,
And there was more than enough of that, my lad.
Day after day, time slowly passed me by,
Alone in this ramshackle shelter.
I was forced to fend for myself, my hunger
Fed by this bow. I shoot birds on the wing by
Stretching back the bowstring and striking.

264-5: "Cephallenian king"—Odysseus. "Cephallenian" refers to the Ionian Islands off the western coast of Greece, including Ithaca, the home of Odysseus.
Then I crawl painfully to my quarry, dragging
My withered foot as far as I need to go.
Somehow I manage, trailing in utter agony,
To go and fetch water, and in the frosts
Of winter I gather kindling to break for a fire.
At first I had no heat, but by rubbing stone on stone,
I found the hidden sparks that keep me alive.
Now I have all a man needs—a roof over his head
And the warmth of a fire, everything except a cure.

Come on, lad. Let me teach you about my island.
No sailor would ever weigh anchor here out of choice;
There are no good moorings and no welcome port
Where he could unload his cargo for profit:
A wise man would have no reason to sail here.
But what if someone had put in accidentally?
It can happen over the course of a lifetime.
These people, when they did come, my son,
Always expressed sympathy and, now and again
Moved to pity, would leave a bit of food or clothing.
But the one thing I always begged for was never given:
Safe passage home. No, I've been here ten years now,
Wasting away, suffering starvation and misery,
Feeding my flesh to this insatiable sickness.
This is what the sons of Atreus and Odysseus
Have inflicted on me. May the gods on Olympus
One day make them suffer for what they did!

CHORUS:
Like those who came before us, I feel sorry
For you, son of Poeas.
PHILOCTETES:
You're right. Continue your story:
How did they outrage you?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
They came in a ship bedecked with garlands,
Godlike Odysseus and Phoenix, my father's mentor.
They told me, and who knows whether it's true or false,
Since the death of my father, it had been ordained
That towering Troy would fall only to me.
Of course, when I heard this I wasted no time
And set sail with them as quickly as possible.
I wanted to pay my respects before the funeral
And see my father for the first and the last time.
Then there was their promise of victory:
I was the one who would conquer Troy.
After only two days at sea, sped by strong winds
And swift oars, we landed at bitter Sigeion.
When I disembarked the army crowded around,
Welcoming me, and swore that they were seeing
Their lost Achilles alive again.
But he lay dead and in misery. I wept.
Eventually I went to the sons of Atreus,
Naturally in friendship, and claimed
My father's arms and possessions.
But what an insolent answer they gave me:
"Offspring of Achilles, you may have all
Of your father's property except his arms.
Another man owns them now—Laertes' son."
Tears welled, stinging my eyes, and I leapt up

344: Phoenix—an exile from the house of his father, Amyntor, taken in
by Peleus, the father of Achilles. Phoenix was appointed tutor to Achilles
and was his most trusted adviser.
351: "For the first... time"—Neoptolemus had only just been born
when Achilles either returned to his homeland of Phthia or was tricked
by Odysseus to reveal himself as a man and forced to go to Troy. There
are differing mythic traditions, but in all of them Neoptolemus has never
seen his father.
355: Sigeion—a spur of land to the northwest of Troy on the southern
side of the Hellespont and about 125 miles from the island of Skyros.
Sigeion was also the legendary location of Achilles' tomb.

In a passionate rage, smarting with anger and said,
"Violators! How dare you award my arms
To another man without my consent!"
Then Odysseus, who was close at hand, said,
"Boy, it was their right to give them;
I saved his arms, and I saved their master."
In my great rage I spared him nothing;
I flung every insult and said it all.
I was not going to lose my arms to him!
And although he was a man slow to anger,
He was stung by the abuse and countered,
"You should have been here, with us,
But you chose to neglect your duty.
Since you cannot keep a civil tongue in your head,
You'll never take these arms back to Skyros."
Abused and insulted, I am sailing for home
Deprived of what is rightfully mine
By that bastard son of bastards, Odysseus.
I hold the commanders accountable.
An army is like a city and reflects its leaders;
If its people behave immorally,
They have learned to by example.
I have told you the whole story. May the gods
Love an enemy of Atreus' sons as much as I do!

[Strophe]

CHORUS:
Mistress of the Mountains,
All-giving Earth,

373: "I saved their master"—Odysseus and Ajax were primarily responsible
for retrieving Achilles' body from the battlefield.
384: "Bastard son of bastards"—Odysseus, brought up as the son of
Laertes, was often called "the son of Sisyphus" because of his reputation
as a trickster. Sisyphus was the legendary founder of Corinth and was
eternally punished in Hades for attempting to cheat death. One version
of the myth has Anticleia and Sisyphus conceive Odysseus before Anti-
cleia marries Laertes. Cf. note on Ajax 188.
391-402: a passage in lyric meter written to be sung by the chorus leader
while the chorus dance. This strophe is matched by lines 507-18.
Together they form what is known as a hyporchema, or dance-song.
Mother of Zeus
From Paktolos' glittering streams,
I called on you, sovereign mother,
When the sons of Atreus
Outraged him
By giving away
His matchless father's arms
To the son of Laertes.
Hear this blessed goddess
Who rides on bull-killing lions.

PHILOCTETES:
Strangers, it seems to me that you've sailed
Here with a cargo of common grievances.
You and I sing the same song, and I know
The work of the sons of Atreus and Odysseus:
He could put any atrocity into words
And lend himself to all kinds of treachery
In the hope of perverting justice.
None of this comes as a shock, except
That Ajax could stand to watch it happen.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
He was already dead. Had he lived,
I would never have been cheated like this.

PHILOCTETES:
What are you saying? He too is dead and gone?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Gone. He no longer sees the light.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh no, no! But Diomedes, Tydeus' son,

And that spawn of Sisyphus sold to Laertes,
They never die! They don't deserve to live!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
No, they don't; you can be sure of that.
They are thriving in the Greek army.

PHILOCTETES:
And what of my dear old brave friend
Nestor of Pylos—is he still alive? He could
Counter their schemes with his sage advice.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
He is alive but in great difficulty: His son
Antilochus is dead, and he has no protection.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh no, not another. Two more deaths
Too hard to bear. I wish I never knew!
Oh, oh, what can we look to when men
Like this are dead while Odysseus lives?
It is he who should be counted among the dead.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
He's a cunning wrestler, but even the most cunning
Stratagems, Philoctetes, can be tripped up.

PHILOCTETES:
For the sake of the gods, where was Patroclus—
Your father's closest friend—when you needed him?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
He too had been killed, let me tell you;
War never wants evil men
But always takes the good.

394: Paktolos—a river in the Phrygian kingdom of Lydia, modern-day western Turkey, which was said to flow with gold dust from Mt. Tmolus. The area was associated with the worship of Cybele, the mother goddess.
416: Diomedes—Diomedes of Argos is one of the most fearsome warriors in the Iliad; he even went into combat with Ares and Aphrodite. In an earlier version of the Philoctetes myth, Diomedes had accompanied Odysseus to Lemnos.
PHILOCTETES:
I'll bear witness to that, and on that subject
Let me ask you about a worthless man
Who had a sharp tongue and mind for schemes.

440

NEOPTOLEMUS:
You can only mean Odysseus.

PHILOCTETES:
No, not him, but a fellow named Thersites
Who never knew when to keep quiet,
Though it drove men mad. Is he still alive?

445

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I never saw the man, but I heard he was still alive.

PHILOCTETES:
He would be. Evil creatures are never destroyed;
Some unseen power carefully protects them
And takes perverse pleasure in diverting
Criminals and wrongdoers away from Hades,
While the just and the good are sent straight there.
So what do I make of this? Is this the way of the gods?
How can I praise the gods when their ways are so evil?

450

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Son of an Oetean father, from now on
I will take care to view Troy
And the sons of Atreus only from afar.
Where corruption overpowers virtue
And honor is stifled, letting duplicity rule,
I will never offer men my loyalty.
No, rocky Skyros will do for me.
I'll be quite content to stay at home.
So, to my ship. Good-bye, son of Poeas,
Good-bye. May the gods restore your health—
I know you want that more than anything.

PHILOCTETES:
We must go and make ready to sail
For the god to speed us on our way.

465

PHILOCTETES:
Are you meaning to go now, my son?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Yes, we must watch the weather from the ship
So we can seize the moment and sail.

PHILOCTETES:
Then, my son, by your father and your mother,
By everything you hold dear in your home,
I beg you as a supplicant, do not leave me alone,
Forsaken, living in the utter misery
You have seen and heard for yourself.
Take me with you! It is repulsive,
I know it, to have to carry such a cargo,
But steel yourself to it, as befits your family.
Shun disgrace and find glory in honor.
If you ignore this, you'll degrade your good name.
Do it, my lad! Think of the honors you'll receive
If I make it back to Oetean land alive!
Come on, it's not even a full day's work.
Dare to do it: Have me aboard and stow me
Where you like—in the hold, the prow, the stem,
Wherever I'll least distress my shipmates.
Say yes, my son: By Zeus the god of suppliants,
Be persuaded. I'll get down on my knees
In spite of my injuries, hobbled and lame.
Don't abandon me here in total isolation.
Take me to your land or just to Euboea,
The kingdom of Chalcodon. It's not too far
To Oeta from there; I could make it.
I'd cross the highlands of Trachis

488-9: “Euboea . . . Chalcodon”—Euboea is a long, narrow island just off
the coast of eastern Greece, where Chalcodon was king; he was the father
of Elephenor, who served at Troy.
491: Trachis—the hilly region to the south of Malis and the final home of
Heracles and his wife Deianeira. Their marriage ended in the suicide of
Deianeira and the death of the mortal Heracles. Sophocles tells this story
in Women of Trachis.

442: Thersites—a reviled figure whose name means something like
"Bruiser." He was put down by Odysseus in the Greek chiefs' assembly
in Book 2 of the Iliad. In most versions of the myth, he is killed by Achilles; here Sophocles has him survive.
453: “Oetean”—Mt. Oeta was where Heracles died and ascended to
heaven. It stands in the region of Malis, Philoctetes' homeland.
And ford the streams of Spercheius and appear
Before my dear father. It’s been so long;
I fear he’s passed away. So many times
I sent word to him by those who came here,
Praying that he would dispatch a ship
And fetch me back home. Either he died,
Or these messengers couldn’t have cared less
For me and hurried on to their homes instead.
But now I have my escort and my messenger.
You can save me; you can be compassionate.
Human fortune is fraught with danger,
And life is nothing if not uncertain.
To avoid risk is to court disaster.

The complacent should look to their lives,
Else they be taken by surprise and ruined.

[Antistrophe]

CHORUS:
Have a heart, sir. He’s told of such suffering,
An ordeal I’d wish on no friend of mine.
Sir, if you’re against those despised sons of Atreus,
You should turn their mistreatment of you
To this man’s gain and take him where he wants to go.
Put him aboard your good, swift ship;
Take him home;
Avoid reprisal from the gods.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Be careful: You’re just unaffected onlookers now,
But once you grow weary of living with his sickness,
You may not find it so easy to stick to your word.

CHORUS:
Not me. You would never have a reason
To reprimand me for such a thing.

492: Spercheius—a river that runs through the plain of Malis and empties out to the Malian gulf.
507-18: A passage in lyric meter written to be sung by the chorus leader while the chorus dance. This antistrophe is matched by lines 391-402. Together they form what is known as a hyporchema.
From Troy, bound for the vineyards of Peparethos.
When I learned that these seafarers were your crew,
I felt that I could not simply go on my way
Without first informing you of the news.
I knew you would be obliged. I take it you
Know nothing about your predicament
And what the Greeks have in store for you.
They're wasting no time
Setting their plans in motion.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Sir, I appreciate you thinking of me, and if
Am a worthy man, I will not forget your kindness.
Tell me what you know; I need to learn
What new plots the Greeks have against me.

TRADER:
Old Phoenix and the sons of Theseus
Have taken ship and sail in search of you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
To persuade me to come back or to force me?

TRADER:
I'm not sure. I can only tell you what I heard.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Are Phoenix and his accomplices so desperate
To please the sons of Atreus that they run their errands?

TRADER:
The errand is being run, I know that, and without delay.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then why did Odysseus not come in person?
Perhaps he was too scared to deliver his own message.

548: Peparethos—a tiny island off the coast of Thessaly in northwestern Greece. The island of Skyros, Philoctetes' home, is only forty miles to the southeast. Peparethos was known in antiquity for its fine wine.
561: "The sons of Theseus"—Demophon, the king of Athens, and his brother Acamas. According to one mythic tradition, Theseus was murdered on Skyros by Lycomedes, the guardian of Neoptolemus.

571: "Tydeus' son"—Diomedes. See note on line 416.
NEOPTOLEMUS: I can see well enough.

TRADER: I will hold you responsible for this.

NEOPTOLEMUS: Then do, but speak.

TRADER: I'll speak. Those two men I told you of are sailing After him. The strong son of Tydeus and mighty Odysseus have sworn an oath to bring him back, Either by conciliation or by the power of force. All the Greeks heard Odysseus announce this; He has every confidence he will be successful, Even more than the man he sails with.

NEOPTOLEMUS: But why all of a sudden have the sons of Atreus Turned their attention toward a man They exiled such a long time ago? What could have compelled them? A god? The fear of divine retribution Seeking revenge for past evils?

TRADER: I can tell you everything, since you've not heard. There was a Trojan prophet, a royal son of Priam, Who went by the name of Helenus. Cunning Odysseus, who it is said is brazen And shameless, captured him in the night And brought him back in chains, publicly Exhibiting his fine prize to the Greeks. Helenus then foretold all he was asked and said They would never take his city unless Philoctetes Could be persuaded to leave his island to come to Troy. When Odysseus heard the prophet say this, He instantly promised to fetch this man And bring him back to the Greeks. He thought it most likely that he would be willing To come, but if he refused, then he would use force. He said they could have his head if he failed. You have heard everything, boy. I suggest that you And anyone else you care about leave now.

PHILOCTETES: I am a wretched man! That total fraud Has sworn to persuade me to go back to the Greeks! He'd find it easier to persuade me to come back to life After I am dead and buried deep down in Hades And, like his father, to try to cheat death!

TRADER: I know nothing about that. I must get aboard my ship. May the gods be with you, and may it be for the best. (Exit the Trader through the stage right wing.)

PHILOCTETES: Isn't it amazing, my lad, that the son of Laertes Could possibly hope to soften me with words, lead me To his ship, and deliver me into the midst of the Greeks! I would rather listen to my most lethal enemy, The snake that crippled me, than to him! He would dare do anything to get what he wants; At least now I know that he's on his way. So, my son, we need to get under way and put As much sea as possible between Odysseus and us. Let's go now; good speed with good sailing Gives good sleep once the work is done.

NEOPTOLEMUS: We'll sail as soon as the headwind dies down. It's far too fierce to put out at the moment.

PHILOCTETES: It's always fair sailing when fleeing from evil.

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605: Priam—the king of Troy and father to fifty sons, including Hector and Paris, and many daughters, including Cassandra and Polyxena. 
606: Helenus—a son of Priam and Hecuba, a seer of Apollo, and an important Trojan warrior in the Iliad. After the death of Paris, he and one of his brothers, Deiphobus, became rival suitors for Helen. Helenus was rejected and went over to the Greeks. 
625: “His father”—See note on line 384 for Sisyphus, the alleged father of Odysseus.
NEOPTOLEMUS:
Not always. The weather is also against them.

PHILOCTETES:
No wind has ever averted a pirate
When there's an opportunity to ransack and steal.

If not, I will relent.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then we'll go now, just as soon as you collect
Everything you need from inside.

PHILOCTETES:
There are a few things. Not much.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Can they not be found onboard my ship?

PHILOCTETES:
I need a particular herb that I keep to soothe
My wound and help manage the pain.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Fetch it. Is there anything else?

PHILOCTETES:
I need to find any arrows that might have missed
And fallen; no one else can ever have them.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then is that your famous bow?

PHILOCTETES:
I'm holding the one and only.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Could I see it? I mean, even handle it?
To be so near to the power of a divinity!

PHILOCTETES:
For you, my son, I will grant your wish.
There's nothing I wouldn't do for you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I want to take it—I really do—but I feel I should
Be cautious. Is it allowed? If not, I will relent.

PHILOCTETES:
You speak respectfully, my son. Yes, it is allowed.
You have opened my eyes to the light of life,
To see the land of Oeta, my old father, my friends.
You have lifted me from beneath the feet
Of my enemies and placed me beyond their grasp.
Don't worry, the bow will be yours to hold
And then hand back to the hand that gave it.
You'll be able to boast; because of your compassion,
You were the only other mortal to hold this bow,
And I had it because I also performed a kindness.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I am fortunate to know you and earn your friendship.
One who knows how to give and take a kindness
Will always gain a priceless friend.
Please, go in.

PHILOCTETES:
I will, but come with me.
I'm weak. I need your help.

(Exit Neoptolernus and Philoctetes through the skene door.)

Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe a]

I once heard a story, though I never saw it myself,
Of one who dared to try to bed the wife of Zeus.

671: "A kindness"—when the young Philoctetes lit the funeral pyre of Heracles.
673: "A priceless friend"—In the Greek, Neoptolemus' choice of words here reflects both the sound and the meaning of the name Philoctetes, which translates as something like "he who gains a friend" or "friend of gain."
679: "One who dared...wife of Zeus"—Ixion, a Thessalian king who was the first man to murder his own kin when he invited his father-in-
He was caught by Cronus' mighty son
And lashed to the rim of an ever-running wheel.
But I have never seen or heard of any mortal
Suffering a more hateful fate than this man.

No crime was committed; nobody was wronged;
He treated others as they treated him.
Did he deserve to come to this?
How could he stand to listen alone
To the rush of the surrounding seas
And keep a grip on a life so steeped in grief?

[Antistrophe a]
He was his own neighbor, lame and alone.
No one was near to help him bear his torment.
No one heard the shrieks and cries, his answer
To the agony of the putrefying flesh and blood.
No one dressed the searing streams that leached
From his maggot-infested, mutilated foot.
And when he was consumed in pain,
No one tended him with soothing herbal balms.
Once his debilitating agony had waned,
He would try to crawl, but only so far,
A helpless infant reaching out,
Scavenging to meet his meager needs.

[Strophe b]
He could never harvest
The fruits of the blessed earth
Nor reap the bounty
That men work from the land.
The only way to feed the pangs of hunger
Was with the swift flights shot
From his deadly bow.
Poor soul, for ten years
He never enjoyed the taste of wine.
Instead he had to scrape his way

In search of any stagnant pool
That could quench his thirst.

[Antistrophe b]
But now he has met a noble son.
He will be happy and strong again.
All his troubles nowlie behind him.
After all this time he will sail away,
Slicing the sea on our swift ship,
Carried home, to the Malian nympha,
The river banks of Spercheius,
And the peak of Mt. Oeta,
Where Heracles himself, Lord
Of the Shining Shield, rose to the gods
In a blaze of his father's heavenly fire.

(Enter Neoptolemus and Philoctetes through the skene door.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Please, come on. Why won't you speak?
You've frozen. What's wrong?

PHILOCTETES:
A, A, A, A!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What is it?

PHILOCTETES:
Nothing to worry about. You go ahead, son.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Are you in pain? Is it your wound again?

PHILOCTETES:
No, definitely not, not that, I'm fine—
O GODS!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then why call on the gods?

PHILOCTETES:
So they'll keep us safe and protect us . . .
A, A, A, A!

law Eioneus into his house and had Eioneus killed. Zeus pardoned Ixion and brought him to Olympus, where Ixion tried to seduce Hera. Ixion was punished by being bound to an eternally turning wheel in Hades.
NEOPTOLEMUS:
What is wrong with you? Why won’t you tell me?
Stop this silence; it’s obvious that something’s wrong.

PHILOCTETES:
O my son, I’m finished! I can’t hide my torment
From you . . . ATATAI! It’s shooting through me!
Shooting through me! NO! Not again! NO!
I’m finished, my boy; it’s eating away at me! PAPAI!
APAPPAPAI! PAPAPPAPAPPAPAPPAPAI!
By all the gods, if you are carrying a sword, son,
Grab it and strike right at my heel!
Hack it off, clean through—don’t worry about me!
Do it quickly, son, quickly!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What is this? Suddenly, out of nowhere,
What is making you scream like this?

PHILOCTETES:
You know, my son.

PHILOCTETES:
Boy, you know!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I know nothing. What is wrong?

PHILOCTETES:
How could you not know? PAPPAPAPPAPAI!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Your sickness is truly unbearable.

PHILOCTETES:
More than you know. Have pity!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What can I do?

PHILOCTETES:
Don’t be scared away. Don’t leave me!
It comes on me every so often. It will pass
Once she has satisfied her hunger.

PHILOCTETES:
You poor man, every sorrow has struck you.
Give me your hand; let me help you.

PHILOCTETES:
NO! No, don’t touch me. But take my bow:
You wanted to hold it; now keep it safe for me
Just until the pain subsides.
If I slip into sleep, it slows the sickness.
Please let me rest quietly, but swear to me:
If those men should come here looking for me,
By all the gods, you swear to me that for any
Reason whatsoever, willingly or unwillingly,
You will never ever give them my bow.
If you do, you will not only condemn yourself,
But you will condemn me—your suppliant.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Don’t worry. No one else but you and I
Will hold this bow. Give it to me in good faith.

PHILOCTETES:
Here, take it, my son. But pray to the envious gods
That it will not bring you the sorrows
It showed to its former owner and me.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Gods, grant both our wishes:
Swift smooth sailing to wherever heaven wills,
To wherever our destiny may lie.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh, my son, you’re wasting your breath.
I can feel the black blood boiling up again,
Bursting from my wound. There’s worse to come . . .

773: “Your suppliant”—Philoctetes has made himself a suppliant of
Neoptolemus; Neoptolemus is honor bound to protect him because sup­
pliants were sacred to the gods.

777-8: “The sorrows . . . former owner”—Heracles’ use of the bow and
poisoned arrows led indirectly to his own agonizing death after a Cen­
taur he killed arranged for the poison to be recycled against its owner.
For the story, see Women of Trachis 555–87.
PAPAI! FFFFF!
PAPAI! Foot! What more can you do to me?
It's coming again,
Breaking over me! Coming! No! No!

(NEOPTOLEMUS recoils.)

Don't leave me! You know what this is!
ATTATAI!
Odysseus! If only you could feel this pain,
Feel your frame split in two and your guts
Wrench in your chest! FFFFF! PAPA!
You two commanders: Agamemnon!

Menelaus! Why did you not suffer
These torments as long as I?
Whymy? Me!
Death! Death! Every day I call to you—
Why do you never come?
O my son, noble child, take hold of me,
And call upon the fires of Lemnos to engulf me.
Once I saw it to do the same
To a son of Zeus in return for the weapon
That you now keep safe for me.
Say something, boy, say something!

Why are you quiet? What are you thinking?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
- My heart is bursting with grief for your pain.

PHILOCTETES:
- Be bold, my son. It stabs sharply
  But passes quickly. I beg you:
  Don't leave me here alone.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
- We will stay, don't worry.

800: “The fires of Lemnos”—No trace of the legendary Lemnian volcano called Mosychlus has ever been found, though Pausanias reports that at some point Chryse Island disappeared into the sea. “The fires of Lemnos” is probably an allusion to the myth of Hephaestus and the fumarole fields of the island that produced steam and vapor. Red Lemnian earth was considered a curative, and purging fire rituals were known to have been practiced on the island (see note on line 927).

810-6: “Take me there... Go where?”—Philoctetes may be indicating his cave home, but this could also be another reference to the Lemnian fire ritual (see note on line 927). Philoctetes may believe that he will transcend his pain by sacred fire just as Heracles did when Philoctetes lit Heracles' pyre.
SOPHOCLES

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I will not.

PHILOCTETES:
If you touch me, you will kill me!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Stay calm. I’ll let you go.

PHILOCTETES:
Earth, let me die now; take me under.
I cannot take this pain!

(Philoctetes starts to drift off to sleep.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I think he’ll soon be asleep.
He can hardly hold his head up.
His whole body is drenched in sweat,
And a stream of black blood has burst
From his heel. Friends, let’s leave
Him in peace and let him rest.

CHORUS:
[Strophe]
Sleep with no torment, sleep with no pain,
Come to our gentle prayers;
Bring your blessing, blessed lord.
Keep his eyes shrouded serenely
With the mist that clouds his sleep.
Come, come, our lord of healing powers.

(The chorus address Neoptolemus.)

Young man, where do you stand?
What to think? How to take the next step?
He sleeps; our time is now.
What are we waiting for?

Opportunity is everything,
And victories are made in a moment.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Though he hears nothing, I can see that the bow
Is worthless if we sail away without him.
God willing he will also be crowned with the victory.
The shame would be on us if we succeeded through treachery.

CHORUS:
[Antistrophe]
But, my boy, won’t the gods see to that?
Speak softly now, son;
Whisper.
A sick man is easily woken
From restless sleep.
You should explore the limits
Of all you can do by stealth,
To do what you have to do.
If you continue this attitude toward him—
And you know exactly what I mean—
I can foresee only trouble ahead.

[Epode]
The wind is with you, lad, the wind is with you.
He won’t see; he’s helpless,
Splayed out in his darkness
(Sleep in the sun is the soundest),
Immobilized,
As good as dead in Hades.
Look, see for yourself.
Are you sure of what you’re saying?
As I understand it, boy,
The strongest plan has no fear.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Keep quiet and keep your wits about you.
He’s opening his eyes and lifting his head.

(Philoctetes wakes.)

827–64: First Kommos—a passage in lyric meter taking the place of the second stasimon, written to be sung by the chorus.
832: “Lord of healing powers”—Apollo was a god of sickness and healing and is also linked to Chryse Island in Book 1 of the Iliad.
858: The text is doubtful here; this line may be a gloss.
PHILOCTETES:
Ah, sunlight, sleep’s successor, I never dreamed
That strangers would ever watch over me.
I could never have hoped, my son,
That you would tend me with patient care,
Staying by my side and easing my pain.
Those “brave” sons of Atreus certainly
Couldn’t stomach their responsibility to me,
But your nature is noble, from noble blood,
And you were never burdened
By the foul stench or my anguished cries.
The plague has passed for a while,
A breathing space, forgetfulness,
A little bit of welcome rest.
Help me up on my feet, my son,
So as soon as I regain my strength,
We’ll make for the ship straightaway.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I am so glad to see you free from pain,
Alive and well. I can’t quite believe it;
You went through such intense agony;
I thought you were surely going to die.
Let’s get you up, or if you like,
My men can lift you; it’s no trouble.
They will help; we’re all in this together.

PHILOCTETES:
Thank you, my boy. Help me up, like you said.
But leave them out of it; no need to unsettle them
With the foul smell before we need to.
It will be hard enough on them once I’m aboard.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
All right, then hold on to me and stand yourself up.

PHILOCTETES:
Not to worry, I’m used to this. I’ll get up.

(Philoctetes struggles up on his feet.)

875: “The foul stench”—The wound gives off a terrible gangrenous smell (see note on line 927).
NEOPTOLEMUS:
Not abandon you, but carry you on a harsh crossing,
And this has been tormenting me.

PHILOCTETES:
What are you saying, my son? I don’t understand.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I can’t hide it: You are to sail to Troy,
To the Greeks, as an instrument of the sons of Atreus.

PHILOCTETES:
No! Don’t say that!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Don’t bemoan until you learn . . .

PHILOCTETES:
Learn what? What are you trying to do to me?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Rescue you from this misery and then together
We will lay waste to the plains of Troy.

PHILOCTETES:
So this is the truth. This is what you want.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
We are compelled by necessity. Don’t be angry.

PHILOCTETES:
I am finished! Betrayed! You Stranger!
What have you done? Give me back my bow!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I cannot. It is my duty and in my interest
To obey the orders of my commanders.

PHILOCTETES:
Firebrand! Demon! Conniving monster!

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The arrival of Neoptolemus symbolically reenacts
the Lemnian fire ritual in which for nine days all fires of Lemnos were
extinguished and the sexes lived apart in a replaying of the myth of the
Lemnian women who had slain their husbands; a ship bearing new fire
arrived from the sacred island of Delos and reignited the hearth and
forge fires, bringing new life. The nine days of the festival may relate to
the nine years Hephaestus spent on the island. Philoctetes also spends
nine years on Lemnos. Some versions of the myth also mention the foul
smell of the Lemnian women, which drove their husbands away.
That once fed me; my prey will prey on me,
Life for life, my blood in recompense for theirs.
I've fallen victim to one who seemed so innocent.
I hope you die! No, not yet, one last attempt:
You may yet change your mind. If not, then die!

CHORUS:
What do you want us to do, sir?
Should we set sail or do what he wants?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I feel so sorry for him; I can't help it.
My sympathy keeps growing.

PHILOCTETES:
Have mercy, my son, for the sake of the gods.
Don't let it be said in scorn that you tricked me.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What should I do? I wish I had never left Skyros
And had to face this unbearable pain.

PHILOCTETES:
You're not a bad lad, but I think you've been trained
By bad men to come here and act ruthlessly.
Better to leave that to those best suited to it.
Sail on from here, but give me back my bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What should we do, men?

(Enter Odysseus, accompanied by his men, through the stage right wing.)

ODYSSEUS:
Traitor! What do you think you are doing?
Get away from him and give me that bow.

PHILOCTETES:
What's this? Do I hear . . . Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS:
Odysseus, for sure, standing before you.

PHILOCTETES:
I am betrayed! Finished! It was him?
He set this trap and stole my bow.

PHILOCTETES:

ODYSSEUS:
Yes, this was my work. I admit it.

PHILOCTETES:
Give me back my bow, boy, give it back!

ODYSSEUS:
That he will not do, though he might want to.
And you must come too—even if we have to drag you.

PHILOCTETES:
You shameless bastard, you would use force?
There's nothing you wouldn't sink to.

ODYSSEUS:
If you won't come of your own free will.

PHILOCTETES:
Land of Lemnos, almighty fires
Ignited by Hephaestus, how could this be tolerated?
How can you let him tear me from your soil?

ODYSSEUS:
It is Zeus. Know that it is Zeus who reigns here.
Zeus decides all. I am merely his servant.

PHILOCTETES:
Detestable man, there is no end to your contrivances—
Hiding behind heaven, making the gods out to be liars!

ODYSSEUS:
This was decreed—you must follow this path.

PHILOCTETES:
No, I say, no!

ODYSSEUS:
And I say yes—you have no choice.

PHILOCTETES:
I am cursed! My father raised a slave!
I'm not fit to be called a free man!

987: Hephaestus—god of the forge.
989–90: "It is Zeus . . . decides all"—Odysseus tries to trump Philoctetes by invoking the name of Zeus, the highest deity.
SOPHOCLES

ODYSSEUS: No, return with us to Troy and stand with the bravest
Of men; together you will grind the city to dust.

PHILOCTETES: Never! I'll not suffer that, not while I stand
Over the steep cliffs of this island.

ODYSSEUS: And what could you do?

PHILOCTETES: I'll throw myself against the rocks and shatter
My head into a thousand pieces.

ODYSSEUS: Get hold of him! Don't let him do it.

(Odysseus' men grab Philoctetes.)

PHILOCTETES: If only my hands could draw my beloved bow—
But they have fallen prey to Odysseus.
You, with your sick, unfeeling mind
Creep in again and snare me in your trap.
You hid behind this boy, who I never knew,
Far too good for you, but well worthy of me.

His only thought was to obey his orders;
Now he agonizes over his mistake
And the wrong he's done to me.
Your sly-eyed sordid soul has schooled
Against his will and his very nature.
Now you want to tie me up and take me
Away from the coast where you condemned me
To a living death—no friend, no home, no hope.

Why won't you die? I have prayed for your death
So many times, but I get nothing good from the gods.
You're happy to be alive while I live in misery,
Ridiculed by you and those sons of Atreus,
The twin commanders you now serve so well.
Yet you had to be yoked to their expedition
By fraud and force, whereas I, the total wretch,
Freely sailed my seven ships into dishonor
And disgrace, banished here by them!
You said it was them; they'd say it was you.

Why now? Why me? Why take me away? What for?
I am nothing and have long been dead to you.
How can it be, accursed man, that you no longer
Find me a repellent cripple? If I sailed with you,
How could you sacrifice or pour libations to the gods?
Wasn't that how you justified marooning me here?
I hope you suffer! And if there is any justice in heaven,
Then you will suffer for what you did to me.
I know there is, because you would never
Have sailed all the way here for such a wretch
Unless the gods had ordained that you need me.

Land of my ancestors, omnipotent gods!
After all this time, avenge me! Avenge me!
If you have any pity, punish them all!
I've led the most pitiful life, but if I lived
To see them annihilated, that would be my cure.

CHORUS: An embittered man, he's indignant, Odysseus.
His suffering has not softened his resolve.

ODYSSEUS: I could answer him at length if time allowed,
But the way things stand, I will say one thing:
I am whatever kind of man I have to be.
As for deciding matters of morality,
There is no man more virtuous.
It is in my nature to always want to win—
Except, in your case, I will gladly give way.
Take your hands off him and let him go.
He can stay here; we've no more need of him
Now that we have his bow in our possession.
Teucer is skilled in such things, and I dare say

1057: Teucer—the half-brother of Ajax and a famous archer. In Ajax (1223–1415), Teucer is at odds with the sons of Atreus over the burial of Ajax until Odysseus steps in and resolves a potentially deadly situation.
That I could shoot this bow just as well as you
And aim as true. So we don’t need you at all.
Enjoy your long walks on Lemnos. We must go.
This prize might bring me the honors
That rightfully should have been yours.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh, misery! What can I do? Do you mean
To go before the Greeks with my bow?

ODYSSEUS:
I’ve heard quite enough. I’m leaving.

PHILOCTETES:
Son of Achilles, have you nothing to say?
Are you just going to leave?

ODYSSEUS:
Come on! And don’t look at him.
Your generosity will ruin everything.
(Exit Odysseus through the stage right wing.)

PHILOCTETES:
Friends? You, too? Are you abandoning me?
Have you no pity?
(The chorus prepare to leave.)

CHORUS:
The boy is our commander. Whatever he says
To you, we say the same.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I will be told that I am too compassionate,
But wait here, if that’s what he wants,
At least until the crew has prepared for sea
And we have said our prayers to the gods.
He may well change his mind about us.
We must leave; come quickly when we send word.
(Exit Neoptolemus through the stage right wing.)

PHILOCTETES:
Hollow cave carved in the rock,
Sun baked and ice blasted,
It was my cruel destiny to never leave.
Now you will be the only witness
To my lonely death.
Ah me, me, me.
My sad shelter
That echoed with my pain,
How will I survive these days?
What hope have I of sustenance?
High above me, in the whistling breeze,
The birds will flutter by.
I cannot catch them now.

CHORUS:
It was you. You cursed yourself,
You poor, deluded man;
This fate is not forced on you
Or beyond the bounds of your control.
You had your chance
To make the prudent choice.
There was a better way;
You had to choose the worse.

PHILOCTETES:
I am cursed! Cursed!
Abused in my agony,
Abandoned,
Alone, for the rest of time.
Dead.
Aia! Aia!
I have no way to live:
The winged weapon
I held in my strong hands

1087–1217: Second Kommos—a passage in lyric meter taking the place of the third stasimon.
1110 Will provide for me no more.
The unforeseen treachery
Of a duplicitous mind tricked me.
Oh, to see him,
The mastermind of this ambush,
1115 Suffer for as long as I have.

CHORUS:
It is destiny, heaven-sent destiny,
Not a trick.
I had no hand in it.
Send your spite
1120 At others; don’t curse me.
Don’t throw away my friendship.

[Strophe b]

PHILOCTETES:
Why me? Me? He’s out there
Sitting by the surging gray sea,
1125 Laughing at me, flaunting my bow,
Which no other mortal man has owned.
Oh, beloved bow, my friend,
Ripped from my loving hands,
If you could only feel,
1130 You’d look with pity
On this follower of Heracles
Who’ll never hold you again.
You have passed into the hands
Of a new master now;
1135 A tactician manipulates you.
And you’ll see such blatant deceit
In the face of my most hated enemy
And infinite lies devised against me.
O Zeus!

CHORUS:
1140 A man should say what he thinks is right,
But once said, he must restrain himself
From firing off this kind of insult.
Odysseus is one acting for many;
He serves the common will
1145 As a duty to his fellow men.

[Antistrophe b]

PHILOCTETES:
My soaring prey, bright-eyed
Beasts roaming the high pasture,
Fly no more from your lairs.
I no longer hold any power;
My arrows are gone.
I am cursed!
Roam free—you have
Nothing to fear from me.
Nothing.
Now is your time.
Take blood for blood
And feast on my tainted flesh.
Soon I will be dead,
For how can I now live?
Can any man live on air
When he has no means
1150 To harvest the abundant earth?

CHORUS:
By the gods,
1155 If you have any respect for a stranger
Who wishes you nothing but goodwill, listen.
Consider this and consider it well:
You can avoid this end;
1160 It feeds on your self-pity
And will never subside as long
As it coexists with self-inflicted hardship.

PHILOCTETES:
Again and again you make me remember my pain.
You have been the kindest of any who came.
Why do you destroy me? What have you done to me?

CHORUS:
What do you mean?

PHILOCTETES:
Was it always your plan
To take me to Troy, the place that I hate?

CHORUS:
It is for the best.
PHILOCTETES: Go then! Leave me here!

CHORUS:
We'd be grateful to, very grateful, happy to oblige.
Come on then!
Back to the ship! Man your stations!

PHILOCTETES:
No! By Zeus who hears curses, don't go! I beg you!

CHORUS:
Calm yourself.

PHILOCTETES:
Friends! For gods' sake, stay!

CHORUS:
What do you want?

(Philoctes' pain rises up.)

PHILOCTETES:
Aiai! Aiai!
Goddess! Goddess! I am finished!
Foot! Foot! What will I do with you
For the rest of my miserable life?
Friends! Come back again, please!

CHORUS:
Come back and do what?
Have you changed your mind?

PHILOCTETES:
Don't be angry with me.
When the pain strikes
I can't control my words.

CHORUS:
Then come with us, you poor man.

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1187: "Goddess"—daimon, perhaps meant as a reference to Chryse, a local earth goddess. It was at her sanctuary that Philoctetes was bitten by the snake (see note on line 194).
(Enter Neoptolemus through the stage right wing holding the bow and closely followed by Odysseus.)

**Odysseus:**
Will you please just tell me what has made you turn around and return here in such a hurry?

**Neoptolemus:**
I need to put right what I did wrong.

**Odysseus:**
What is this? What did you do wrong?

**Neoptolemus:**
I obeyed you and the Greeks!

**Odysseus:**
And why would that disturb you?

**Neoptolemus:**
Because I cheated a man using trickery and deceit.

**Odysseus:**
Who? I hope this isn’t some thoughtless new scheme.

**Neoptolemus:**
Thoughtless? No, not for the son of Poeas...

**Odysseus:**
I’m afraid to hear what you’re going to do.

**Neoptolemus:**
...Whose bow I stole and will return...

**Odysseus:**
Zeus! What are you saying—you’re giving it back?

**Neoptolemus:**
Yes, I had no right to take it. I acted shamefully.

**Odysseus:**
By all the gods! Are you trying to mock me?

**Neoptolemus:**
If it’s mockery for me to speak the truth.

**Odysseus:**
Son of Achilles, what have you said?

... We follow Jebb in the addition of a line here; the Greek text suggests that one may have been lost.
NEOPTOLEMUS:
You cannot force me to obey you.

ODYSSEUS:
Then we will fight not only the Trojans but you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What will be, will be.

ODYSSEUS:
Watch me
Reach for my sword. My hand is on the hilt.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Watch me reach for mine, only quicker.

ODYSSEUS:
I want no more of this. I will inform
The army of this, and they will deal with you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
At last, wisdom! Stay wise, Odysseus;
It might keep you out of trouble.

(Exit Odysseus through the stage right wing.)

PHILOCTETES:
What is all this shouting out here?
Why are you calling me?
What do you want with me now?
(He sees Neoptolemus.)

Ah me! This can be nothing good. More bleak news?
Have you come to make my misery worse?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Don’t be afraid, but listen to what I have to say.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh, I am afraid. I believed your promises once,
But fair words from you proved foul for me.

PHILOCTETES:
Is there no room for remorse?

PHILOCTETES:
You spoke just like this when you stole my bow,
A “faithful friend” with a poisoned heart.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
No, not anymore. Just tell me whether you’ve decided
To stay here in distress or sail away with us.

PHILOCTETES:
Stop!
Don’t say any more. You’re wasting your breath.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Have you decided?

PHILOCTETES:
More than words can say.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I wish I could persuade you to change your mind,
But I don’t have the words.
I will stop.

PHILOCTETES:
It would have been futile.
You’ll never earn my trust or win my heart.
You stole the one thing that sustained my life,
Using treachery and deceit, and now
You come here to offer up advice!
Your great father spawned a wretched son!
I want you dead, all of you—the sons of Atreus,
The son of Laertes, and you!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Put an end to your curses
And take your bow from my open hand.
(Neoptolemus offers Philoctetes the bow.)

PHILOCTETES:
This is another trick.
NEOPTOLEMUS:
No, I swear it, by the highest power of sacred Zeus.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh, welcome, welcome words... if they're true.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
My actions will prove my words. Hold out your hand
And take possession of your bow.

(He hands the bow to Philoctetes. Enter Odysseus through the stage right wing.)

ODYSSEUS:
I will not allow this—as the gods are my witnesses,
In the name of the sons of Atreus and the entire army!

PHILOCTETES:
My son, who was that? Did I hear Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS:
Indeed you did, and here I am,
The same Odysseus who will take you to Troy
By force, whether the son of Achilles likes it or not.

PHILOCTETES:
Then you'll pay for it if this arrow flies right.

(Philoctetes takes aim at Odysseus.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:
No! By all the gods, don't shoot that arrow!
(Neoptolemus grabs Philoctetes.)

PHILOCTETES:
Let me shoot, by the gods! Unhand me, my lad!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Don't shoot!

*He hands... Enter Odysseus:* The sudden entrance of Odysseus would suggest that he did not return to this ship at line 1260 but hid himself to watch Neoptolemus and Philoctetes. Odysseus may have lingered in the stage right wing entrance, where he would have been visible to most of the audience.
1330 You will never be free of this searing pain
Unless you go willingly to the plain of Troy
To see the sons of Asclepius, our allies,
Who will treat you and administer a cure.
Then together we will take this bow
And tear down Troy.

1335 Let me tell how I know this:
We are holding a Trojan prisoner,
Helenus, the best of all the prophets.
He has seen clearly what will come to pass
And has pronounced that this summer
Will see the fall of Troy.
He has staked his life on this.
Now you know, so be generous and give way.
The rewards will only be of benefit to you;
You'll be hailed as the bravest of all the Greeks
Once the healing hands have cured you
And you have won unparalleled fame at Troy,
The city that caused endless grief.

PHILOCTETES:
Oh, spiteful life! Why me? Why do I still live
In the light? Let me sink into the depths of Hades!

1350 Ah, me! What should I do? Doubt his words
When he has given me such kind counsel?
Then do I give way? If I do, how can I stand
In the sight of men in such a sorry state?
Who would even speak to me?

1355 My eyes have witnessed all my sufferings,
But how could they bear to see

PHILOCTETES: 247

PHILOCTETES

The sons of Atreus or foul Odysseus,
The men who tried to destroy me?
It's not the hurt of past indignities that smarts,
But a vision of the corruption that is to come.
One who nurtures evil thoughts
Will forever be schooled in evil.
I wonder then about your motives:
You should not be going back to Troy;
You should be keeping me from going.
It was an outrage that they prevented
You from inheriting your father's arms!
Now you fight at their side and want me to do the same?
Do not do this, my son. You swore to take me home.
Come to Skyros and stay awhile; leave wicked men
To wicked ends. You'll be twice blessed,
By me and my father, and by not abetting
Evil men, your nature will never appear evil.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
There's a lot of sense in what you are saying,
But I need you to trust in the gods, take my word,
And sail away from this land as my friend.

PHILOCTETES:
To the Trojan plain and the despicable
Sons of Atreus—with this crippled foot?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
No, to those who will free you from your pain,
Heal your wound, and save you from this sickness.

PHILOCTETES:
What kind of advice is this? What do you mean?

NEOPTOLEMUS:
I see what will be best for both of us.

PHILOCTETES:
You should be ashamed to say such things before the gods.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Should one feel shame when helping friends?

1332: "The sons of Asclepius"—Machaon and Podalirius. They are named in Book 2 of the Iliad immediately after a reference to Philoctetes (2.731). Asclepius was a healing god and the son of Apollo. In 420 B.C.E., his cult was invited to Athens. Sophocles was said to have personally housed the cult (and perhaps the snake that represented it) at his home prior to an Athenian shrine being built near the Theatre of Dionysus. Sophocles was given the title Dexion ("Receiver") for performing this religious service on behalf of the state.

1337: Helenus—See note on line 606.
PHILOCTETES: Does this help me or the sons of Atreus?

NEOPTOLEMUS: You. I am your friend and speak in friendship.

PHILOCTETES: But you want to hand me over to my enemies!

NEOPTOLEMUS: Please, learn not to be so defiant when in trouble.

PHILOCTETES: You will destroy me with your words, I know it!

NEOPTOLEMUS: I will not; you just refuse to understand.

PHILOCTETES: I know that the sons of Atreus abandoned me.

NEOPTOLEMUS: They abandoned you, but now they want to rescue you.

PHILOCTETES: Never—if it means that I must agree to go to Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS: What else can I do if I cannot persuade you

PHILOCTETES: Let me suffer what I need to suffer! But you,

NEOPTOLEMUS: What else can I do if I cannot persuade you

PHILOCTETES: You promised. You gave me your hand on it,

NEOPTOLEMUS: But what could you do?

PHILOCTETES: My son. You said you'd take me home. Fulfill your oath.

NEOPTOLEMUS: I have the bow of Heracles.

PHILOCTETES: If that is what you want, we will go.

NEOPTOLEMUS: If that is what you want, we will go.

PHILOCTETES: What noble words!

NEOPTOLEMUS: Step carefully, with me.

PHILOCTETES: With all my strength.

NEOPTOLEMUS: How will I escape being condemned by the Greeks?

PHILOCTETES: Ignore them.

NEOPTOLEMUS: What if they invade my country?

PHILOCTETES: I'll be there.

NEOPTOLEMUS: What are you saying?

PHILOCTETES: I will drive them away.

NEOPTOLEMUS: Then say good-bye to this place, and let's go.

(Enter Heracles on the roof of the skene.)

HERACLES: Not yet, son of Poeas,

NEOPTOLEMUS: Until you have heard my words.

PHILOCTETES: Hear the voice of Heracles;

HERACLES: Look upon his form.

NEOPTOLEMUS: Enter Heracles . . . skene: Heracles may have entered suspended on the mechane, the stage crane often used for the entrances of gods. He may have then been placed on the roof of the skene, where he delivered the speech. The only actor available to play Heracles would have been the same one who played Odysseus and the Trader, suggesting that this is perhaps one last trick of Odysseus, who has disguised himself as the god.
For your sake, have I left
The heights of heaven
To reveal the plan of Zeus.
Stop this present journey;
Listen to the word.
First, know of my fortunes:
Once I had endured my many labors,
I won the immortal excellence you see
Before you. And for you too
It has been ordained that your suffering
Will be repaid with a life of glory.
Go with this man to Troy;
Be cured of this vicious wound.
Then as the army’s champion,
Kill Paris, cause of the harm, with my bow.
Take Troy, and the army will honor you.
Carry the spoils to the Oetian heights
As a joy to your father, Poeas.
From this rich war-prize dedicate
A portion to me; make an offering
At my pyre in recompense for my bow.
Son of Achilles, I say the same to you:
You will not take Troy without him,
Nor he without you. Twin lions,
You must protect each other.
Asclepius, the healer, I will send to Troy.
The city must fall twice to my bow.
Be warned: When you lay waste to the land,
Show true respect for the things of the gods.

1424: “Man”—Heracles names Neoptolemus as a “man,” indicating that his initiation is complete. In cult practice Heracles presides over the martial instruction of male initiates (ephebes), and gymnasia were often named for him.
1436: “Twin lions”—Philoctetes is destined to shoot Paris, and Neoptolemus will kill Priam.
1438: Asclepius—See note on line 1332.
1439: Heracles had sacked Troy one generation earlier, when the city was ruled by King Laomedon.
1441–2: “Show true respect . . . Zeus”—The audience would know that Neoptolemus savagely and irreverently killed Priam while he was suppliant at the altar. Images of Neoptolemus committing acts of violent sacrilege at Troy were common and predate Sophocles’ play.
1458: “Rock of Hermes”—a peak on the northwest of the island, near Cape Flaka.
1461: “Lycian”—a cult title of Apollo meaning “light” or “wolf,” both terms connected to initiation rites. The reference here may be to Apollo as a healer. Excavations at Hephaistia, Lemnos’ ancient city, have unearthed archaic terra-cotta models of fountains, one with healing nymphs. This may suggest that Lemnos was known for its therapeutic waters.
Steer me on a fair and fortunate course
To wherever mighty Fate should send me.
A friend’s good thoughts and the invincible
Demigod brought fulfillment.

(Exit Philoctetes and Neoptolemus through the stage right wing.)

CHORUS:
We will all set sail together.
Pray to the spirits of the deep
To send us safely on this voyage.

(Exit the chorus through the stage right wing.)

Endnotes

A. Ajax

Line 15: “I can’t see you, but I know it’s you.” Greek plays were not staged to re-create realistic scenarios, and it would not have been a stretch for the Athenian audience to accept that Athena would be invisible to Odysseus. Moreover, the actors wore masks and had to face the audience when speaking to be heard and to properly engage the audience. In this scene Odysseus would be speaking out front with Athena behind him on the upper level of the skene.

Line 333: “Why me? Why me?” There is no suitable contemporary English translation for Greek cries of pain such as io moi moi! (Ah me, me!). Greek masked acting used a whole range of utterances to articulate pain, suffering, and sorrow. Such language was often formalized as part of funerary lamentation, when loud expressions of grief were normal. The actor today might choose to groan or cry out, but this does miss the formulaic recitative quality of such expressions.

Lines 346–55: “Then look, I will open the doors. . . . There’s no doubt now: He’s out of his mind!” We cannot be certain about how this scene was staged. Some have assumed that only the chorus see the horror inside the doors, but the ekkykléma was an established piece of stage machinery in tragedy and seems most likely here, especially considering the chorus’ order to “open up!” Tecmessa’s repetition of the order to open the doors also indicates an ekkykléma entrance. This would provide a scenic contrast to the furious entrance of Ajax at line 91. Now the audience sees a static fallen hero. The sight of Ajax surrounded by slaughter would have been compelling and reminiscent of Orestes surrounded by the Furies in Aeschylus’ Oresteia of 458 B.C.E. (The Furies 64–93)—a scene that may have also used the ekkykléma.

Lines 545–64: “Lift him up. . . . He will devote himself to your care.” We cannot know the exact age of Eurysaces; he can be no more than nine, as the play takes place in the tenth year of the Trojan War. But the fact that Ajax says “Lift him up” (545) would suggest a smaller child of perhaps three to six years of age. This would certainly create a poignant stage image of the helpless young boy at the mercy of the Greeks. This scene invokes Hector’s interaction with his son Astyanax in the Iliad, when the young boy shrieks from the sight of Hector’s plumed helmet (6.466–84).
C. Electra

Lines 35–8: “Apollo answered my questions along these lines: / By myself, without mustering an armed force, / To trick them, sneak in, and, with my own hand, do / The slaughter they deserve.” The text is unclear about whether the god himself endorses the action that Orestes will take. Orestes has not asked whether he should kill the guilty pair but rather how he can make them pay the price, and Orestes here has rephrased the oracle’s answer in his own words. See Introduction, p. xxviii.

Lines 226–7: “Dear friends, noble as you are, no one now / Can tell me anything that helps.” The line, literally a question, has been read in several ways. The main alternatives are: (1) “For from whom, noble friends, could I hear a word that would be helpful, in the judgment of anyone who thinks right?” (from the Greek in Kells 1973); (2) “For who that thinks right would judge that any word would help me?” (from the Greek in Jebb 1893/2004, Lloyd-Jones 1994). We have adopted a simplified version of the first alternative.

Line 610: “I see she is huffing with anger.” Perhaps the chorus leader is referring to Electra and telling Clytemnestra that Electra’s anger has drowned her attempt at rational argument. That is Jebb’s view, supported by his comparison with Antigone 471. Other scholars think the anger is Clytemnestra’s and indicated by a gesture. In that case, the chorus leader would be talking to Electra and referring to Clytemnestra, whose appearance, behind the mask, would need to be made explicit by a speaker. On the one hand, the chorus in such a context usually comments on the preceding speech; on the other, Clytemnestra takes the comment of the chorus as directed toward her, as we see from the following line. So either interpretation may be defended.

Lines 686–7: “He completed the course / As well as he began it.” The translation follows an emendation, as interpreted by Kells. The manuscripts read: “He made the end-points of the course equal to his nature,” which might mean, “He ran as well as he looked.”

Line 790: “Could this be good?” Lloyd-Jones follows an emendation that means, “Am I not well off?” (1994).

Lines 1074–5: “The girl who weeps alone / Endlessly for her father’s death.” This translation is based on an emendation accepted by most modern editors.

Lines 1251–2: “But wait till their arrival / Prompts us.” This line refers to the arrival of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The word translated as “arrival” often means “presence”; an ancient commentary tells us that in this context it means “right time” (kairos, as in line 1259), which we have supplied in 1254 for the combination of two verbs meaning “is present” and “is fitting.” So interpreted, Orestes’ lines here would be another warning to Electra to tone down her rhetoric until they have had their revenge. Taken in the more usual way, however, this is a double warning, as if Orestes were to say: “Be quiet until they are here, then remember what they did—not by speaking or wailing, but by killing them.”

Line 1478: “Although you’re alive, you’ve been matching words with the dead.” The line has perplexed many scholars. This translation follows the original Greek text, with Lloyd-Jones (1994), a text that implies a threat against Aegisthus’ life. Jebb and Kells follow a widely admired emendation that leads to one result or another that would be less frightening to Aegisthus: “that you have for some time now been addressing living men as though they were dead” (Kells 1973); “that the dead, as thou miscaldest them, are living” (Jebb 1893/2004).

D. Philoctetes

Lines 1–2: “The peninsula of sea-washed Lemnos, / Deserted: no one sets foot here.” In Homer’s Iliad, Lemnos is not deserted. A consignment of fine sweet Lemnian wine arrives at the Greek camp sent by Euneus, the Lemnian king (Iliad 7.467). Making Lemnos uninhabited may have been an invention of Sophocles; two previous versions of the story staged by Aeschylus and Euripides, now lost, both have a chorus of Lemnians. Odysseus mentions that it is the rocky peninsula that is deserted, and we cannot assume that the whole island is unpopulated. Philoctetes’ injuries make it impossible for him to stay far from his rocky home. In any event, this is a desolate and desperate place..

Line 28: “Above or below you? I cannot see.” We must consider the mask in imagining how this scene might have been staged. To have been heard, Odysseus would have faced the audience when speaking, and Neoptolemus would have been behind him, up on the stage. This “split focus” facilitated by the mask allows Sophocles a greater range in establishing his staging. Odysseus looking up and Neoptolemus calling down would have been enough to suggest the scene that the text describes.

After line 135: (Enter the chorus . . . stage right wing.) The chorus enter via the stage right wing entrance into the orchestra. Alternatively, they may have entered earlier with Neoptolemus and Odysseus and been silent until now. In Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ versions of Philoctetes, which have only come down to us in fragments, the chorus consist of local
Lemnian men. Sophocles' chorus consist of Greek sailors, but who are they? The text is unclear, except they do seem very loyal to Neoptolemus. They could be warriors from Skyros or perhaps veteran soldiers who had served under Achilles. This would put additional pressure on Neoptolemus to perform correctly and make the right choices. The chorus of Philoctetes is more actively involved in the plot than most tragic choruses, not only advising Neoptolemus but also participating in deceiving Philoctetes.

Lines 194-5: “Savage Chryse sent this lonely, / Solitary suffering.” The myth that Philoctetes was bitten by a snake that guarded the shrine of Chryse may belong to a corpus of much older “treasure dragon” stories that also includes Jason and the Golden Fleece. Sophocles is vague about the background to Philoctetes' wound, but contemporary vase paintings and the lost Philoctetes of Euripides indicate that the young Philoctetes first visited Chryse (or, Golden) Island with Heracles on an earlier expedition against Troy. He was bitten by the snake either because he dared to show the way to the secret buried shrine of Chryse, thereby revealing her treasure, or because he accidentally trespassed on sacred ground. Chryse Island also features prominently in Book 1 of the Iliad as a place sacred to Apollo. When Agamemnon refuses to return Chryseis to her father, who is named Chryses, Apollo sends a plague down on the Greeks. Agamemnon then gives back Chryseis but takes Achilles' war-prize, Briseis, in recompense, thus sparking the wrath of Achilles and the events of the Iliad.

Lines 296-7: “At first I had no heat, but by rubbing stone on stone, / I found the hidden sparks that keep me alive.” In Book 1 of the Iliad, Hephaestus tells how he was thrown off Olympus, became lame, and was nursed back to health by the Sintians, the ancient inhabitants of Lemnos. In return he showed them how to use fire and forge metal. Sophocles may be evoking the primeval Sintians in his portrayal of Philoctetes, standing in direct opposition to the sophisticated and urbane Odysseus.

Hephaestus seems to have originally been a non-Greek god, and on Lemnos a non-Greek population called the Tyrsenoi inhabited the island until the sixth century. Philoctetes is reminiscent of an ancient precivilization hunter-gatherer, and his simple and direct moral position proves compelling to the impressionable Neoptolemus.

Line 987: “Ignited by Hephaestus . . .”—This is the only time Hephaestus is named in the play. In some ways, the myth of Philoctetes mirrors that of Hephaestus. Both are marooned for nine years on Lemnos; both are lame and considered ugly. In the myth of the return of Hephaestus,