

# SOPHOKLES' *PHILOKTETES* AND THE ASCENT TO POLITICAL FRIENDSHIP

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## Key concepts

Sophokles; Philoktetes; nosos [illness]; stasis [stability]; polis; homonia [together-mindedness]

## ABSTRACT

Sophokles' *Philoktetes* was produced in 409 BC. The dominant theme that reveals itself in the play's imagery is Philoktetes' incurable illness, his *nosos*.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to shed light on the relationship between the play's *nosos* theme and the political and moral unravelling that was leading Athens to an impasse. From this vantage point, *Philoktetes* may be viewed as a tragedy about *stasis*, to be understood in its ancient meaning of a "disease",<sup>2</sup> where the *polis*' functions become arrested and its naturally cooperating elements turn against each other with hatred.<sup>3</sup> The catharsis of the play, which occurs with Herakles' epiphany, may then be interpreted as Sophokles' positing of *homonoia* or political friendship as the path for his *polis*' salvation. *Homonoia* is a new concept<sup>4</sup> that will later find its philosophical elaboration in the works of Plato and Aristotle, but Sophokles has already described its core elements: it is a friendship that is forged from grand values of great consequence, and its consummation is an *athlos* that calls for sacred dedication and exertion so that the passions and actions of citizens may be brought into accord with these values.

## NOSOS IN THE ACHAEAN CAMP

The plot of *Philoktetes*, just as two previous tragedies with the same name by Aeschylus and Euripides, is derived from what was then a well-known *mythos* surrounding the expedition of the Greeks at Troy to steal the bow of Philoktetes. The play opens with Odysseus briefing Neoptolemos that Philoktetes' weapons are to be taken by deception and that in the name of profit and victory all means are permissible. Thus, even before Philoktetes makes his appearance, and though the audience is expecting to soon see an infirm cripple, Sophokles makes the audience aware that a more global affliction has

seized the Greek army and its leaders. Odysseus couches the stealing of Philoktetes' weapons in the self-serving language of profit and victory. The mission is all about *kerdos*, which in its political context always connotes a gain without attention to justice. As Aristotle will state in Book 5 of his *Politics* (1302a 32-34), the aim of *stasis* is *kerdos* and "time", "profit" and "honour", or put in a modern vernacular, self-interested gain and power. Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides identify the means as "force" and "fraud", *bia* and *apate*.<sup>5</sup> Hence when Odysseus tells Neoptolemos: "When you act for *kerdos*, then you must not hesitate", Sophokles leaves no room for doubt that the army is in a condition of *stasis*, that in its corrupt hands, its aims, even when divinely ordained, are impious and have lost their connection to justice.

The language of Odysseus parallels Thucydides' description of the transformations in values and language that were a generic trait of the *staseis* unleashed during the Peloponnesian Wars (3.82.4.1-5.3). There is an inversion of values, so that upon victory, the shameful is to become respectful, cowardice will be seen as bravery and sacrilege as piety. Odysseus reassures Neoptolemos that if the mission is completed with success he will be called "wise" and "virtuous" (119) and mankind will come to think of his actions as "pious" (85). Victory (not justice) is sweet (81); lying is associated with salvation (109); even though the deceitful act may appear to be shameful, after victory one may then act with justice (82). The manipulation of language occurs throughout the play, but in the opening exchanges it reveals with great economy the values of the Greek army.

When it comes to means, Odysseus views deceit as more efficient than force. Persuasion and acts of friendship are never considered as alternative choices. What Athenian in Sophokles' audience would not have been reminded of the force and fraud that had become commonplace in the successive *staseis* that racked Athenian society? The events of 411 were still fresh in everyone's minds, whereby the oligarchic plotters had lulled the Athenian assembly with false promises – that an oligarchic transformation would be profitable; that it would bring Persian gold; that it would be temporary and mild – while at the same time these same plotters unleashed a reign of terror and assassination. This intimate relationship between force and fraud is made explicit later on by Philoktetes who, though his bow has been taken only by deceit, cries out that he has been the victim of force (1128-29 [own translation]):

Oh beloved bow, that was,  
from loving hands, by force, taken

The interactions between Odysseus and Neoptolemos at the opening of the play reveal a way of thinking and acting that were traditionally identified with a *polis* in profound decay in which its leaders announce "gain" as its objective and lying as its principle of preservation. Neoptolemos, asks Odysseus (108-109 [translation Grene])<sup>6</sup>:

“Do you not find it vile yourself, this lying?”

...to which he receives the answer, that:

“Not if the lying brings our rescue with it.”

The epic heroes who have yet to conquer Troy appear before us as leaders of an army whose principles resemble those of common brigands.

## HATRED: THE *NOSOS* OF PHILOKTETES

Many writers have commented on Philoktetes' anger and how this play shows the harm that can befall a *polis* when heated passions put their stamp on the *polis*' public life. Upon closer examination, however, we shall find that the dominant emotion is that of hatred rather than anger proper, and that the difference between the two is vital for making sense out of the plot and the catharsis of the play.

To get at the difference between anger and hatred we may turn to Aristotle who made a precise distinction between the two. He explained that anger is caused by a perceived slight; it evokes a pain that is not removed until the pleasure of punishment is secured or until an acceptable apology is granted. Anger is thus specific to the offense and is directed to the individuals perpetrating the injury. Hatred, however, knows no pain, and it is not directed towards individuals but to an entire class of persons; it is pitiless, cold and implacable and can be quenched only by the destruction of one's enemies. It is independent of any specific context of injustice and its operation need not refer back to any perceptible injury. The hated Many are merged into an impersonal despicable One, and this makes possible mob-like behaviour, since a characteristic of a mob is its lack of discrimination, its herd-like One-ness. Thus it is that civil wars are often accompanied by slaughters of children and women and whomever else hatred's broad strokes may perchance cover. Hatred develops out of anger but it subsumes it and moves beyond it.

Philoktetes wishes that harm may come to the entire army so that it may be ruined. He cares not a whit about apologies or equivalent punishment of those responsible for his abandonment, nor will he be calmed by the oracle's promise of a cure if he were to come to terms with the Greeks. This should be compared to the wrath of Achilles, which, though unrestrained in intensity, is nevertheless limited to Agamemnon for a specific insult suffered; he wishes to punish – not to destroy – the Achaean forces so that they will come begging for his return. Philoktetes will never return; there is nothing to return to, for the Greeks have become enemies whom he wants to see destroyed to a man, and it is this thought alone that gives him relief from his pain (1040-1044 [translation Grene; own emphasis]).

Land of my fathers, Gods that look on men's deeds,

take vengeance on these men, in your own good time,

upon them *all*, if you have pity on me!

Wretchedly as I live, *if I saw them*

*dead, I could dream that I was free of my sickness.*<sup>7</sup>

Another element of difference in the conditions that evoke Achilles' anger and Philoktetes' hatred is their respective framework of values. The punishment that the wrathful Achilles seeks promises to be effective because it assumes allegiance to the common values of honour and areté, so that when Agamemnon and the Greek army suffer from Achilles' withdrawal they feel remorse and try to make amends for the injury to Achilles' honour. In *Philoktetes*, Odysseus and the Greek army move in a moral world that shares no point of intersection with that of Philoktetes. The army speaks the language of guile and power, while Philoktetes is still beholden to the epic values of honour and manly virtue. There would be no purpose served for Philoktetes to be angry at the Argives, for he could never hope to affect them; his anger would either be impotent and burn within him to no effect, or if he chose to vent it he would offer a comical sight of someone hurling recriminations against persons who are impassive to such emotional displays. The Achaeans would only feel pain if they were to adapt to some other code of conduct that would evoke in them shame or remorse for their past deeds and present conduct. Such a condition is precluded from the outset.

## THE “LOGOS” OF HATRED

The environment of *nosos* has been set for an encounter between Achaean deceit and Philoktetes' hatred. Neoptolemos approaches Philoktetes with a fabricated tale, reporting to him that he is homeward bound to Skyros; that he has left Troy after being humiliated by the Atreidae and Odysseus. He recounts how they supposedly refused to give him his father's weapons and instead gave them to Odysseus for services rendered. Overall this brief tale shows superb mastery of the art of manipulation, because the success of the deceit relies on knowledge of the psychological weaknesses of the target to be manipulated.

Philoktetes is attracted to this story because he operates on the principle that “the enemy of my enemies is my friend.” He opens up to Neoptolemos because the youngster's supposed mistreatment comes from the hands of the same persons that have harmed him. He does not evaluate Neoptolemos by the traditional criteria that are used to validate friendship. Usually, the proof of friendship in the Greek world was bound to strict criteria that incorporated ritualised codes of reciprocation: they included knowledge of the prospective friend's character gained over time; reciprocal actions as tangible evidence of mutual affection; the pleasure of mutual society; and the benefits of collaboration. The way that Philoktetes recognises Neoptolemos as a friend is indicative of his premises (320-328 [translation Grene; own emphasis]).

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- Neoptolemos: I have dealt with those villains,  
the two Atridae and the prince Odysseus.
- Philoktetes: *Are you, as well as I, a sufferer  
and angry? Have you grounds against the Atridae?*
- Neoptolemos: Give me the chance to gratify my anger  
with my hand some day...
- Philoktetes: Well said, boy!  
You come to me with a great hatred against them.

The traditional criteria for friendship recognition have become dysfunctional. The unstated argument that churns in Philoktetes' mind, as he evaluates Neoptolemos, is brutally simple and jettisons centuries of careful distinctions that the Greeks had developed in this matter. It goes something like this: <sup>8</sup>

- I hate the Achaeans;  
anyone who hates the Achaeans is my friend;  
Neoptolemos hates the Achaeans;  
therefore Neoptolemos is my friend.

The flaw of the syllogism lies in the fact that the emotion "I hate" stands in for a major premise. Normally, as the word for political friendship, *homonoia*, denotes, it is a "together-mindedness" (*noos+homou*)<sup>9</sup> (from which just and noble deeds are expected to occur) that forms the content of the premise, while here it is a common hatred that fleetingly binds for the deed at hand. On this basis Philoktetes has no doubt that their community of shared bitterness is sufficient grounds for recognising Neoptolemos as a friend (404-407). Neoptolemos' deceit works flawlessly because when persons are in a condition of *dichonoia* ("split" or "apart-mindedness", the subjective trait of the passionate enmity that develops between citizens during times of *stasis*), they are ruled by their passion to which they adjust their beliefs. What is sought is satisfaction of the passion and the pleasure appropriate to the passion. Thus certain hateful events are wished for, even when there is no logical basis for such events to unfold; or avenues of vindictive action are accepted as desirable, not because they are viable, but because they conform to the passion. One's powers of evaluation are proportionately diminished in relation to the excess of the passion. This tendency is well understood by demagogues who thrive on the opportunities that this psychological deterioration in the populace presents for manipulation.

## THE FIRST STEP TO FRIENDSHIP

Philoktetes' hatred cannot soften unless someone takes his pain into consideration. Recognition of Philoktetes the human being, apart from an instrument in a grand mission, marks a moral crisis and a turning point in the play. The recognition is deliberately drawn out and tortuous. It begins when Philoktetes suddenly cries out in pain, but to this sudden outbreak of suffering Neoptolemos gives only a perfunctory, detached query. He states the obvious, is polite and correct, but not truly interested.

“[i]s it the pain of your inveterate sickness?” he asks.

“No, no indeed not,” responds Philoktetes, “Just now I think I feel better” (734-36 [translation Grene]).

Philoktetes responds coolly, in part because he is trying to conceal the extent of his suffering so that Neoptolemos will not see him as a nuisance and change his mind about giving him passage for his return to his homeland. Neoptolemos' queries and Philoktetes' denials are repeated several times but as the crescendo of suffering intensifies, Philoktetes, overwhelmed by pain, abandons the pretence and cries out (742-43 [translation Grene]):

I am lost my boy,

I will not be able to hide it from you longer

Oh! Oh!

And just at this point when Philoktetes openly admits his pain, Neoptolemos inexplicably blocks out what has just been told to him. Amazingly, he becomes dazed, falls into a bewildered funk and states that he cannot see and does not know the cause of Philoktetes' moaning; he asks *three* times, as if he were blind and deaf to the glaring facts before him, what is it that is causing these unbearable groans? (751-754 [translation Grene; with modification]).

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

Philoktetes:            You know, my boy.

Neoptolemos:           What is it?

Philoktetes:            You know, my lad!

Neoptolemos:           What do you mean?  
                                  I do not know.

Philoktetes:            Surely you know. Oh! Oh!

After the third response Neoptolemos acquiesces to the suffering before his eyes and is moved to empathy. He utters the words of compassion that Philoktetes has been waiting to hear: “How terrible the burden of your sickness,” he says, and Philoktetes responds: “Terrible and beyond words; *pity me!*” (755-756).

Here is the first stirring of friendship, the first words that are spoken with sympathy for Philoktetes’ unspeakable plight and Philoktetes responds with the words, “pity me”, showing that he has never been reduced to an animal, that he yearns for something more than rocks and wild animals to hear his groans and pains. Neoptolemos’ stirrings of empathy overwhelm Philoktetes to excess. He becomes unduly trusting and gives his weapons over to Neoptolemos for safe keeping. His trust will turn out to be misplaced because Neoptolemos’ compassion occurs from within a web of lies that still entrap him in Odysseus’ wiles.

Even so, this crippled act of recognition begins the process of Neoptolemos’ break with Odysseus’ values. The audience too witnesses Philoktetes’ excruciating pain and is led to enter his psychic world where it can examine the legitimacy of his hatred, from *his* standpoint. The subject of the play changes from a plot to snatch weapons, to Philoktetes’ *nosos*. This shift in dramatic emphasis is crucial for moving the audience. The Athenians who were experiencing a breakdown in their own *polis* and were daily being apprised of competing schemes and factional manoeuvres involving allies, subject cities, Persian satraps, Spartan generals, Alcibiades and other Athenian generals and leaders, suddenly take a breather from the intricate web of deceit in the play, and they turn their attention to *nosos*, of course Philoktetes’ *nosos*, yet ultimately their own. By feeling his agony they themselves undergo a psychological transition. The indecipherable tangle of lies and deception are pushed into the background, while the *nosos* of a character, who up to now has figured only as a pawn being manoeuvred to its prescribed endgame, is thrust into the foreground. From this point on Odysseus and his intrigues fade in importance while the real problem of overcoming *nosos* and returning to friendship take centre stage.

## FIVE ARGUMENTS FOR FRIENDSHIP - REJECTED

There is an insoluble paradox in the plot. The Gods have ordained a cure for Philoktetes and a victory for the Greeks, but neither of the two can be realised. The Achaeans in their present hubristic mode cannot gain Philoktetes’ cooperation and so they will not conquer Troy; and Philoktetes cannot overcome his antipathy for the Greeks so he will not go to Troy to be cured. Both sides stand to lose all that the Gods have promised; both sides are aware of the consequences yet both are incapable of overcoming their

predicament. The ascent to reconciliation therefore falls on Neoptolemos' shoulders. At this stage, he is the only hope for overcoming the impasse, because by responding to Philoktetes' pain he shows two traits that neither of the two implacable parties has: the capacity for friendship which the embittered Philoktetes lacks, and an ethical sensitivity that the corrupt Achaeans are incapable of.

Neoptolemos will take the initiative to return Philoktetes to friendship, in part out of remorse, but it is also the case that it has been prophesied that he, along with Philoktetes, will conquer Troy. The oracle has provided him with the context to seek out Philoktetes' cooperation, for his own role in the divine plan calls for Philoktetes' participation, and since this is not to be gained by force or guile, then all that remains is for him to approach Philoktetes in the persuasive manner of a friend.

In all, five arguments will be made under Neoptolemos' initiative to persuade Philoktetes to cooperate in the divinely ordained mission. Four of these will come from the *choros* and one from himself directly. The *choros* functions as Neoptolemos' extension of sorts. It is composed of his "fellow-crewmen" who are personally committed to him (1072). Sophokles gives them a collective identity that unequivocally distinguishes them from Odysseus and his camp, but from Neoptolemos as well. They lack the latter's noble instincts; they are prone to operate solely from advantage to get the job done.<sup>10</sup> Though they are capable of sympathy for Philoktetes, they nevertheless cannot extract themselves from viewing him as an intractable means that is out of compliance with their master's purposes. They see him as an obstacle that is to be removed by converting him, literally by force of argument, to their ends. As extensions of Neoptolemos, they also suffer from their master's limitations, and so at this point of their intervention they are handicapped by the fact that Neoptolemos has still not broken with Odysseus, and hence from the outset they are confined to arguing from premises tainted with deceit and the haughtiness of power.

The *choros* takes on its role of persuasion when Neoptolemos asks them to stay behind with Philoktetes while he and Odysseus prepare to set sail for Troy. Now that they have Philoktetes' weapons, and given that he refuses to join them, they have decided to abandon him, yet Neoptolemos hopes that in the brief time remaining Philoktetes might change his mind. Neoptolemos and Odysseus exit and the *choros* and Philoktetes remain alone. Let us turn to examine each of the *choros*' four appeals as they come in rapid succession, in order to seek out their core premise (1093-1100 [translation Grene; own emphasis]).

It was *you* who doomed yourself,  
 man of hard fortune. From no other,  
 from nothing stronger, came your mischance,  
 when *you* could have chosen wisdom,  
 with better opportunity before *you*,  
*you* chose the worse.

The argument here is that Philoktetes himself is responsible for his woes; *he* chose the worse instead of the better. By presenting matters in this light, the *choros* callously absolves itself, and their master, of their collusion in bringing Philoktetes to his defenceless plight. It is, moreover, an argument from power, because it comes after their treachery has left Philoktetes defenceless. The available choices have been wholly determined by their coercive action. Furthermore, they add salt to his wounds by telling him, the victim of aggression, that he could have picked a less onerous course, that in fact such a course is still left open to him, and that he need only select a fortuitous outcome from the choices of surrender that have been placed before him. This argument is in accord with Odysseus' point of view and leaves no ground for any friendship whatsoever and thus is abandoned, since Philoktetes does not dignify it with a response. The *choros* then takes a different tack (1116-1122 [translation Grene]).

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

In this second attempt the *choros* contradicts its previous argument, for now it claims that the events are the work of gods and not of mortals, and that human volition is utterly powerless in the face of divine fate. It is implied here that if the gods alone are to blame, then Philoktetes should forget their collusion in the stealing of his weapons, and hence receive the *choros* as a reliable friend. The problem with this argument is that it too operates on the principle of power; only the responsibility for the devious actions has been cleverly removed from the hands of its human perpetrators and projected upwards and away into the heavens. Again Philoktetes does not bother to acknowledge their entreaty. Ignoring them completely, he merely laments that his bow will be in the hands of the trickster Odysseus. The *choros* then continues (1140-1145 [translation Grene]).

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

With this the *choros* softens its heretofore coercive tone and makes a plea for cooperation on the grounds of justice. The train of argument seems reasonable, for all they ask is that Philoktetes examine his predicament with a cool head and with the passionless eye of justice. If he does so they are confident that he will abandon his enmity. Their unspoken assumption is the commonplace Hellenic view that justice consists in “helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies”. If that indeed is so, then Odysseus was, in this sense, acting justly on behalf of his friends. He was merely the instrumentality for a common enterprise, and to condemn his actions one must condemn the principle of friendship and justice upon which it is based. Since this is a principle common to all the heroes of the *Iliad* it is not one that Philoktetes is likely to reject. However, the sophistic element of the argument turns on how one is to define the “good of one’s friends,” and here there is no doubt that the “good” is reduced to raw profit and self-serving advantage. Ignored again, another plea follows (1163-1166 [translation Grene]):

In the name of the gods, if there is anything that you  
hold in respect,  
  
draw near to a friend that approaches you in all sincerity.  
  
Know what you are doing, know it well.  
  
It lies with you to avoid your doom.

The *choros* in exasperation now speaks directly to his fate; that it is in *his* hands to obey the oracle and to be cured and to bask in immortal glory and honour. Philoktetes, again ignores these entreaties, and instead asks the *choros* why it aims for his destruction by demanding that he return to his enemies at Troy (1168-1175 [translation Grene; own emphasis]):

Philoktetes: Again, again you have touched my old hurt,  
for all that you are the best of those that  
came here,  
Why did you afflict me? What have you  
done to me?  
  
Choros: What do you mean by this?  
  
Philoktetes: Yes, you have hoped to bring me  
to the hateful land of Troy.  
  
Choros: *I judge that to be best.*

The *choros*' reply, more literally rendered, is that it acted in this way “*because I think that this is the most excellent choice for you*”. This final plea for friendship is made on the strongest grounds yet, that of self-interest. This last twist is a refinement to the previous

argument, for if justice is to act for the profit of one's friends, then the *choros* was just in stealing his weapons, because in so doing they acted for Philoktetes' own advantage. The *choros* is claiming that the means that they used may have been shoddy, but the end, after all, was for *his* benefit. If we step back and review the four entreaties made thus far we notice that the *choros* has steadily appealed to the principle of advantage, but has recast it each time so as to make it more palatable to Philoktetes. The *choros* begins from (1) the advantage of the powerful who lay down an ultimatum; they then appeal to (2) a divine power that imposes terms of cooperation as a benefactor; this is followed by (3) a "common advantage" among brigands, and lastly by (4) undiluted personal self-interest.

All four arguments articulate the right of the powerful to dictate terms, and even the last ploy that seemingly addresses Philoktetes' own advantage, is an advantage that is *defined for him and one to which he must bend*. Perhaps we should ask ourselves here, what after all is wrong with self-interest? Throughout history, states, parties and individuals have presented a compact of self-interests as the foundation for community. Perhaps the only error of the *choros* is that it has formulated an interest that is not readily acceptable, because it has put it forward with imperious force as a "take it or leave it" proposition? If Philoktetes' interests were put forward in the manner of a compact, drafted in the spirit of good will and free consent, without coercion hovering in the background, then he might respond in manners open to cooperation. This in fact is the next attempt at reconciliation that will be made by Neoptolemos. Going against Odysseus, ignoring his threats of violence, Neoptolemos returns the stolen weapons to Philoktetes, thus showing with his actions that he comes as a friend. The return of the weapons creates a new situation within which Neoptolemos attains the credibility of a prospective friend without the taint of guile. From this vantage point he is able to plead to Philoktetes that he should accept a course of action that is in his self-interest, and to furthermore respond positively to the confluence of interests that require him to cooperate with his heretofore enemies.

Neoptolemos begins by warning Philoktetes that he has become "ensavaged" (*egriosai*, 1320). With this word Neoptolemos places Philoktetes outside those boundaries of human character that would allow him to participate as a citizen of a *polis*. He is outside of *logos*, for *logos* is tied to its practical function of discriminating the just, and the good and just for man. Philoktetes is torn. He concedes that Neoptolemos' advice is spoken with friendly regard for his welfare. But his passionate hatred will not let go of him and he retorts with an argument that again has its starting point in the hatred for his enemies.

Regarding the past, he asks how will his eyes stand to watch himself in the company of those that destroyed him? It is not the sting of the past that holds him back, as much as the prospect of future wrongs to be suffered at his enemies' hands. Since they were evil

in the past and evil in the present, they have shown that they are evil throughout and are only capable of giving birth to evil offspring in the future.

What Philoktetes is implying here is that even the gods' oracle is not sufficient guarantee of future salvation; that he will be cured and conquer Troy may be written, but what shall come afterward is unknown, and may even hold greater evils than those he presently suffers from. He prefers his present pain that is known to him, than to risk even greater misfortune in the future. Self-advantage, no matter how great, when it is to come from cooperation with morally corrupt persons may have long-term disastrous consequences, especially after the gains are made, for then one can be disposed of, like a tool that is tossed aside once the job is done.

Philoktetes will clinch his case for non-cooperation by showing that his *ad hominem* argument extends to Neoptolemos' enemies as well. He tells Neoptolemos that he too should not entertain the thought of a return to Troy since the same persons humiliated him when they deprived him of his father's weapons: "they have done you wrong," he says (1364). To return would not only bring harm to Philoktetes but it would bring insult to Neoptolemos' father, Achilles. Philoktetes has now completely turned the tables on both the *choros* and Neoptolemos. Like a good sophist, he uses their own principle of self-interest to arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions. Neoptolemos' linkage of "profit" with the "good" is now turned against him with the full force of sophistic antilogos. Philoktetes is telling Neoptolemos, that since their friendship stands in relation to common enemies, and given that it is agreed that these enemies are evil, a point never challenged by Neoptolemos, he, Philoktetes, in dissuading him from cooperating with the Greeks, is a guardian of Neoptolemos' self-interest, since he protects him from present disgrace and future harm. Sophokles, mirroring the devolution of his *polis* at the hands of political leaders beholden to similar principles, has turned the characters and their choices for either "profit" or "salvation" inside out and upside down. The actions chosen, which appear to be correct according to the premises of "interest" and "gain", turn out to be catastrophic.

Neoptolemos must now go beyond interest and profit to friendship, but it is here that his deception traps him. To refute Philoktetes he would have to reveal to him that his supposed clash over his father's weapons was a lie fabricated by Odysseus, but if he were to do this he would simply add to the weight of Philoktetes' claim that the Greeks at Troy are evil throughout and that anything originating from them is corrupt and perverse, including this story, which not only aimed to harm Philoktetes but served to corrupt Neoptolemos. To admit the truth would buttress Philoktetes' case, so there is no point in trying to do so. Lies and deception carry a heavy price, and their effects are not reversible. Thus, Philoktetes goes unanswered; Neoptolemos responds that Philoktetes has spoken correctly, and so they agree to set sail for their respective homelands.

## THE CATHARSIS

At this juncture, as the two get ready to sail, the likely outcome of the play is that of withdrawal. Philoktetes will forever remain an enemy of the Greeks and Neoptolemos will have to live like a fugitive. Philoktetes of course assures Neoptolemos that he will protect him from the avenging Greeks with his unfailing bow, but the irony of such an ending would have been to transform Apollo's divine weapon into an instrument for civil war, thus turning the Gods into unwitting tools for the *polis*' dismemberment.

The play has reached an ethical and psychological deadlock: Philoktetes in his hatred cannot be budged, nor can any of the other characters be reformed in manners that might affect him. Hence, like a *polis* in an impasse, a corrector, a mediator, a healer, who stands outside of the dismembered factions, must come forward with a solution that transcends the limitations of the characters and their divisions, just as Solon did when the Athenians called upon him to act as mediator to avert civil war. The sudden, unexpected appearance of Herakles is just as necessary in this play as Solon's or Lycurgus' appearance was in their strife-torn constitutions. We should note that Sophokles is not manipulating his audience with an arbitrary *deus ex machina* so that he might give an appropriate ending to his play. Tragedy calls for *catharsis*, for resolution, and none is logically or dramatically possible from the moral and psychological plights of the major characters. The gods have already provided a "happy ending" from the beginning of the play, but even their oracle fails to dislodge the characters from their intransigent positions. The plot is at an impasse, because self-annihilation or withdrawal would be depressing and pathetic, but not tragic.

With Herakles' epiphany Sophokles is making a great cultural stride in this play in that he has grasped that a condition for harmony in the *polis* goes beyond justice and the ironing out of clashing interests. One must take into account the pains of these injustices and cure them through the forging of political friendship. All contracts that cater to individual profit or even to a confluence of object-based profits can never be a community; such a society can never be stable or long-lasting nor can it overcome the corruption on which such gains are ultimately based.

One must wonder, however, what is changed so dramatically by Herakles' words, so that it allows Philoktetes to be persuaded. Much of what Herakles says, such as their joint conquest of Troy and Philoktetes' cure, has been previously stated by Neoptolemos. There are two differences that particularly stand out: First, the framework of the prophecy is severed from the context of profit; and secondly, within this new framework, Herakles' own presence evokes the *mythos* that allows Philoktetes to recognise himself and to act as a friend of his true self.

Herakles recasts the oracle in terms of friendship. He first announces that he has come for Philoktetes' own good; he does not view Philoktetes as an instrument to be disposed of in the name of the mission's greater good. Next he addresses the restoration of friendship within Philoktetes' own tormented soul. He reminds Philoktetes that he, Herakles, suffered greatly to reach immortal aretē. His sufferings, in other words, did

not reduce him to a savage. Instead they were the materials out of which his restraint and his self-knowledge developed and became the means for his ascent. Herakles, in the 5th and 4th century, was thought of as a demi-god who had overcome his bestiality; and madness;<sup>11</sup> he acquired what at Delphi had been inscribed as “know thyself” and upon becoming a friend to his true self was granted a divine status by the Olympians. His presence, by invoking his own suffering, opens the way for Philoktetes to be cleansed of his hatred and be cured.

In line with this positive conception of the requirements for political friendship harmony, Herakles shall deny satisfaction to Philoktetes' vindictiveness, because it is not an element of friendship. Friendship looks ahead to healing and not backwards to the pains and injustices endured during times of *nosos*. Once harm has been inflicted one should not passionately demand retribution. After all, these injustices themselves are usually an outcome of a diseased state of affairs that was taken to be normal at the time. The *choros* had correctly urged Philoktetes to temper his hatred against Odysseus, because as they pointed out Odysseus was only One among Many. To desire annihilation of the One necessarily implies annihilation of the Many as well, and this is precisely the all-consuming destructive phase of *stasis* that the *polis* must never reach.

Neoptolemos is too young and inexperienced to have known that his pleas to Philoktetes to act for his profit and the common profit hid a potential danger. This type of “common good” comes and goes and rests on the ephemeral gains tied to objects, just like the Sicilian expedition was launched with a unanimity of erotic desires for foreign booty. Herakles points to a new mode of friendship of a noble nature that is to be characterised by noble deeds. But this turn will require of Philoktetes that he turns away from his self-righteous destructiveness and everything that supports it.

Philoktetes is to make an offering at the site of the holy pyre in Oete in memory of Herakles' bow. We should recall that *Philo + ktetes* is literally the “possession-lover”; by returning to Mount Oete and sacrificing there, Philoktetes is commemorating not *his* bow, but the bow's *true owner*, and this recognition of true ownership is a precondition for the therapeutic removal of his deeply rooted conceit. Not only has he illicitly catered its powers to his private uses but his ownership has become the instrument for the closing of his mind towards others. Now the true owner has returned and has laid claim to it. Once Philoktetes ceases to be *philo-ktetikos* he has nowhere else to turn but to those qualities that endeared him to the Gods in the first place. What he truly possesses, and what he should truly love is not the bow, which was never his, but the abiding traits of his noble character and his cathartic recognition of this fact will make it possible for him to re-experience those emotions that forge and sustain community friendship.

That this friendship between the two is what the Greeks came to call “political friendship” is clearly indicated. Unlike personal friends whose relationship is one of sharing goods and basking in the pleasure of each other's society, this friendship is political – it is laden with utility yet it avoids illicit gain – and is to be formed about a great undertaking.<sup>12</sup> The “great matter” in the play is represented by the conquest

of Troy, but it would be wrong to think of Troy's conquest literally as a symbol of war's binding force. A crude view of war as a unifying force was indeed put forth after Sophokles' death by the sophists Gorgias and his student Isokrates, who called on the Greeks to unite in *homonoia* in a common mission to pillage the Persian Empire. This type of transaction required neither nobility or piety or sacred bonds of friendship. It was a venture to be sponsored by strongmen in a spirit of brigandage.

When Herakles makes his appearance he calls on Philoktetes to pay heed to his "*mythoi*". The words spoken by Herakles are not commandments to be obeyed from the gods of Olympus. As previously stated, the Gods have already commanded – but to no avail. Nor are they to be understood as fanciful tales with a moral message, similar to parables whose symbols make sentient a revelation that prosaic words cannot bring to light. It is best that we think of the word *mythos* in the philosophical sense that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle gave to it, namely, as a type of truth about the world. It is a kind of non-scientific knowledge that couches itself in an imaginative language of wonderment that can reach the passions.

Underlying the *mythos* is a type of knowledge, the grasping of which presupposes that it has been granted a common reverence and exists as a social intelligence. The ennobling values resident in *mythoi* of this sort have a binding force, because the models they present for imitation of shame and veneration are as actual as they are distributed. This aspect of *mythos* helps to explain the inadequacy of prosaic *logos* for assisting humans to right conduct in contexts that involve intense passions. Philoktetes, as we have seen, cannot at this juncture listen to reason. *Logos*, as Aristotle and Plato were to show, is a mere power that is available for common use. It is not an independent controller that can will itself unilaterally over all the other psychological forces that operate within a person. Furthermore, it is quite weak and ineffectual once the passions are in control. When the passions have taken over the *psyche* the power of *logos* is pitiful in comparison. *Logos* must come to a person in a way that can cut through to one's immoderate passions. The noetic content of the passions must be restored and made aright. But how can this be done, say in the case of anger, which is high-pitched and self-righteous in its very expression? It is here that *mythos* enters Philoktetes' mind and his heart with the full authority of reverence, and reconnects him to the hero that he is, to the hero that was once rewarded by the gods for his virtue. The *mythos* has the power to rekindle Philoktetes' passions along a different noetic trajectory that will move Philoktetes away from enmity to reconciliation. He arrives at *logos* not by way of *logos*, since it is *logos* itself which is preventing any rational audience to healing words, but by way of a value laden *mythos*.

That Sophokles had to call upon a god to descend from Mount Olympus to deliver this *mythos* was a sign that Sophokles viewed his *polis* in 409 as one that was losing its moral strength for self-preservation. It was tired and weak and its cacophonous hatreds were fast consuming its powers. Worst of all, it had failed to select from the *mythoi* and the values available to it a way of life that would have restrained its citizens from

the impieties of illicit gain and savage excesses. Instead it had moved far along in the opposite direction.

But in *Philoktetes*, Sophokles has let all future citizens know that Apollo's bow shall be granted to those who aspire to conquer their divided selves and return themselves and their *polis* to their sacred course. As for the consequences of failure, Sophokles has come to the same conclusion made years later by Plato and Aristotle, that man, bereft of virtue, an enemy to himself and to others, is the worst of even the most savage animals. And man's fate in that condition, as calamitous as it may be, is never worthy of tragedy.

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## END NOTES

- 1 The audience that gathered in the theatre of Dionysus, below the Acropolis, could not have failed to associate the *nosos* of their *polis* with the agony being enacted in the drama. Since the defeat of the Sicilian expedition in 413, the Athenian *polis* suffered four *staseis*, or what we today call "revolutions" or "civil wars". The expedition itself had been carried out in the hope of plunder, and in the wake of its failure, thousands of Athenians were killed, and a rapid devolution of its political institutions soon followed: in 411 there was the oligarchic coup of the 400; then the rule of the 5,000, followed by an uprising of the fleet in Samos and a restoration of the democracy in 409. Intricate machinations of numerous factions, each with its own private aims, created a climate where speech and deceit had become indistinguishable. It was a *polis* where the common interest had been reduced to a temporary accommodation of self-interests, and where those who had been defeated and were living in fear awaited their turn for retribution. The *polis* was headed for the political disintegration that was to occur six years later under the rule of Thirty Tyrants.
- 2 For the association of *stasis* with *nosos* see: Aeschylus *Supp.* 660-662, *Pers.* 714-715; Euripides' *The Madness of Hercules HF* 542-43, 34, 273, 59; Plato *Ti.* 81e6 - 82b7; Aristotle *Athenaion Politeia* 13.3, and Demosthenes in the third Phillipic 12.4-5.
- 3 See Plato's *Republic* (351d4-6), for example, the "work" of justice in producing "together-mindedness" (*homonoiia*).
- 4 J. de Romilly. ("Vocabulaire et Propagande ou les Premiers Emplois du Mot HOMONOIA." In *Mélange Chantraine, Études et Commentaires*. Klincksieck. Vol. 79. Paris) traces the origin of

- the word *homonoia* to the late 5th century c. 411. Her thesis on the novelty of the word is further supported by its absence from any of the extant tragedies.
- 5 *Pol.* 1304b7-15. Also see Book 8 of the *Republic* in which each stasis-driven constitutional transformation employs force and deceit that pervert the laws into instruments of vulgar gain. Thucydides (Book 8. 53-54) describes the methods of the conspirators who overturn the Athenian constitution in 411 as relying on deceit (*apate*).
  - 6 Grene, D. & Lattimore, R. 1968. *The Greek Tragedies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
  - 7 To the merchant's "news" that Odysseus has launched an expedition to bring Philoktetes back to Troy, Philoktetes responds (631-632) that he would easier listen to the snake that left him crippled than collaborate with Odysseus.
  - 8 See Blundell, Mary, *Helping friends and harming enemies: a study in Sophocles and Greek ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1989. "Shared hatred creates an instant bond... Philoctetes applauds Neoptolemos' anger before discovering the cause..." (196).
  - 9 Throughout this paper I have translated *homonoia* literally as "together-minded" rather than the usual renderings of "like-mindedness" or "unanimity" or "concord". The rendering of *homou* as "same" rather than "together" is simply bad translation, yet its persistence, even by accomplished scholars, points to the unexamined Roman origins of our notions of "concord". Criminal gangs can be "like-minded" for destructive purposes; good people can be "like-minded" yet impotent to execute their common desires; there can be a concord in the heart or in religious beliefs yet utter dissension in political matters of great import. On the problems of translating *homonoia* see K. Kalimtzis (2000) *Aristotle on enmity and political disease: an inquiry into stasis*, New York: SUNY Press: pp 56-61.
  - 10 Aristotle notes several times that there exists a type of object-centred friendship that is the trait of friendships between the "base" (*fauloi*). See *Eth. Eud.* 1241a23-27, and 1237b30-32.
  - 11 See Susan Woodforth's "Exemplum Virtutis. A study of Heracles in Athens in the second half of the fifth century B.C" (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1966). Woodforth writes that in the late 5th and 4th centuries Athenian vase paintings portrayed Herakles "with a new and greater dignity." The transformation of Herakles is especially apparent in Prodicus' famous tale of the "Choice of Herakles" (*Xen. Mem.* 2.21-34).
  - 12 Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 1167a28-30 [own translation]: "They are 'together-minded' about matters that can be put into practice, and of those, about matters of [great] magnitude (*ta en megethei*), which look to the interests of two parties or the entirety of the *polis*".