

VEXILLUM

the undergraduate journal of
classical and medieval studies

Issue 2

2012

Feeling and Belonging in the *Philoctetes*

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This paper explores the tension between openness to oneself and membership in ones community by assessing the disparate accounts of Philoctetes' abandonment on Lemnos provided by Odysseus and Philoctetes himself. This tension seems to surface not only in Sophocles' Philoctetes but throughout much of ancient Greek literature.

In Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Odysseus's and Philoctetes' descriptions of Philoctetes' abandonment on Lemnos present two equally compelling yet conflicting accounts of a community's decision to cast aside one of its members. Philoctetes, representing the voice of the individual, emphatically asserts that the community has committed an act of violence by forsaking him. Odysseus, speaking on behalf of the community, contends unwaveringly that it has justly sacrificed Philoctetes in order to accomplish its goals. The perspectives these men articulate in their speeches seem inextricably linked with the attitudes they have toward themselves. In fact, by calling attention to the ways in which Odysseus and Philoctetes are respectively closed and open to their own empathic feelings, Sophocles vividly illustrates that one's place in the community is not able to be separated from openness to one's emotions.

The first goal of Odysseus's account is to definitively locate both himself and Neoptolemus within the social order. After introducing Neoptolemus as "κρατίστου πατρὸς Ἑλλήνων τραφεὶς Ἀχιλλέως παῖ Νεοπτόλεμε," the son of the most powerful man of the Greeks, he explains that he left Philoctetes behind on Lemnos only because "ταχθεὶς τὸδ' ἔρδειν τῶν ἀνασσόντων ὕπο," he was commanded to do so by the ruling men. Here he makes a point to identify himself as a cooperative member of the social and military system: it was not his own interests, but the interests of the community, that compelled him to act. At the same time, therefore, he removes himself from the

emotional responsibility—and all of its accompanying feelings—that the decision to abandon Philoctetes created for him. It is, perhaps, also noteworthy that the description of a communal order follows one of a depressingly isolated Lemnos (“βροτοῖς ἄστιπτος οὐδ’ οἰκουμένη”); through this contrast Odysseus both identifies with and glorifies the centrality of the Greek social order to which he belongs. Philoctetes is much less eager to identify himself—and Neoptolemus—in the same terms; that is, primarily as a member of the same social order. He calls Neoptolemus simply “ὦ παῖ πατρός ἐξ Ἀχιλλέως,” leaving out the glorification present in Odysseus’s account (“κρατίστου πατρός Ἑλλήνων”). When he introduces himself to Neoptolemus, he protests the notion that one’s position within that order is so essential, remarking almost haphazardly, “κλύεις ἴσως τῶν Ἡρακλείων ὄντα δεσπότην ὄπλων.” While this matter is of utmost important to Odysseus, it does not seem to carry the same importance to Philoctetes.

Odysseus’s continued efforts to identify with the larger social order depict him as an apathetic, hard-hearted individual. He explains unapologetically that he had to place Philoctetes “ἐξέθηκ” (*outside*), a word that concretely establishes social order as an exclusive entity while affirming that Odysseus belongs within that entity. Odysseus then paints a particularly grotesque picture of Philoctetes’ snake bite, remarking, “νόσω καταστάζοντα διαβόρω πόδα,” that Philoctetes was dripping with respect to his foot with a devouring illness. Not only is Odysseus’s account here void of any sympathy for Philoctetes, but he also seems to be faulting his fellow comrade for having such an offensive wound. He similarly reports:

ὄτ’ οὔτε λοιβῆς ἡμῖν οὔτε θυμάτων
παρῆν ἐκήλοισ προσθιγεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἀγρίαίς
κατεῖχ’ ἀεὶ πᾶν στρατόπεδον δυσφημίαίς,
βοῶν, στενάζων.

(Sophocles 8-11)

Only to the most stoic would the ability of the community to perform its routines (“λοιβῆς, θυμάτων”) in peace unquestionably trump the life of a fellow comrade. His depiction of Philoctetes as being savage (“ἀγρίαίς δυσφημίαίς”), without having expressed any understanding of the agony causing his wild

shouts, is equally as callous. It is, therefore, only possible for Odysseus to align himself so precisely with the values of the community by closing himself off to his own feelings of responsibility for Philoctetes. The use of the verb “προσθιγεῖν” emphasizes the misplaced quality of Odysseus’s priorities here—it is Philoctetes’ wound, not the sacrifices and the libations, which require tending to and touching.

In his description of the same event, Philoctetes uses dramatic language full of the painful feeling that is missing in Odysseus’s account. Standing apart from the community that has deserted him, he hides no part of his feeling:

οἱ δισοοὶ στρατηγοὶ χῶ Κεφαλλήνων ἄναξ
 ἔρριψαν αἰσχυρῶς ὦδ’ ἔρημον, ἀγρία
 νόσῳ καταφθίνοντα, τῆς ἀνδροφθόρου
 πληγέντ’ ἐχίδνης ἀγρίῳ χαράγματι

(Sophocles 264-268)

Where Odysseus explains that Philoctetes had to be placed *outside* (“ἐξέθηκ’”), Philoctetes asserts that the two generals and the ruler of the Kephallonians cast him out (“ἔρριψαν”) shamefully (“αἰσχυρῶς”) into a state of desertion (“ὦδ’ ἔρημον”); since that time he has wasted away (“καταφθίνοντα”) with only his savage illness (“ἀγρία νόσῳ”) to keep him company. His language places particular emphasis on the ways in which he has been isolated and set aside from the social order, appealing to the humanity of the audience, and to that of Neoptolemus, to understand and empathize with his suffering. In keeping with this notion, the verb “φθίω”—used frequently in reference to plants and other vegetation—suggests that human life, just like plant life, must be tended to in order to thrive. Therefore, as Philoctetes stands apart from the social system that has wronged him, he acknowledges the necessity of, and longs for, an empathic community to support his well-being.

It is fitting, then, that Philoctetes continues his account by describing the sadism of the men who were not simply blind, but actively delighted in their decision to abandon him:

τότ’ ἄσμενοί μ’ ὡς εἶδον ἐκ πολλοῦ σάλου
 εὐδοντ’ ἐπ’ ἀκτῆς ἐν κατηρεφεῖ πέτρῳ,
 λιπόντες ὤχονθ’, οἷα φωτὶ δυσμόρῳ

ράκη προθέντες βαιὰ καὶ τι καὶ βορᾶς
ἐπωφέλημα σμικρόν, οἷ' αὐτοῖς τύχοι.

(Sophocles 271-275)

One striking component of this description is the marked distance that these men maintain from the ostracized Philoctetes. Using two different verbs, Philoctetes emphasizes their leaving (“λιπόντες”) and going away (“ῥχονθ”), not having interacted with him but having simply seen (“εἶδον”) him. They place forward (“προθέντες”)—again, refusing to involve themselves—a rag and a small share of food as fit for a beggar (dative of advantage, “οἷα φωτὶ δυσμόρω”). Their physical distance from Philoctetes is imitative of the emotional distance that Odysseus creates in his account of the event. At the same time, the audience is meant to feel as close to Philoctetes as ever in the face of the sadism of the community that is glad (“ἄσμενοί”) to have coldly ostracized one of its members.

There is little doubt that the humanity of Philoctetes is meant to be more honest and relatable than the hard-heartedness of Odysseus and his military comrades. There is, however, something futile, if not misguided, about Philoctetes’ refusal to move beyond the injury that the community has caused him. A closer examination of Philoctetes’ language suggests that the men who abandoned him were not solely responsible for the distance that existed between them—he, too, contributed to such a distance. To Philoctetes, these men have lost their own faces, their individuality: they have become one collective entity with one feeling (“ἄσμενοί”). “οἷ' αὐτοῖς τύχοι,” the embittered Philoctetes asserts, wishing that the same circumstances could befall them. With such an attitude, Philoctetes might forever be sleeping on the shore inside his shelter alone, “ἐν κατηρεφεῖ πέτρῳ.” A central quandary of the *Philoctetes*, therefore, is whether it is possible to be open to oneself and to belong to a community at the same time: to find a middle ground between, on the one hand, Odysseus, and on the other, Philoctetes.

Bibliography

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