

## The *Nosos* of Athens: Disease and Healing in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

The tragic quality of *Philoctetes* continues to be a debated topic in scholarship. The play is undoubtedly agonizing in parts, but the *deus ex machina* of Heracles and the implied victory in Troy do not seem to provide the audience with the same Aristotelian *catharsis* (*Poetics* 1449b21-28) we might expect from Sophoclean drama. Some aspects of *Philoctetes* recall earlier plot devices in the tragedies of Sophocles, in that a mistake is made, and horrible consequences are suffered: Philoctetes was bitten by a snake, and he suffers from a festering wound. However, the ending of the play, unlike most of Sophocles' other dramas, is not catastrophic. After retrieving Philoctetes and his bow, Neoptolemus and Odysseus head off to Troy and we understand that they are successful in their goal of fulfilling Helenus' requirements to take the city. Philoctetes ultimately returns home safely, after being healed by Machaon, son of Asclepius, in Troy. Given this positive ending, what is it about the suffering of Philoctetes in this play that moved the Athenian audience, and continues to move readers today?

This presentation focuses on the language of sickness in *Philoctetes* and the suggested cure for his *nosos*: Machaon the physician, son of Asclepius. Later tradition (Plutarch and other sources) suggests that Sophocles had a special connection to the cult of Asclepius, but little textual proof of this exists from the fifth century. Robin Mitchell-Boyask's work posits a place-based connection unrelated to text: he notes the proximity of the temple of Asclepius to the Theater of Dionysus at this time, and the high level of interest in his cult, coinciding with the popularity of Hippocratic medicine (2008:112). These events are also linked, according to Mitchell-Boyask, to the famous plague that struck the city of Athens in the early years of the Peloponnesian War (430 BC). Would the emphasis on the pain and sickness of Philoctetes in this play have evoked relatively recent painful memories in the Athenian mind? And if so, how might

the ending of the play, implying war and suffering on both sides, have left an audience member feeling? Was Athens sick in a metaphorical sense by this point, having gotten over the worst of the physical malady, but still in need of a cure? The healing method used for an ailing individual seeking help at the temple of Asclepius involved a dream. Perhaps the healing of the city through poetry – like Aristotle’s famous idea of *catharsis* – is what Sophocles hoped for in his work towards the end of his career.

My discussion also considers one of Sophocles’ key innovations in staging this narrative, that Lemnos is uninhabited except for Philoctetes: there is no chorus of soldiers to back him or other friends to provide any help. Philoctetes is isolated from all of humanity, not only by his horrible pain, but also by his geography. This dramatic innovation, when viewed in light of the close relationship of Lemnos to Athens in the Peloponnesian War, gives us insight into how Sophocles may have perceived the Athenian *polis* at this time. In over thirty instances of nosological language, Sophocles brings to excruciating life the physical pain and the loneliness of Philoctetes; if we look at his pain as a mirror of the city’s trauma, perhaps we can understand more clearly the “dream cure” of the cult of Asclepius, and the connections between medicine and poetry in Sophoclean tragedy.

Thus this presentation endeavors to tie together Sophocles’ presentation of disease in *Philoctetes* with ideas about sickness implicit in the cult of Asclepius and the Hippocratic texts, and to investigate whether Philoctetes’ *nosos* is symbolic of a citywide malady, which, though metaphorical, would have evoked emotionally charged memories for Athenians. This paper also examines what Heracles’ invocation of Asclepius at the end of the play (line 1437) might mean for the healing of the city. This study opens up questions in tragic scholarship with respect to threads of ancient medicine, religion, and performance, with the goal of clarifying the

relationships between them and further analyzing Aristotle's description of *catharsis* in the *Poetics* in this light.

#### Bibliography

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