

## Neoptolemus: The Making of a Cruel Warrior.

Thanks to Schein's recent commentary (2013), Sophocles' *Philoctetes* has been given a fresh perspective. Taking Schein's comments on Heracles' cautionary words to Neoptolemus at the end of the play as a starting point, this paper argues that Sophocles constructs the character of Neoptolemus based on his later involvement in the sack of Troy. It presents a departure from the trend of reading *Philoctetes* in the context of contemporary Athens (as compellingly presented in, for example, Scodel 2012) and instead presents Neoptolemus as a character in direct engagement with his own complex mythological heritage. In particular, it argues that Neoptolemus' later (moral) savage behaviour is foreshadowed in *Philoctetes* in a way that mirrors the (physical) savagery of Philoctetes himself and his wound that has been noted as a significant aspect of this play (Segal, 1995; Worman 2000).

Neoptolemus is an ephebic youth in *Philoctetes*, struggling to understand himself and his place within the Greek army (for example, Allan, 2001). After Heracles' intervention *ex machina*, it is understood that both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus will return to Troy, but lingering in Heracles' words is the unsettling foreshadowing of Neoptolemus' behaviour in Troy during the sack. For an audience familiar with the tradition, this warning against bad behaviour would not have come as a surprise. This paper argues that the later incarnation of Neoptolemus was meant to be central in the audience's mind throughout *Philoctetes*. Building on the work of Fuqua (1976) and Davidson (1995), the paper argues for the importance of mythological tradition in the interpretation Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes*. For Fuqua and Davidson, the *Odyssey's* Telemachus is the central mythological parallel for Neoptolemus. They have identified an

important pattern connecting the two young men who are in search of a father or father-figure. This paper argues that Sophocles is also drawing on Neoptolemus' own character from later in his own chronology to develop the character in *Philoctetes*, and that the cruelty that becomes his trademark later is in fact present in *Philoctetes*.

Sophocles constructs the character in way that responds to his later characterization by having Neoptolemus surrounded by manipulation; first Odysseus manipulates him to use deception to try to bring Philoctetes back to Troy, and later Philoctetes himself plays on the young man's emotions so that he does not abandon him. Over the course of the play, we see the young man try to follow what he believes is the morally best course of action by helping Philoctetes, but his efforts of friendship are not reciprocated (Nussbaum, 1976). Finally, his efforts are overturned by Heracles, *ex machina*, who directs both men back to Troy. All of this creates a young man who sees his efforts at kindness and morality quashed by necessity and fate. He appears to be seeking security and guidance of a father-figure, but the example he is shown in this play is one of disconnection and expediency. If we return to the comparison with Telemachus, *he* finds the father he is seeking and some stability is restored in his life. This does not happen to Neoptolemus, and as a result, the instinct towards morality and honesty that he exhibits at the beginning of the play is extinguished.

His actions in the sack of Troy are not, therefore, a reflection of the anger of Achilles that he has inherited; rather they are a reflection of his abandonment by the men he trusts and with whom he has tried to form a relationship.

## Bibliography

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