

Philoctetes



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOPHOCLES

Sophocles was born in 496 BCE in Colonus, a village outside of Athens, Greece. Sophocles's father, Sophillus, was a wealthy manufacturer of armor and arms, and Sophocles enjoyed a rather privileged childhood. He was afforded the absolute best of Greek education, and he was known as a young man for his supreme athletic ability and stunning good looks. In his early years, Sophocles was active in theater as an actor, and at age 16, he led the *paean*, or choral chant, to celebrate the Greek victory against the Persian Empire at the Battle of Salamis. Citing a weak voice, Sophocles left the acting scene and focused his energy exclusively on writing tragic plays and poems. At the center of Athenian life during Sophocles's time was the Dionysia, a large festival in honor of Dionysius, the Greek god of theater. The festival was made up of two separate festivals, the Rural Dionysia and the City Dionysia, which were held at different times of the year. The Dionysia lasted for several days and culminated with the staging of several plays—three sets of three tragedies and a tragicomedy, as well as five comedies—with winners selected by a panel of judges in the categories of tragedy and comedy. Sophocles won his first Dionysian festival in 468, and while that play has been lost to antiquity, it is known that Sophocles beat out his famous contemporary, Aeschylus, to take first place. Sophocles is thought to have competed in at least 30 Dionysian festivals, in which he won first place 24 times and never came in below second. Sophocles has more first place wins at Dionysian festivals than either of his renowned contemporaries, Aeschylus and Euripides. The best plays of the Dionysia were distributed to the public in printed form and were studied in Greek schools, and many of Sophocles's plays made this illustrious list. Sophocles wrote at least 123 plays during his prolific career (although only seven have survived antiquity), including [Antigone](#), [Oedipus Rex](#), and [Electra](#), but *Philoctetes* is one of the only Greek tragedies that can be firmly dated. Sophocles wrote and staged *Philoctetes* in 409, winning the City Dionysia, when he was almost 90 years old. Sophocles's success at the festivals made him extremely popular, and he was elected to several public offices throughout his lifetime, including the treasurer of Athens in 442 BCE, and *stratēgoi*, a type of high-level military commander, in 440. It is thought that Sophocles was elected twice more as *stratēgoi* after 440. Sophocles was also a priest in the hero cult of Halon and was a highly respected member of Athenian society. He died around 406 BCE in Athens at the age of 92.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sophocles wrote *Philoctetes* during the Peloponnesian War, which lasted for most of the latter part of Sophocles's life. The Peloponnesian War pitted the Delian League, led by Athens, against the Peloponnesian League, led by Sparta and supported by the Persian Empire. The war officially began in 431 BCE when Sparta invaded Attica, a Greek peninsula. The Spartan invasion was ended with the Peace of Nicias in 421 BCE, but the treaty was repeatedly disregarded by both the Peloponnesian League and the Delian League. In 415 BCE, the Delian League launched an expedition to Sicily to fight the Spartans. The expedition was a catastrophe, and Athens was completely defeated by the Peloponnesian League in 413 BCE. After the disaster in Sicily, Sophocles was one of the elected officials dispatched to Sicily to sort out the whole mess and begin to rebuild the Delian League. By 404 BCE, not long after Sophocles's death, the Peloponnesian League destroyed Athens's entire naval fleet, officially ending the war and prompting the surrender of Athens and the Delian League. With the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, Sparta became the new leading power in Greece.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sophocles's *Philoctetes* is considered a piece of Trojan War literature, a genre which was sparked by Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad*, written around the 8th century BCE. Trojan War literature focuses on events related to the Trojan War, an epic battle between the Greeks and Trojans that ancient people believed was fought during the 12th or 13th century BCE but is now largely regarded as myth. In addition to *Philoctetes*, Sophocles also wrote the tragic play [Electra](#) near the end of the 5th century BCE. Sophocles's [Electra](#) tells the story of Electra and her brother, Orestes, who murder their mother, Clytemnestra, in revenge for the death of their father, Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, after he returned home from the Trojan War. The tradition of Trojan War literature has continued into modernity and includes Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, published in 2011. Miller's novel examines the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, whom Sophocles also mentions in *Philoctetes*. Patroclus was Achilles's close friend, and in some versions of the myth, his cousin. Like Achilles, Patroclus was killed during the Trojan War, and their relationship is central to many of the stories surrounding the war. Another example of Trojan War literature is *Cassandra*, a 1983 novel written by East German writer Christa Wolf. Wolf's *Cassandra* focuses on Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess and twin sister of the prophet Helenus, whom Sophocles also mentions in *Philoctetes*. Like Helenus, Cassandra's prophecies

were always right, but unlike Helenus, no one ever believed her. Cassandra is often depicted as blind and ripping at her hair in frustration, and she has become a popular metaphor for discrimination against women in patriarchal society. For example, *Cassandra* is also the name of a feminist text written by Florence Nightingale in 1852.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Philoctetes
- **When Written:** 409 BCE
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** 409 BCE
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Greek tragedy
- **Setting:** The island of Lemnos
- **Climax:** When Heracles suddenly appears and orders Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to go to Troy.
- **Antagonist:** Odysseus

EXTRA CREDIT

Cause of Death? Despite the fact that Sophocles lived well into his 90s, he is not said to have died of natural causes. Some accounts of Sophocles's death claim he choked on a grape, while others claim he died from exhaustion after reciting all of [Antigone](#) from memory. Other sources report that Sophocles died of happiness and delight after winning first place in the festival Dionysia for the 24th time.

In Honor of Asclepius. Sophocles constructed an altar to Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and healing, in his home in 420 BCE. The cult of Asclepius was very popular during the 5th century BCE, and Sophocles indeed mentions Asclepius in *Philoctetes*, as he is the only one who can heal Philoctetes's wound.



PLOT SUMMARY

Odysseus arrives on the island of Lemnos with Neoptolemus, the son of the late hero Achilles. The island is deserted, and there are no houses or ships to be found. This is the same island where Odysseus and a fleet of Greek sailors abandoned Philoctetes, the famous Greek archer and son of Poeas, nine years earlier on their way to Troy to fight the Trojan War. Philoctetes's **wound** had been "oozing with pus," Odysseus says, and his cries of pain disrupted the crew's prayers and sacrifices to the gods, so they left him on the island. But there is no time now for long stories, Odysseus tells Neoptolemus, and he needs Neoptolemus's help. It is time for Neoptolemus to "prove his worth" and assist the Greeks by tricking Philoctetes.

Odysseus orders Neoptolemus to find Philoctetes and tell him that the Greeks had convinced him to go to Troy to fight, but he left angrily after Atreus's sons gave Achilles's arms to Odysseus. Neoptolemus must convince Philoctetes he is telling the truth, Odysseus says, or all of Greece will suffer. Without Philoctetes and his **bow and arrows**, given to him by the god Heracles, Neoptolemus will not be able to conquer Troy. Only Neoptolemus can win Philoctetes's trust, Odysseus says, because he was not part of the initial expedition to Troy that abandoned Philoctetes on the island.

Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that he must find a way to steal Philoctetes's bow and arrows and convince him to come to Troy, but Neoptolemus's moral compass won't allow him to behave in deceitful ways. He would rather take Philoctetes's bow by force, but Odysseus claims that won't be possible. Philoctetes's arrows never miss their mark, and he will kill Neoptolemus instantly. Deception is the only way, Odysseus says, and he reminds Neoptolemus that all of Greece will regard him as a cunning hero if he manages to convince Philoctetes to come to Troy. Neoptolemus agrees against his better judgement, and Odysseus tells him he will soon send a sailor disguised as a merchant to further their plot, but otherwise, Neoptolemus is on his own. Odysseus heads back to the ship to keep hidden from Philoctetes, and the chorus, made up of a group of Greek sailors, asks Neoptolemus what they can do to help and lament the terrible pain Philoctetes is forced to live in. The gods have ordered Philoctetes's suffering, Neoptolemus says. Philoctetes angered the goddess Chryse when he trespassed on her shrine, and he will not agree to go to Troy with his bow and arrows until the gods decide it is time.

The men can hear the sounds of crying, and Philoctetes approaches. He asks the men who they are and what they are doing on Lemnos. No one comes to the island unless they are forced, Philoctetes says, and he begs the men not to be scared by his "wild appearance," as he is but a "miserable wretch" with no one to look after him. Neoptolemus recounts the story Odysseus has ordered him to tell, and Philoctetes in turn tells Neoptolemus that he was marooned on Lemnos by Odysseus and his men after he was bitten by a snake on the island of Chryse. They left him with little to keep him alive, Philoctetes says, and he is sure that their shared hatred for Odysseus means that he can trust Neoptolemus. Philoctetes begs Neoptolemus not to leave him alone on the island, just as the sailor disguised as the merchant approaches. He claims to be a wine trader on his way back from Troy, and he has heard word concerning Neoptolemus. Odysseus has ordered a ship to retrieve Neoptolemus and bring him back to Troy, because the prophet Helenus has claimed that the war cannot be won without him. Odysseus and Diomedes have boarded another ship for Lemnos, because Helenus said the war can't be won without Philoctetes either. Philoctetes refuses to go to Troy for Odysseus, and he convinces Neoptolemus to take him home to

Greece instead. Philoctetes is thankful and claims he now considers Neoptolemus a friend, so he invites him into his cave. With his painful wound, he wants Neoptolemus to stay nearby.

Inside the cave, Philoctetes falls to the ground. He can no longer keep the pain of his wound hidden, and he begs Neoptolemus to cut off his foot with his sword. Neoptolemus refuses but asks Philoctetes what he can reasonably do to help him. Philoctetes asks Neoptolemus to stay with him until his pain subsides. Neoptolemus agrees, and Philoctetes hands him the bow and arrows. He asks Neoptolemus to keep the bow and arrows safe until his acute attack of pain passes, but Neoptolemus must agree not to give them to Odysseus if he arrives while Philoctetes is delirious with pain. Neoptolemus takes the bow and arrows and promises not to let another soul touch them. A river of “murky” blood flows from the wound on Philoctetes’s foot as he passes out. When Philoctetes wakes later, he is shocked that Neoptolemus has really stayed by his side. He thanks him profusely, and Neoptolemus begins to cry. He has gone against his “true nature,” Neoptolemus says, and Philoctetes begins to worry that he won’t really be going on Neoptolemus’s ship. Neoptolemus reassures him that he will let Philoctetes on the ship, only Philoctetes won’t like where they are headed. Suddenly, Odysseus appears and tells Philoctetes that he is going to Troy, like it or not. Neoptolemus orders the chorus to stay with Philoctetes as he goes with Odysseus back to the ship—still holding Philoctetes’s bow and arrows.

Neoptolemus tells Odysseus that he must “undo the wrongs” he committed in listening to Odysseus and the Greek army and says he must give the bow and arrows back to Philoctetes. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that he is mad and reminds him that the entire Greek army will come after him if he betrays them. Neoptolemus can’t be swayed, however, and Odysseus places his hand on his sword. Neoptolemus draws his own sword, but instead of fighting him, Odysseus goes back to tell the army of Neoptolemus’s traitorous decision. Neoptolemus calls to Philoctetes and tells him to come out of his cave. He gives him back his bow and arrows, and Odysseus reappears and again tells Philoctetes he will be going to Troy. Philoctetes draw back the bow, but Neoptolemus begs him not to shoot. Odysseus again runs away, and Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus that he is a good man. Neoptolemus tries to convince Philoctetes to go to Troy anyway and tells him his wound will be healed there, but Philoctetes still refuses. Besides, Neoptolemus promised to take him home, and he asks again that Neoptolemus fulfill his promise. Neoptolemus says that the Greeks will kill him if he does, but Philoctetes promises to keep him safe with his unerring bow and arrows, so Neoptolemus agrees to sail Philoctetes home to Greece.

Suddenly, Heracles appears from the sky, bearing a message from Zeus. Neoptolemus cannot take Philoctetes home to Greece, as both men are needed to win the war in Troy. Once in Troy, Philoctetes will be cured of his painful wound, and he will

kill Paris with his bow and arrows, bringing an end to the Trojan War. Both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes agree to go to Troy, and Heracles disappears. Philoctetes bids Lemnos goodbye, and the chorus prays for their safe passage to Troy.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Philoctetes – Philoctetes is a famous Greek archer, Poeas’s son, and the protagonist of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*. According to myth, Philoctetes led seven ships to Troy on the first expedition to fight in the Trojan War but was bitten by a snake after inadvertently disturbing the shrine of Chryse on the island of the same name. The bite festered and developed into a painful **wound** that drained “revolting pus” and refused to heal. Philoctetes’s cries of agony interrupted the prayers of the other Greeks, so they marooned him on the deserted island of Lemnos. Nine years later, Philoctetes is still suffering alone on the island, but Helenus’s prophecy claims the Trojan War cannot be won without Philoctetes and his unerring **bow and arrows**, which were a gift from the god Heracles. Odysseus brings Neoptolemus and the chorus of Greek sailors to Lemnos to steal Philoctetes’s bow and arrows and take him back to Troy. Philoctetes refuses to help Odysseus and Atreus’ sons, the leaders of the attack on Troy, as they were the same men who abandoned him. Philoctetes’s hateful grudge is stronger than his love for his country or his desire to be cured of his wound. Just as Philoctetes convinces Neoptolemus to sail him home to Greece, Heracles appears from the sky and speaks the word of Zeus. Philoctetes *must* go to Troy, where he and Neoptolemus will sack the city. Heracles also says that Philoctetes will shoot and kill Paris, the prince of Troy, effectively ending the war and saving untold Greek lives. Philoctetes immediately agrees to go to Troy upon Heracles’s command, where, according to myth, he is healed of his wound and hailed as a hero. The character of Philoctetes highlights the discrimination against disabled people in Greek society. After Philoctetes’s snake bite and crippling wound, the army throws him away with little thought. His disability means he isn’t useful to them anymore, and his suffering makes them uncomfortable. However, Sophocles indicates that Philoctetes and other disabled people are still valuable and should be treated with respect; in fact, since Philoctetes is needed to end the war, he is absolutely crucial to Greek society.

Neoptolemus – Neoptolemus is Achilles’s son and the one who accompanies Odysseus to Lemnos to retrieve Philoctetes and bring him to Troy. After the prophet Helenus prophesizes that the Trojan War cannot be won without both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, Odysseus convinces Neoptolemus to go to Troy; however, Odysseus has a much tougher time convincing Neoptolemus to deceive Philoctetes to get him to Troy as well. Neoptolemus, like his father, is not a dishonest or malicious

man, and Odysseus's deceptive plan to "trick" Philoctetes is at odds with Neoptolemus's superior morality. He tells Odysseus that he would rather try to force Philoctetes to go to Troy, even if it can't be done, as he would rather "fail in a noble action than win an ignoble victory." Neoptolemus's obligation to the Greek army and his duty to follow the command of his superior officers, in this case Odysseus, means that Neoptolemus is forced to act against his moral compass, which Sophocles implies happens frequently in the military. While Neoptolemus initially agrees to go along with Odysseus's dishonest plan, he eventually surrenders to the inner conflict between his morals and his obligation to the army, and he decides to abandon his obligation and remain true to his morals by taking Philoctetes home to Greece as he promised, instead of to Troy against his wishes. Heracles appears at the last minute and convinces both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes to go to Troy, but had Heracles not appeared, Neoptolemus presumably would have caused the Greeks untold pain by allowing the Trojan War to continue. The character of Neoptolemus illustrates the common struggle between doing what one desires and doing what is right for the greater good, which Sophocles implies is a lose-lose situation. No matter what choice Neoptolemus makes, he is forced to sacrifice either his morals or the hope for peace between the Greeks and the Trojans.

Odysseus – Odysseus is the king of Ithaca, a leader of the Greek army, and the antagonist of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*. Odysseus is portrayed as a despicable man who abandoned Philoctetes on the island Lemnos simply because Philoctetes's **wound** and cries of pain disrupted the crew's prayers and sacrifices to the gods aboard the ship to Troy. Odysseus is further painted in a negative light when he forces Neoptolemus to deceive Philoctetes and steal his unerring **bow and arrows** so they can more easily force him into going to Troy against his will. However, Odysseus implies that he did not want to abandon Philoctetes on the island but was forced to do so by Atreus's sons. He tells Neoptolemus that he must be the one to deceive Philoctetes and win his trust, because Neoptolemus was not part of the initial expedition that abandoned Philoctetes on Lemnos. "You weren't / Committed by oath or forced into taking part," Odysseus says to Neoptolemus, "But every one of those charges applies to me." This suggests that Odysseus was forced by the army into acting against his moral compass, which Sophocles implies is a frequent occurrence and a constant struggle for those who go to war. Furthermore, Odysseus believes he can abandon morality in the name of winning the war and simply pick it back up again when the war is over, but Sophocles implies that this isn't the case. When Heracles appears at the end of the play, he reminds Neoptolemus and Philoctetes to "show piety" as they sack Troy, but Odysseus fails to do this in his deceptive plan to conquer Troy and end the war. In this way, Sophocles implies that deception is never excusable, not even in war, as some baseline of decency must be maintained.

Heracles – Heracles is the Greek god of strength and heroes. According to Greek myth, Heracles was a mortal Greek hero before he was deified. Heracles wanted to be placed on a funeral pyre while he was still alive in order to end his suffering more quickly, but no one would light the fire except for Philoctetes. To reward Philoctetes for his good deed, Heracles gifted Philoctetes his unerring **bow and arrows**, which keep Philoctetes alive while he is marooned on the island Lemnos and will later win the Trojan War by killing Paris. Philoctetes has a special connection to Heracles, and he invokes his name multiple times throughout the play. In the closing scene, Heracles appears from the heavens and convinces Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to go to Troy to sack the city and end the war. Heracles's fortuitous arrival at the end of Sophocles's play is an example of the popular Greek literary convention known as the *deus ex machina*, in which an unsolvable problem is solved by an unlikely occurrence written specifically to solve said problem. However, the appearance of Heracles also underscores Sophocles's central argument that it is much nobler to sacrifice one's own desires for the greater good. Had Heracles not arrived and convinced them otherwise, Philoctetes would have allowed his grudge against Odysseus and Atreus's sons to keep him from going to Troy, and Neoptolemus would have remained true to his moral compass and kept his promise to take Philoctetes home to Greece. Without Heracles, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus would not have gone to Troy, and all Greeks would have suffered in the continuation of the Trojan War.

Chorus – The chorus is a group of Greek sailors under the command of Odysseus. The chorus largely functions to advance and enrich the plot, and they are exceedingly sympathetic to Philoctetes's pain and suffering; however, the chorus also serves to underscore Philoctetes's isolation. Sophocles's contemporaries, Aeschylus and Euripides, both wrote plays about the myth of Philoctetes, but the chorus in their plays consisted of native Lemnians, not Greek sailors. With his chorus of Greek sailors, Sophocles is able to portray the island Lemnos as completely deserted and Philoctetes as utterly alone.

Merchant/Sailor – This character is a Greek sailor and a member of Odysseus's crew. The sailor disguises himself as a wine merchant on his way back from Troy, in order to further Odysseus's deceptive plan to steal Philoctetes's **bow and arrows** and convince him to come to Troy. Disguised as the merchant, the sailor tells Philoctetes and Neoptolemus that Odysseus is on his way to Lemnos to take Philoctetes to Troy, because the prophet Helenus has prophesized that the Trojan War will only be won by both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. The sailor, or merchant, is another example of deception in *Philoctetes*, which Sophocles implies is immoral, even in instances of war.

Achilles – Achilles is a respected Greek warrior, a hero of the Trojan War, and Neoptolemus's father. Achilles is killed during

the Trojan War by Paris, and Odysseus concocts a false story in which Atreus's sons deny Neoptolemus his deceased father's armor and instead give it to Odysseus. Odysseus hopes that the story will cause Philoctetes, who deeply hates Odysseus, to trust Neoptolemus, thereby making it easier for Neoptolemus to steal Philoctetes's **bow and arrows** and convince him to come to Troy.

Poeas – Poeas is a Thessalonian king and Philoctetes's father. While Philoctetes is marooned on Lemnos, he tries to get word to Poeas to come and pick him up, but the Greeks who happen upon the deserted island can't be bothered to take the "cripple" Philoctetes's messages back to his father. Because the messages never get delivered, Philoctetes hears no reply from his father and assumes Poeas is dead, although he's actually alive. Philoctetes begs Neoptolemus to take him home to his father throughout most of the play, and when Heracles appears during the closing scene, he claims that Philoctetes will go home to Poeas after the Trojan War and tell him all about his heroic efforts to kill Paris and win the war.

Chryse – Chryse is a minor Greek goddess with an island of the same name. During the initial Greek expedition to Troy to fight the Trojan War, the Greek fleet, which was led by Odysseus and Philoctetes and under the command of Atreus's sons, stopped on the island Chryse, where Philoctetes was bitten on the foot by a snake for disturbing the shrine of Chryse. Philoctetes's **wound** festered and refused to heal, and he was subsequently abandoned on Lemnos, the very next island on the way to Troy. Neoptolemus claims that Chryse has ordered Philoctetes's wound and suffering, but Philoctetes refuses to go to Troy and find relief from his pain until Heracles appears and orders him to do so.

Atreus's Sons/The Atridae – The sons of Atreus (sometimes called the Atridae) are Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, and Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Both Agamemnon and Menelaus played special parts in the Trojan War, as it began after Menelaus's wife, Helen, ran off with Paris, the prince of Troy. After Helen left Menelaus for Paris, Agamemnon ordered the united Greek forces to attack Troy, resulting in a war that rages for 10 years. Philoctetes blames Atreus's sons for ordering Odysseus and his fleet of sailors to maroon him on Lemnos after a snake bite on his foot turned into a festering **wound**, and Philoctetes deeply hates them because of it. Through Atreus's sons, Sophocles underscores how war and military command can force one into doing immoral or unethical things—such as abandoning a disabled warrior because his disability is a hindrance to their cause.

Diomedes – Diomedes is the king of Argos and a Greek hero of the Trojan War. In some versions of the myth of Philoctetes, Diomedes (rather than Neoptolemus) accompanies Odysseus to Lemnos to retrieve Philoctetes. Diomedes does not arrive on Lemnos in Sophocles's play, but he is mentioned many times. Diomedes is one of the men Philoctetes blames for marooning

him on Lemnos, and Philoctetes deeply despises him as well as Odysseus. According to the elaborate lie concocted by Odysseus and delivered by the merchant, Diomedes is on his way to Lemnos with Odysseus to take Philoctetes and his **bow and arrows** to Troy by force.

Sisyphus – Sisyphus is the king of Ephyra and, according to Philoctetes, the biological father of Odysseus. Per some versions of the myth of Odysseus, Sisyphus seduced Anticlea, Odysseus's mother, before she married Laertes, Odysseus's recognized father. Sisyphus is known for his deception and even escaped Hades, or the underworld, by persuading Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, to let him return to earth to haunt his wife. Sisyphus represents deception in Sophocles's play, and Philoctetes refers to him multiple times, calling Odysseus "a cheat like Sisyphus."

Laertes – Laertes is Odysseus's recognized father; however, Philoctetes implies that Sisyphus is Odysseus's *real* father. According to some versions of the myth of Odysseus, Odysseus's mother, Anticlea, was already pregnant with Odysseus by Sisyphus when Laertes paid the dowry to marry her. Thus, according to Philoctetes, Odysseus is "Sisyphus' / Spawn, whom Laertes bought."

Helenus – Helenus is a famous Trojan prophet and the son of Priam, the king of Troy. Helenus is captured by the Greeks during the Trojan War, and he tells them that the war cannot be won without both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, along with Philoctetes's unerring **bow and arrows**. According to Helenus, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes will be hailed as heroes after sacking the city of Troy and bringing the war to an end.

Paris – Paris is Priam's son and the prince of Troy. According to Greek myth, the Trojan War began after Paris ran off with Helen, the wife of Menelaus, who was one of Atreus's sons and the king of Sparta. When Heracles appears at the end of *Philoctetes* and convinces both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to go to Troy, Heracles claims the 10-year war will finally end after Philoctetes kills Paris with his unerring **bow and arrows**.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Zeus – Zeus is the supreme deity in Greek mythology and the king of the gods of Olympus. Zeus is referenced several times in *Philoctetes*, and when Heracles appears at the end of the play to convince Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to go to Troy, Heracles speaks the word of Zeus.

Asclepius – Asclepius is the Greek god of medicine and healing. According to the prophet Helenus, Asclepius is the only one who can cure Philoctetes's **wound**, and he will only do so if Philoctetes goes to Troy.

Ajax – Ajax is a Greek hero killed during the Trojan War. Philoctetes refers to Ajax as a good man and friend of Achilles, and Philoctetes is sad to hear of Ajax's death in Troy.

Sophocles's play *Ajax* focuses on the death of Ajax during the Trojan War.

Hermes – Hermes is the Greek messenger of the gods and son of Zeus. Hermes is also known as the Greek god of deceit, and Odysseus prays to him to bless his deceitful plan to trick Philoctetes.

Athena – Athena is the Greek goddess of war. Athena is closely associated with Odysseus in Greek mythology, and he indeed prays to her in *Philoctetes*.

Priam – Priam is the king of Troy and the father of Paris and Helenus.

TERMS

The Trojan War – The Trojan War is an epic ten-year war fought between the Greeks and the Trojans. It was sparked after **Paris**, a prince of Troy, ran off with the wife of Menelaus, one of **Atreus's sons**. **Philoctetes** was part of the first expedition to Troy along with **Odysseus**, but after Philoctetes was bitten by a snake on the island of Chryse and sustained a festering **wound**, Odysseus marooned him on Lemnos at the order of Atreus's sons. Sophocles's play begins nine years later, after **Helenus**, a prophet, claims the war can't be won without both **Neoptolemus** and Philoctetes, who owns **Heracles's** unerring **bow and arrows**. Philoctetes, however, adamantly refuses to go to Troy until Heracles appears from the heavens and orders him to go. Ancient Greeks of Sophocles's time considered the Trojan War to have been an actual historical event that took place around the 12th century BCE, but today the war is widely considered mythical.



THEMES

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DISABILITY AND DISCRIMINATION

Sophocles's tragic play *Philoctetes* examines the myth of Philoctetes, a celebrated Greek hero and archer. Philoctetes led seven ships to Troy to fight the Trojan War—a battle between the Greeks and Trojans sparked after the wife of the king of Sparta ran off with Paris, a Trojan prince—but after stopping on the island Chryse, Philoctetes was bitten on the foot by a poisonous snake. Philoctetes's **wound** festered and refused to heal, resulting in unbearable pain and a putrid odor. Viewing Philoctetes's disability as a burden, the ship's crew, under the direction of

Odysseus, the king of Ithaca and a respected Greek warrior, marooned Philoctetes on Lemnos, a deserted island off the coast of Troy. Sophocles's play begins nine years after Philoctetes is abandoned on Lemnos, and his wound continues to plague him without end. In addition to Philoctetes's physical suffering, he is constantly discriminated against by the Greeks who happen upon the island. Philoctetes is sidelined, disregarded, and treated with disgust; however, prophecy states that the Greeks will need Philoctetes if they want to win the war against the Trojans, which continues to rage on. Through the portrayal of Philoctetes's disability and the discrimination that he is forced to endure, Sophocles at once condemns discrimination of the disabled and effectively argues that those with disabilities are valuable to society, too.

Philoctetes is wholly rejected by Greek society and left to “rot on [his] own” on the island of Lemnos simply because his disability and subsequent suffering inconvenience others and make them uncomfortable. Odysseus claims that the fleet left Philoctetes on the island because Philoctetes's cries of pain disturbed their prayers and offerings to the gods. Philoctetes's “animal shouts and yells” filled their camp “with sounds of ill omen,” so they left him on the island. In short, Philoctetes's disability bothered the Greeks; thus, they selfishly abandoned him. When Odysseus and his men, Neoptolemus and the chorus of Greek sailors, return to the island, Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus and the chorus that other Greeks have come to the island over the years. These other Greeks expressed their sympathy for Philoctetes, and even gave him food and clothing, but they refused to bring him home. Philoctetes's disability made these Greeks uncomfortable, and they wouldn't share a boat with him. When the chorus, who is sympathetic to Philoctetes's suffering, begs Neoptolemus to bring Philoctetes home, Neoptolemus warns them against it. The men may be sympathetic now, Neoptolemus says, but they will “change [their] tune” once they are forced to live with Philoctetes and his wound aboard the ship. They may find Philoctetes “too much,” Neoptolemus says. Like Philoctetes's fleet and the visitors to Lemnos, Neoptolemus finds Philoctetes's disability off-putting and he thus tries to distance himself from the man as much as possible because of his discomfort.

In addition to marooning Philoctetes on Lemnos, the Greeks treat Philoctetes with little respect, which further underscores discrimination against the disabled in Greek society. When Neoptolemus first comes across the cave Philoctetes lives in, he is sickened when he discovers Philoctetes's soiled bandages drying in the sun. The bandages are “stained with revolting puss,” and Neoptolemus announces this loudly to the men. Instead of reacting with sympathy and concern, Neoptolemus first receives Philoctetes with utter disgust and disrespect. Over the years, Philoctetes has asked the Greeks who happen across the island to take word to his father, Poeas, of his whereabouts so that Poeas might sail to Lemnos to rescue him.

The Greeks, however, never deliver the messages to Poetas. “[M]y messengers couldn’t / Be bothered with *me*,” Philoctetes says. Delivering a message to Philoctetes’s father seems like a simple request—it doesn’t require the Greeks to share a boat with Philoctetes, get “too close” to his wound, or listen to his cries of pain. And yet, the Greeks *still* refuse to help, highlighting how deeply they devalue Philoctetes. Their discomfort with the man’s disability leads them to avoid having anything to do with him, even though he was once highly respected. Even Philoctetes himself is often self-deprecating and expects others to be repulsed by him. When Neoptolemus arrives on the island, Philoctetes begs him to take him home. “Find me a corner somehow,” Philoctetes pleads. “I won’t be an easy / Cargo to have on board, I know. But still, / Put up with me, please!” As Greek society has largely rejected and treated Philoctetes with contempt, Philoctetes, too, believes that he deserves little respect because of his disability.

Despite having excluded him and slighted him because of his disability, the Greeks need Philoctetes if they are to finally defeat the Trojans and end the war, which has been raging on for nearly 10 years. According to the prophet Helenus, Troy can only be taken by Neoptolemus and Philoctetes with his unerring **bow and arrows**, a gift from the Greek god Heracles. Without Philoctetes and his bow and arrows, the war will continue, resulting in further loss and hardship for the Greek people. Not only is Philoctetes still useful to Greek society, he is absolutely crucial to their peaceful future. By highlighting how much the Greeks need Philoctetes, Sophocles argues that those with disabilities are not only deserving of respect but have as much to offer society as any able-bodied person.



DECEPTION, ETHICS, AND WAR

At the center of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* is Odysseus’s deceptive plan to trick Philoctetes into returning to Troy with the Greek army to sack the

city and win the Trojan War. According to a prophet named Helenus, the war cannot be won without Philoctetes and his **bow and arrows**, which were gifted to him by the Greek god Heracles and never miss their mark. Philoctetes, however, despises Odysseus and the Greek army since they marooned him on a deserted island nine years earlier because of his festering **wound**, and he adamantly refuses to lift a finger to help them. Philoctetes’s intense hate for the Greek army means he can’t be persuaded, and his unerring bow and arrow mean he can’t be forced. Thus, Odysseus maintains, Philoctetes must be tricked if he is to be brought to Troy to win the war on behalf of the Greeks. Odysseus enlists the help of Neoptolemus, the son of the late hero Achilles, to trick Philoctetes, but Neoptolemus’s strong ethics and inherent aversion to lying make this task repugnant to him. Neoptolemus, however, agrees to Odysseus’s dishonest plan against his better judgement. After all, Odysseus is his superior officer,

Neoptolemus reasons. Through Odysseus’s deceitful plan and Neoptolemus’s moral struggle with such dishonesty, Sophocles ultimately argues that deception is unethical in *any* context, even in war.

Since Greece’s victory in the war hinges on Philoctetes going to Troy against his will, Odysseus has no problem using deception to get him there. For Odysseus, the use of deception is justified because it will lead to success. Odysseus knows that it goes against Neoptolemus’s moral fiber to be dishonest, but he reassures him it is for the best. “But victory’s a prize worth gaining,” Odysseus argues, “Bring yourself / To do it. We’ll prove our honesty later on.” Winning the war is paramount to Odysseus, no matter the cost, even if he must abandon his morals to do so. Odysseus asks Neoptolemus to put himself “in [Odysseus’s] hands” for a time and forget his morals. “Then, for the rest of time,” Odysseus says, “Be called the most god-fearing man in the world!” Odysseus assumes that, like Odysseus himself, Neoptolemus can bend his morals a little to win the war and simply pick those morals back up again afterwards, but this isn’t the case for Neoptolemus. Odysseus also tries to convince Neoptolemus that lying is not dishonorable if it “leads to success.” If Neoptolemus successfully tricks Philoctetes into going to Troy, Neoptolemus will be hailed as the cleverest hero, Odysseus maintains. In other words, not only will Neoptolemus’s deceit be good for the Greeks, it will benefit Neoptolemus as well, so that deceit cannot possibly be unethical.

While Neoptolemus eventually agrees to deceive Philoctetes, he deeply struggles with the moral implications of such deceit, which suggests that lying can’t be justified after all. “Double-dealing is not my nature,” Neoptolemus tries to explain to Odysseus. Neoptolemus claims he is “most reluctant” to carry out deceitful orders and finds them “distasteful,” but he is given little choice to refuse Odysseus’s orders. Neoptolemus claims he would rather attempt to take Philoctetes by force, even if Odysseus claims it cannot be done. “I’d rather fail / In a noble action than win an ignoble victory,” Neoptolemus argues. To Neoptolemus, lying is shameful, and even if it does ensure that the Greeks win the war, it will not be much of a victory. Just as it looks like Neoptolemus has tricked Philoctetes into coming with him, Neoptolemus begins to falter. “I’m torn apart, and cannot say how!” Neoptolemus cries. He feels “disgust” for himself because he “betrays / His own true nature and acts against it.” In Neoptolemus’s eyes, winning the war is not enough to justify lying to Philoctetes.

Neoptolemus ultimately comes clean with Philoctetes and tells him the truth to “undo the wrongs that [he] did before.” In initially listening to Odysseus “and the whole of the Greek army,” Neoptolemus is manipulated into using “guile and deceit to entrap a man,” for which, Sophocles implies, there is no excuse. Such lying is immoral and dishonorable, Neoptolemus tells Odysseus, and he won’t continue to deceive Philoctetes.

Odysseus reminds Neoptolemus that helping Philoctetes instead of the Greeks will cause the Greek army to turn on him, but Neoptolemus can't be swayed. "I'd rather my actions were right than wise," Neoptolemus claims. In other words, he knows that telling the truth will likely get him killed, but Neoptolemus is more comfortable with death than with abandoning his moral compass. Luckily, Philoctetes agrees to go to Troy after an epiphany in which Heracles orders him to go; in the end, it's not deception at all that gets him to do what Odysseus wants, but rather honesty and authority. Sophocles' argument is clear: even in war, deception is never ethical or justified, and moreover, it's not an effective way of getting what one wants.



SUFFERING AND ISOLATION

Sophocles's play *Philoctetes* focuses on the deep, endless pain that Philoctetes endures. Abandoned on the island Lemnos, Philoctetes is plagued by severe attacks of pain following a snake bite, but the physical discomfort of Philoctetes's **wound** pales in comparison to the profound loneliness he feels on the deserted island. Sophocles wanted to draw attention to Philoctetes's isolation, and this is reflected in the subtle changes Sophocles makes to the classic myth. During Sophocles's day, contemporary tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides both staged popular plays involving the legend of Philoctetes, and while neither has survived antiquity, it is known that both Aeschylus and Euripides's plays included a chorus made up of native Lemnians. Sophocles's chorus, on the other hand, is made up of Greek sailors, which allowed Sophocles to portray Lemnos as completely uninhabited—except for Philoctetes, that is. With the depiction of Philoctetes's pain and suffering, both physical and psychological, Sophocles effectively argues that loneliness is the ultimate cause of human suffering, and he therefore implies that humankind cannot live indefinitely in isolation.

Once Philoctetes is marooned on Lemnos by the Greeks, he is wholly isolated, with the exception of a rare sailor here and there. Sophocles's chorus of Greek sailors "pity" Philoctetes and his existence on the deserted island. "No one there to look after him," they claim, "No companion with kindly eyes, / Wretched, always so lonely." Philoctetes's painful plight is made worse by his isolation. With no one to share his misery, Philoctetes is left to bear the full brunt of his suffering. According to Philoctetes, sailors rarely come to the island of their own volition. There is no port on the island and nowhere to anchor a ship. Thus, trade is not conducted on the island and sailors have no reason to visit, leaving Philoctetes utterly alone. "No sensible man would steer a course for this place," Philoctetes claims, unless "he is forced to," either by weather or a heartless crew. "It happens now and again in a long lifetime," Philoctetes says, but such sailors leave as soon as they are able, with few words to Philoctetes, which makes him feel even more isolated and alone.

Once Neoptolemus arrives on the island to trick Philoctetes into going to Troy with the Greeks to sack the city and win the war, Philoctetes repeatedly begs Neoptolemus not to leave him. Philoctetes's constant and mournful lamentations and requests underscore his psychological anguish related to his isolation and his desire for human companionship. "I humbly / Implore you," Philoctetes says to Neoptolemus, "please don't leave me here on my own, / Abandoned like this, living in all these horrors." Despite Philoctetes's severe physical pain, his first complaint to another man is that of loneliness, not of physical discomfort. After an acute attack of pain in his foot, Philoctetes immediately worries that Neoptolemus will abandon him like the other Greeks because of his extreme pain. "Don't leave me because you are frightened," Philoctetes says, "The torturer comes and goes and will let me alone, / Perhaps, when he's done his worst." Philoctetes is so worried that his pain will scare Neoptolemus away that Philoctetes is more concerned with Neoptolemus's comfort than his own. Philoctetes claims he is "wretched." He is "crushed and broken by toil and pain" with "no one ever to share [his] home." While his physical ailment is certainly a major cause of his discomfort, Philoctetes seems more affected by his complete and total isolation living on the deserted island.

Notably, after Philoctetes falls into his last acute attack of pain and wakes up to find Neoptolemus still at his side, Philoctetes's physical pain seems to be largely resolved. From the unwelcome visit of Odysseus to the appearance of Heracles, Philoctetes is concerned only with making it back to Greece and off the island Lemnos. Philoctetes's weeping wound, which is front and center for most of the play, fades to the background once Philoctetes begins to believe that Neoptolemus won't leave him. Sophocles thus suggests that Philoctetes's pain, both physical and emotional, is quelled with the presence of a trusted friend, which further underscores Sophocles's overreaching argument that human beings are not cut out to live in isolation.



DECISIONS, OBLIGATION, AND THE GREATER GOOD

Throughout Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus are faced with difficult decisions and extreme consequences. After Philoctetes was bitten by a snake and a festering, putrid **wound** developed, Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, along with a fleet of Greek warriors, marooned Philoctetes on a deserted island. Now, Philoctetes is expected to help the same men who abandoned him by going with the Greek army to Troy to sack the city and finally win the Trojan War. Prophecy states that Heracles's legendary **bow and arrows**, which now belong to Philoctetes, will guarantee a Greek victory; however, in his deep hatred for Odysseus and the Greek army, Philoctetes is not inclined to help them. Neoptolemus, the Greek warrior enlisted by

Odysseus to deceive Philoctetes and trick him into going to Troy, likewise struggles with the decision to abandon his morals and deceive an unwitting man. Neoptolemus is not deceitful or malicious by nature, and he is reluctant to lure Philoctetes to Troy using dishonesty, but Neoptolemus knows that if he does not do what is expected of him, he will be severely punished by Odysseus and the army. With the difficult decision-making portrayed in *Philoctetes*, Sophocles effectively argues that people often grapple with balancing their own desires against what is best for the greater good of society, and he ultimately argues that the struggle is a lose-lose situation, as there is likely to be some sacrifice involved in either choice.

Philoctetes adamantly refuses to go to Troy and help the Greeks win the war, and instead chooses to honor his grudge and selfish desires over the needs of the Greeks. While Sophocles implies that Philoctetes has definitely been mistreated by the Greeks and has every right to hold a grudge, it would be nobler of him if he pushed beyond his hatred to help the Greeks at large, who have nothing to do with his hatred for Odysseus. When the Greek sailor approaches Philoctetes and Neoptolemus disguised as a merchant and tells Philoctetes of Odysseus's plan to force him to Troy, Philoctetes can't be persuaded. "I'd rather obey my bitterest foe, / The deadly snake which turned me into a cripple," Philoctetes says. His hate for Odysseus is so strong, Philoctetes cannot bring himself to fight on his behalf, even if it is necessary to win the war. As the chorus, made up of Greek sailors, tries to encourage Philoctetes to go to Troy for his own good, Philoctetes refuses. "I'll never agree to it, never, believe me," Philoctetes says, "Not if the lord of the fire and the lightning / Comes to set me ablaze with his thunderbolts!" In other words, not even Zeus himself, the king of the Olympian gods, can force Philoctetes to Troy with his powerful thunderbolt. Even after Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes that Helenus, the prophet, has said his wound will be healed if he goes to Troy, Philoctetes still won't agree. "To hell with you all," Philoctetes says to Neoptolemus, "The Atridae first, then with Laertes's son, / And finally you!" Philoctetes will not fight for Menelaus or Agamemnon, the brother kings of Greece, nor will he fight for Odysseus or Neoptolemus. He stubbornly chooses to endanger all of the Greeks to satisfy his own selfish need to hold a grudge.

Neoptolemus, too, decides to act on behalf of his personal moral compass instead of acting in the best interest of the Greeks. Sophocles suggests that Neoptolemus's desire to remain true to his morals is commendable, but as with Philoctetes's grudge, Sophocles implies it would be nobler if Neoptolemus instead acted on behalf of the greater good. After Neoptolemus gains Philoctetes's trust and wins possession of the bow and arrows under false pretenses, he decides to return the weapon to its rightful owner, regardless of the risk to the Greeks and their cause. He believes they have obtained the bow "in vain" and that "shame and disgrace" are sure to follow.

Again, Neoptolemus's decisions are guided by his desire to uphold his own beliefs, not what is best for the Greeks. As Neoptolemus admits his deception to Philoctetes, he refers to himself as "base" and is convinced all of Greece will consider him low as well. "The thought's been dogging me all along," Neoptolemus admits. He is so ashamed of his dishonesty, he can't go on with Odysseus's plan. After Neoptolemus tells Odysseus that he can no longer be part of his deception and is giving back the bow and arrow, Odysseus reminds Neoptolemus that the Greek army will seek vengeance for his leniency. "Aren't you afraid of the Greeks?" Odysseus asks. "I'm not, with right on my side," Neoptolemus answers. Neoptolemus is more worried about satisfying his obligation to himself and his morals than he is about satisfying his obligation to the Greeks. While Sophocles certainly implies that deception is never ethical, he also suggests that Neoptolemus has an obligation to find *some* way to get Philoctetes to Troy for the good of the Greeks; after all, the entire war depends on him.

Philoctetes convinces Neoptolemus to take him home to Greece instead of forcing him to go to Troy to fight in the war, despite the danger this choice poses to both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes. If Neoptolemus refuses to follow Odysseus's orders and instead helps Philoctetes to go home, Neoptolemus will likely be killed for neglecting his duty as a soldier. At the close of the play, just as Philoctetes and Neoptolemus leave the island to head back to Greece, Heracles appears and stops them on behalf of Zeus. He claims that Philoctetes's wound will be healed and both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus will forever be regarded as heroes if they go to Troy. Philoctetes and Neoptolemus both agree immediately and make their way toward the ship headed for Troy. Without the sudden and fortuitous appearance of Heracles, both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes would have neglected their duty to the Greeks, which would have led to disastrous consequence for everyone involved. In this vein, Sophocles implies that one has an obligation to the greater good, such as one's country and gods, before one's self, even though sacrificing one's own interests is challenging.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PHILOCTETES'S WOUND

At the center of *Philoctetes* is the wound Philoctetes suffers due to a snake bite on the island Chryse, and it is symbolic of Philoctetes's pain and isolation. Additionally, Philoctetes's wound symbolizes the deep hate and resentment he feels toward Atreus's sons and Odysseus. Odysseus was ordered to abandon Philoctetes on the island

Lemnos by Atreus's sons, the commanders of the Greek forces, because the foul odor of the wound and Philoctetes's constant cries of suffering made the crew uncomfortable and disrupted their prayers and sacrifices to the gods. Alone on the deserted island, Philoctetes's wound makes his existence nearly unbearable, and his pain is compounded by his isolation and loneliness. According to the prophet Helenus, Philoctetes's wound will be healed if he goes to Troy to fight, thereby ending the Trojan War, but Philoctetes can't bring himself to fight on behalf of the same men who rejected him and treated him so badly. He is willing to continue suffering with his wound simply to punish those who punished him. Sophocles wrote *Philoctetes* in 409 BCE during the Peloponnesian War, which consumed much of the latter part of his life. Sophocles undoubtedly watched many men go to war and sustain deep and lasting injuries, just as Philoctetes does on the initial expedition to Troy. In nine years, Philoctetes's wound shows no signs of healing, and it will not resolve until healed by the god, Asclepius. In this way, Sophocles suggests through Philoctetes's wound that wounds sustained during war last a lifetime and never heal. Notably, however, Philoctetes hardly mentions the wound in the later part of the play, after he realizes that Neoptolemus is not going to abandon him. Though the wound still isn't healed, it seems to cause Philoctetes much less physical pain once his emotional isolation is over, which again underscores the devastating consequences of isolation.



PHILOCTETES'S BOW AND ARROWS

Philoctetes's bow and arrows drive most of the plot of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, and they represent

Philoctetes's power, or "prowess," as Heracles puts it; however, Philoctetes's bow and arrows also represent his obligation to the gods. According to myth, Philoctetes is gifted the bow and arrows, which never miss their mark, by Heracles after Philoctetes showed him mercy and compassion. Before Heracles was deified, he was a mortal hero suffering and dying after being injured in battle, and he wished to be placed on his funeral pyre while still alive to end his suffering. However, no one would agree to light to the fire except for Philoctetes, and Heracles gave him the bow and arrows in thanks for his service. Philoctetes's bow and arrows keep him alive on the deserted island Lemnos after he is abandoned there on account of his **wound**. Even in his extreme pain and suffering, Philoctetes is able to shoot birds and game and sustain a meager life. But when Neoptolemus effectively steals the bow and arrows, he also strips Philoctetes of his power and the ability to keep himself alive. Without the arrows that never miss, Philoctetes has no hope of surviving in his weakened and injured state. Neoptolemus does eventually give Philoctetes back the bow and arrows, but when Heracles appears at the end of the play, he makes it clear that Philoctetes must take the bow and arrows to Troy and end the Trojan War for the greater good of

the Greeks. Not only does Philoctetes have an obligation to serve the greater good of the Greeks, he also has an obligation to obey the gods and use the bow and arrows as they see fit, and so the weapons are symbols of his debt to the gods as well as his power to fend for himself.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Electra and Other Plays* published in 2008.

Scene 1 (Lines 1 – 134) Quotes

☛☛ Now, Neoptolemus, true-born son of Achilles, Greatest of all the Greeks, it was here that I once Put ashore the Malian, Poeas' son, Philoctetes, Acting upon the orders of my superiors. The gnawing wound in his foot was oozing with pus. We couldn't pour a libation or offer sacrifice Undisturbed. His animal shouts and yells Were constantly filling the camp with sounds of ill omen. That story needn't detain us now, however. This isn't the moment for long discussion.

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker), Philoctetes, Poeas, Achilles, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening passage of *Philoctetes*, and it is significant because it begins to tell the story of several of the play's characters, but it also underscores the discrimination against the disabled in ancient Greek society and the power the Greek army has to make people behave in ways that they otherwise would not. This passage identifies Neoptolemus as the son of Achilles, the famous Greek hero, and this is mentioned several times throughout the play. Neoptolemus feels immense pressure to live up to his father's legacy, and it begins with Odysseus addressing him as Achilles's son in the very first line of the play.

Odysseus also introduces Philoctetes as someone's son, and since Philoctetes's father, Poeas, is a king in Thessaly, it is a rather important distinction. Philoctetes is the son of a king, which should warrant him some respect, but his offensive wound and subsequent disability means that he is completely rejected by society. In this case, Philoctetes is

rejected by the Greek army, the very men who are supposed to be his brothers in arms. Philoctetes's cries of pain disrupt their prayers, so they dump him on a deserted island. Odysseus, however, prefaces the story by stating he was ordered to do it by his "superiors," which implies he didn't actually want to do it and was forced against his will. Yet this doesn't mean that Odysseus has any sympathy. On the contrary, he refuses to take the time to fully tell Philoctetes's story. With this passage, Sophocles suggests that it is time for a "long discussion" about Philoctetes, and about the ill-treatment of disabled people in Greek society more generally.

☞ Now let me explain why you can safely meet
This man and secure his trust, when I can not.
You didn't sail with the main expedition. You weren't
Committed by oath or forced into taking part.
But every one of these charges applies to me.
If he sights me while the bow's in his own possession,
I'm finished and you'll be finished for being with me.
Those weapons can't be resisted. Our task must be
To contrive a way for you to steal them from him.

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker), Philoctetes, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Odysseus is explaining why Neoptolemus must be the one to trick Philoctetes, and it is important because it again implies that the Greek army forces one to behave in ways that they otherwise would not. According to myth, Philoctetes led seven ships to Troy during the first expedition to fight the Trojan War, and Odysseus was among the men onboard. It was on this expedition that Philoctetes sustained the snake bite and was subsequently abandoned on Lemnos, but Odysseus implies that it wasn't his choice to maroon Philoctetes, suffering and without adequate supplies, on the deserted island.

Odysseus claims he treated Philoctetes so badly and left him all alone on the island because he was "committed by oath" to do so and was "forced" into taking part. Odysseus's "oath," presumably, is the oath he took to defend and honor

Greece in the army, and since his superior officers ordered such a reprehensible thing, he was obligated to do it, even if he thought it wrong. Neoptolemus believes stealing Philoctetes's bow is wrong, too, but it must be done in order to get Philoctetes to Troy and win the war, thus saving untold Greek lives. Sophocles does not excuse Odysseus or Neoptolemus of their unethical behavior, nor does he condemn it outright; he merely highlights the internal struggles that often occur between adhering to one's morals and following orders, particularly in the military.

☞ I know, my boy, it isn't part of your nature
To tell untruths or resort to double-dealing.
But victory's a prize worth gaining. Bring yourself
To do it. We'll prove our honesty later on.
Now, for a few hours, put yourself in my hands
And forgo your scruples. Then, for the rest of time,
Be called the most god-fearing man in the world!

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker), Philoctetes, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Odysseus is trying to convince Neoptolemus to trick Philoctetes and steal his bow and arrows, even though Odysseus knows that doing so would go against Neoptolemus's inherently good nature. This passage is important because it underscores Sophocles's overarching argument that deception and falsehoods are never excusable, not even in instances of war. While Sophocles implies that Philoctetes *should* go to Troy because it is in the best interest of the Greeks, he also implies that Odysseus and Neoptolemus *should not* resort to deception to get him there.

Neoptolemus is a deeply moral and ethical man, and he does not like Odysseus's plan, but Odysseus believes that deceit is justified if it brings the Greeks victory. Odysseus treats Neoptolemus's "scruples," or morals, as if they are something Neoptolemus can just put down and pick up again later, but Sophocles implies it doesn't quite work that way. Neoptolemus cannot be "god-fearing" only some of the time, and he greatly struggles with Odysseus's difficult request. At the end of the play, when Heracles appears and

tells both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to go to Troy, he also tells them to always “show piety,” as “nothing ranks so high / With Zeus.” Here, Odysseus fails to show piety in his deception, and while Sophocles implies that it is certainly Odysseus’s obligation to protect and fight for Greece, his first obligation is to the gods, which entails piety and righteousness.

gods indeed declare it time for Philoctetes’s arrows to “prove [Troy’s] destruction” when Heracles appears at the end of the play and speaks the word of Zeus. Neoptolemus’s words foreshadow Heracles’s appearance, which makes that appearance seem less like a *deus ex machina* (an event contrived specifically to solve a problem) and more like a deliberately planned appearance that is required to release Philoctetes from his suffering.

Entry of the Chorus (Lines 135 – 218) Quotes

●● His dreadful fate’s no wonder to me.
If I have an inkling, his sufferings first
Were sent by the gods, when he entered the shrine
Of cruel Chryse, who dealt him his wound.
So what he endures now, far from his friends.
Must also be due to the will of some god:
He may not aim those god-given shafts,
Which none can resist, at the towers of Troy,
Till the time has come when the prophet declares
Those arrows will prove her destruction.

Related Characters: Neoptolemus (speaker), Chryse, Philoctetes, Chorus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Neoptolemus explains to the chorus the cause of Philoctetes’s pain and suffering, and it is important because it portrays Philoctetes as an innocent victim whose suffering has been ordered by the gods, which makes the discrimination against him all the worse. Here, Neoptolemus claims that Philoctetes entered the shrine of Chryse, which is famously guarded by a snake. Philoctetes meant no disrespect and didn’t even know he was trespassing, but it was decided by “cruel” Chryse that Philoctetes should suffer. As Philoctetes’s suffering has been ordered by the gods, it seems even more unfair that the Greeks should punish him for it by rejecting him and casting him out of society.

This passage also implies that Odysseus is wasting his time in trying to bring Philoctetes to Troy, since Philoctetes will not go to Troy with his bow and arrows until the gods decide it is time. Neoptolemus seems to know that convincing Philoctetes to go to Troy is useless, yet he is still forced to try through his obligation to Odysseus and Greek army. The

Scene 2 (Lines 219 – 675) Quotes

●● I’m here because the two Greek generals, backed
By Odysseus, shamefully flung me ashore, alone
And abandoned, to waste away with a raging wound.
Struck down by the savage bite of a deadly snake.
With that for company, son, they marooned me here
And left me to rot on my own. (The fleet had sailed
From the isle of Chryse, and this was their first port of call.)
Then once, to their joy, they’d seen me asleep on the shore
After a stormy passage, they laid me inside
A rocky cave and left, tossing me out
A few beggarly rags, with a small amount of available
Food to keep me alive and avoid pollution.

Related Characters: Philoctetes (speaker), Atreus’s Sons/ The Atridae, Odysseus, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 212-3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is Philoctetes’s explanation of his injury and subsequent abandonment, and it is important because it underscores how poorly Philoctetes is treated simply because of his disabling wound. Philoctetes specifically blames Atreus’s sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, “the two Greek generals,” and Odysseus for rejecting him and marooning him on the island. The “savage” and “deadly” snake bite Philoctetes suffered on the island Chryse makes him exceedingly ill, and his pain is immense. Instead of offering him compassion and care, Odysseus and Atreus’s sons leave him “to rot” on the island alone.

Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus that they abandoned him on Lemnos, the “first port of call” after the island Chryse, which implies they didn’t wait long to get rid of him. They didn’t give him time to see if his wound would improve, and they dropped him at the very next island they came to.

Furthermore, they did not attempt to apologize or even explain; they simply “tossed [him] out” into a “rocky cave” with only a “few beggarly rags” and a little food. They obviously cared nothing about Philoctetes’s comfort or whether he lived or died. Philoctetes is treated with absolute disregard and disgust because of his disability, and Sophocles underscores this injustice and exposes it for what it is: immoral and reprehensible.

☛ Now, my boy, let me tell you about the island.
No sailor will ever land here, if he can help it.
There’s nowhere safe he can anchor his ship, no port
In which he can trade for profit or find a welcome.
No sensible man would steer a course for this place.
He might, perhaps, put in because he is forced to—
It happens now and again in a long lifetime.
Such people, when they arrive, my boy, will say
They’re sorry for me. They might feel sorry enough
To give me a scrap of food or something to wear.
But when I raise the question of taking me home,
Nobody wants to do it.

Related Characters: Philoctetes (speaker), Atreus’s Sons/
The Atridae, Odysseus, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 213-4

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Philoctetes is telling Neoptolemus about the island Lemnos, and this quote is significant because it illustrates just how isolated and alone Philoctetes is, which only adds to his pain and suffering. This quote also highlights the discrimination Philoctetes suffers on account of his disability, as no one seems willing to help him. Lemnos is completely deserted. People rarely come to island as there is simply no reason to. There is no port, and there is no trade coming to or from the island. The only people who come to the island are “forced,” by either weather or a heartless crew, or, in Neoptolemus’s case, by a commanding officer.

Still, when people do come to the island, they refuse to help to Philoctetes, beyond a few handouts of food or clothes. Philoctetes’s wound drains putrid pus and his acute bouts of pain are intense and dramatic; thus, no one actually wants to share the close quarters of a ship with him. Those who come to the island “say” they are sympathetic to

Philoctetes’s pain and suffering, but both Philoctetes and Sophocles imply that they really aren’t. If they were truly sympathetic, they would not allow a man to suffer alone in isolation indefinitely. Philoctetes’s poor treatment is undeserved and heartbreaking, and Sophocles argues that Philoctetes’s wound is reason to show him compassion, not to discard him and leave him to die alone.

☛ No, either bring me safely as far as your home
In Scyros, or else to Calchodon’s place in Euboea.
From there it’s only an easy crossing to Oeta,
To Trachis’ heights and Spercheii’s beautiful stream.
And so you can show me again to my own dear father—
Though I’ve been long afraid I shall find him gone.
When people arrived, I often used to send him
Imploring messages, hoping he might be able
To come in a ship of his own and fetch me home.
But either he’s dead, or else my messengers couldn’t
Be bothered with *me*—it was natural enough, I suppose—
And wanted to hurry on with their homeward voyage.

Related Characters: Philoctetes (speaker), Poeas,
Neoptolemus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Philoctetes is trying to convince Neoptolemus to take him home to Greece. It underscores Philoctetes’s isolation and suffering, and it also further reflects the discrimination he is made to endure on account of his disability. Neoptolemus has lied and told Philoctetes that he is headed home to Scyros, and Philoctetes would be happy just to make it there. He asks Neoptolemus to take him as far as “Calchodon’s place in Euboea,” which refers to the Abantian people of the island Euboea, not far from Philoctetes’s home of Meliboea. It is clear that Philoctetes badly misses his father and wants to get home to him.

Philoctetes worries that his father, Poeas, might be dead, since he hasn’t come to take him home. However, it is later revealed that Philoctetes’s father isn’t dead, which implies that the messages Philoctetes sent to his father never reached him. Just as Philoctetes fears, his “messengers couldn’t / Be bothered with [him].” Delivering a message to Philoctetes’s father seems easy enough. It does not require his messengers to share a boat with him or get too close to his putrid wound or suffering, yet they still won’t help him. This complete disregard underscores how deeply society

devalues Philoctetes because of his wound, and how deeply he suffers because of it.

Scene 3 (Lines 730 – 1080) Quotes

●● Neoptolemus: What new attack is this?
What's making you groan and howl so loudly?

Philoctetes: You know, my boy!

Neoptolemus: What is it?

Philoctetes: You know, my son!

Neoptolemus: I don't. Tell me!

Philoctetes: You *must* know! [*Another howl of pain.*]

Neoptolemus: Yes, your wound—it's a terrible load to carry.

Philoctetes: It can't be described. Still, you can show me pity.

Neoptolemus: What can I do?

Philoctetes: Don't leave me because you are frightened.

The torturer comes and goes and will let me alone,

Perhaps, when he's done his worst.

Related Characters: Neoptolemus, Philoctetes (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 228-9

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during one of Philoctetes's acute bouts of pain and suffering, and it highlights how Philoctetes's isolation compounds his suffering and makes it worse. Philoctetes's pain seems to come out of nowhere and catch Neoptolemus off guard, as he even asks Philoctetes why he is crying out in pain. Obviously, Neoptolemus should know why, and Philoctetes says as much. Even when Neoptolemus does acknowledge Philoctetes's wound, he still doesn't seem to understand. "Yes, your wound," he says, "it's a terrible load to carry," which is rather dismissive of the intense agony Philoctetes is forced to live with.

Neoptolemus's question, "What can I do?" is repeated throughout the remainder of the play and underscores Neoptolemus's moral dilemma. Even if he did fully understand Philoctetes's pain and responded perfectly to his suffering, it seems that there is little that Neoptolemus can do to ease his pain, since he can't heal the wound. However, not all of Philoctetes's pain is physical. Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus that he can show him "pity," or

compassion, by staying with him until the worst of his pain passes. This suggests that Philoctetes's pain and suffering is intensified by his isolation and loneliness, which implies that human beings cannot live indefinitely in isolation.

●● Death, death, I call on you to my aid
Like this every day. Why can you never come?
My boy, you are nobly born. Seize my body
And burn me in the volcano, the holy fire
Of Lemnos. Be true to your nature. I brought myself
To do the same for Heracles, son of Zeus,
The hero who gave me the arms you now are guarding.
What do you say, my son? Oh, speak!
Why are you dumb? You seem to be lost, boy!

Related Characters: Philoctetes (speaker), Zeus, Heracles, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during Philoctetes's acute bout of pain when he begs Neoptolemus to kill him, and it is significant because it refers to the events that led to Heracles gifting Philoctetes his unerring bow and arrows. According to myth, prior to being deified, Heracles was a mortal hero injured in war and dying. He wanted to be placed on his funeral pyre while he was still alive to end his suffering, but no one would light the fire—except for Philoctetes. As a reward for his compassion and good deed, Heracles gave Philoctetes his bow and arrows. Now, Philoctetes asks Neoptolemus to have compassion for him the way Philoctetes did for Heracles.

Philoctetes knows that Neoptolemus is a good and righteous man, which is why he asks him to do the right thing, at least in Philoctetes eyes's, and "be true to [his] nature." The right thing, however, is arguably for Philoctetes to go to Troy and end the war. Neoptolemus knows this, but he is torn by his sympathy for Philoctetes. Neoptolemus seems "to be lost" to Philoctetes because he *is* lost; His inner conflict between doing what is best for Greece and doing what Philoctetes asks has Neoptolemus at a moral and ethical impasse. No matter which choice Neoptolemus makes, he will have to sacrifice something—either his obligation to the greater good of Greece or his desire to

show Philoctetes compassion—and Neoptolemus remains “lost” in this moral conflict for most of the play.

☞ You are not bad, I’m sure. But wicked men
Have taught you this base behavior. Leave it to others
And sail. But first return my weapons to *me*.

Related Characters: Philoctetes (speaker), Atreus’s Sons/
The Atridae, Odysseus, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Neoptolemus admits to Philoctetes that he has been deceiving him, and it again suggests that the Greek army forces men to behave in ways they might otherwise consider immoral. Neoptolemus refers to himself as “base” for agreeing to deceive Philoctetes and steal his bow and arrows, and he is truly ashamed of himself. But Philoctetes suggests that it isn’t Neoptolemus who is bad, but rather the men he is forced to take orders from: Odysseus and Atreus’s sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, the commanding officers of the Greek army.

Philoctetes refers to Atreus’s sons and Odysseus as “wicked men,” and indeed they appear to be. The men have needlessly and heartlessly abandoned Philoctetes on Lemnos to die, and they are now forcing Neoptolemus to do something that is wholly against his strong morals and good nature. Without the influence of Odysseus and Atreus’s sons, Neoptolemus would never dream of being so deceitful and dishonest. Philoctetes tells him to abandon the army and go home, but not before returning the bow and arrows to Philoctetes. Yet returning the bow would make Neoptolemus a traitor to Greece, and he has already said he would like to avoid this. However, it is becoming more and more difficult for Neoptolemus to follow his superiors’ orders, which again highlights his moral dilemma.

☞ So why are you taking me now and carting me off?
What for? I’m nothing to you. I’ve long been dead.
How, you bane of the gods, am I no longer
A stinking cripple? How, if I come on board,
Will you burn your victims or go on pouring libations?
That was your specious pretext for throwing me out.
Perish the lot of you! Perish you surely will
For the injuries done to me, if the gods have any
Concern for justice. I know they have. You’d never
Have crossed the sea in quest of a mouldering wretch,
Unless some spur from heaven were goading you on.

Related Characters: Philoctetes (speaker), Helenus,
Odysseus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 239-40

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Odysseus appears and tries to force Philoctetes into going to Troy, and it is significant because it again underscores the discrimination Philoctetes endures on account of his wound and disability. Philoctetes asks Odysseus why he even bothered to come and get him after Odysseus has made it so clear that Philoctetes is “nothing” and is useless to Greek society because he is a “stinking cripple.” Philoctetes’s wound and his cries of pain were an interruption to the crew before and they are sure to be again, Philoctetes implies. Interestingly, Philoctetes refers to the sacrifices Odysseus and his men were unable to make because of Philoctetes’s cries earlier in the play as “victims,” which strips the religious meaning from the ritual killing and makes Odysseus appear only as a murderer.

Philoctetes suspects that Odysseus has been ordered by the gods to come and get him, as Odysseus wouldn’t cross the sea for Philoctetes unless he was motivated by “heaven,” and indeed he was. Odysseus came to Lemnos to get Philoctetes because Helenus’s prophecy said Troy could not be conquered without Philoctetes, and in ancient Greek culture, the prophets spoke the word of the gods. Odysseus does not make a distinction between what Helenus says and what the gods say, as they are one and the same in Odysseus’s eyes. Therefore, Odysseus is goaded on by a “spur from heaven.” Furthermore, the fact that Philoctetes is needed to conquer Troy and win the war indicates that Philoctetes isn’t “nothing” after all, but instead is a crucial member of society with much to offer his fellow Greeks.

Lament (Lines 1081 – 1218) Quotes

☞ You only have yourself to blame, unhappy man.
Nothing has struck you with force irresistible.
Where was your better judgement?
Fate would have been kinder, but you
Chose to accept a worse life.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Philoctetes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Philoctetes has refused to go to Troy, even though his wound will be healed if he does. It is important because it implies that Philoctetes no longer deserves any sympathy because he has now *chosen* to stay on Lemnos and suffer. As the chorus says, “nothing has struck [Philoctetes] with force irresistible,” and he has an unprecedented opportunity to ease his discomfort. However, to do so would mean letting go of his hatred for Atreus’s sons and Odysseus and fighting for the Greek army, and Philoctetes can’t bring himself to do that.

The chorus also implies that Philoctetes has made the wrong decision in staying on Lemnos. “Where was your better judgement?” they ask. Philoctetes needn’t go to Troy for Atreus’s sons and Odysseus, or even for Greece; he could go for himself simply to ease his suffering, but he still won’t. The chorus acknowledges that “Fate,” or the goddess Chryse, has dealt Philoctetes a terrible hand in making him suffer so horribly for so long on Lemnos, but he now has the power to stop it. By staying and suffering, he chooses to “accept a worse life,” and therefore has no one to blame but himself. Like Neoptolemus, Philoctetes is torn as well, only he is torn between his hatred for Odysseus and the benefit to Greece that would occur if he left Lemnos. He selfishly chooses his hatred, which Sophocles implies makes him undeserving of continued sympathy.

☞ True men always will plead their causes justly.
Yet once they’ve spoken, they say no more.
Curb their spite and withdraw their sting.
Our young master was chosen.
Under Odysseus’ orders he came.
Helping friends and doing his public duty.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Odysseus, Neoptolemus, Philoctetes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as the Chorus defends Neoptolemus’s decision to deceive Philoctetes, and it is significant because it further implies that Philoctetes is behaving foolishly by staying on the island. It also highlights Neoptolemus’s obligation to Odysseus and the Greek army. The chorus is not excusing Philoctetes’s ill treatment at the hands of Atreus’s sons and Odysseus. On the contrary, they claim a “true” man, or a good man, will always “plead their causes justly,” or speak up when something is wrong, but according to the chorus, once one has made their feelings known, “they say no more.”

In this way, the chorus implies that since Philoctetes has already “justly” pled his case, he should “curb [his] spite and withdraw [his] sting.” In other words, Philoctetes should abandon his hatred and grudge against Atreus’s sons and Odysseus and go to Troy. Furthermore, the chorus implies that Philoctetes should not think badly of Neoptolemus for deceiving him, as he was simply following “Odysseus’s orders” and “doing his public duty” to Greece by ensuring Philoctetes goes to Troy to kill Paris and end the Trojan War. Sophocles implies that both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, regardless of their own desires to adhere to morality or grudges, both have an obligation first and foremost to act in the best interest for the greater good of Greece.

Scene 4 (Lines 1219 – 1407) Quotes

☞ Odysseus: Please tell me why you’re coming back!
What’s all this frantic haste for, man?
Neoptolemus: To undo the wrongs that I did before.
Odysseus: I don’t understand. What wrong have you done?
Neoptolemus: I listened to you and the whole Greek army.
Odysseus: What wicked action did that entail?
Neoptolemus: Guile and deceit to entrap a man.
Odysseus: For god’s sake, whom? What crazy idea . . .
Neoptolemus: Not crazy at all. To give Philoctetes . . .
Odysseus: What do you mean to do? I’m frightened.
Neoptolemus: To restore this bow I stole to its proper . . .
Odysseus: What! Are you going to give it back?
Neoptolemus: Yes, it was shameful and wrong to take it.

Related Characters: Neoptolemus, Odysseus (speaker), Philoctetes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange between Odysseus and Neoptolemus occurs as Neoptolemus decides to give back Philoctetes's bow and arrows, and illustrates Neoptolemus's inherently good nature and his inability to behave in deceitful ways.

Odysseus and Neoptolemus contrast with one another in this respect. Neoptolemus believes it is always wrong to lie and be deceptive, but Odysseus believes it is fine as long as it serves the greater good of Greece. Neoptolemus can't stand that he has deceived Philoctetes, and he is in a "frantic haste" to return the bow and try to make it right.

Odysseus, on the other hand, thinks Neoptolemus is "crazy" for wanting to return the bow and arrows. They have achieved their objective and obtained the bow, and giving it back now is counterproductive to getting to Troy, ending the war, and saving countless Greek lives. Regardless, Neoptolemus believes it is "shameful" to behave deceitfully, and he blames Odysseus and the Greek army for making him behave as such. In this way, Sophocles implies that deception is never excusable in any context, even war. While Sophocles makes it clear that Philoctetes *must* go to Troy for the good of Greece, Philoctetes cannot be forced and instead must go of his own accord, which he eventually does after Heracles tells him to. Sophocles thus implies that Philoctetes has an obligation to the Greeks, but fulfilling that obligation can be a nuanced, complex process.

☝ Odysseus: For heaven's sake, are you joking with me?

Neoptolemus: If telling the truth is a joke, I am.

Odysseus: Look here, Neoptolemus! What do you mean?

Neoptolemus: Have I got to repeat it three times over?

Odysseus: I wish I needn't have heard it once.

Neoptolemus: Well, it's all that I have to say.

Odysseus: Be careful! You may quite well be prevented.

Neoptolemus: Tell me, Odysseus, who will prevent me?

Odysseus: The whole Greek army, myself included.

Neoptolemus: A foolish remark for a clever man!

Odysseus: Your words and actions are no less foolish.

Neoptolemus: I'd rather my actions were right than wise.

Related Characters: Neoptolemus, Odysseus (speaker), Philoctetes

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange also occurs between Odysseus and Neoptolemus as Neoptolemus is attempting to give Philoctetes his bow and arrows back. It underscores how deeply Neoptolemus is committed to his morals. This quote also highlights the frequent deception used throughout the play. For the first time, Neoptolemus is attempting to tell the truth, and Odysseus thinks it is a "joke." In other words, deception is used so frequently that Odysseus doesn't know how to respond when he encounters truth. Yet to give Philoctetes back his bow and arrows is also to betray the army and all of Greece, and Odysseus can't believe what he is hearing.

For Neoptolemus, however, his morals are not something that he can simply put down and pick up again, and he must adhere to them even when it is inconvenient. Even after Odysseus reminds Neoptolemus that his decision will bring the entire Greek army down on him and he will undoubtedly be killed, Neoptolemus must still correct his wrongdoing and give Philoctetes's bow back. Neoptolemus knows that his decision is "foolish," but it doesn't matter to him. Behaving deceitfully and telling lies is so against Neoptolemus's nature that he would rather be "right than wise." Of course, Neoptolemus also agrees that the "right" thing to do is get Philoctetes to Troy, but he refuses to abandon his morals to get him there, again showing how

deciding what's truly "right" can be an almost impossible task.

●● My actions will prove me true. Put out your hand.
These weapons belong to you. Take hold of them now.

Related Characters: Neoptolemus (speaker), Philoctetes

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Neoptolemus gives Philoctetes's bow and arrows back. It is significant because it further underscores Neoptolemus's inherent good nature, but it also reflects the deception and lies that pervade most of the play. The fact that Neoptolemus gives Philoctetes back his bow is proof that he is a good man. He can't keep what doesn't belong to him for any reason, not even to win a war, and he is compelled to right what he considers to be a serious wrong. The bow and arrows indeed belong to Philoctetes (indeed, his survival on the island depends on them), and Philoctetes must, after all, be the one to conquer Troy with them.

Sophocles repeatedly makes reference to the deceitfulness of words throughout the play, and this is indeed an ongoing theme in many of Sophocles's plays. Words are often untrue, Sophocles implies, yet truth can be found in "actions." Neoptolemus's words to Philoctetes have nearly all been lies meant to get his bow and arrows away from him, but Neoptolemus's "actions" of returning the bow and arrows are "true" and "prove" him a good and honest man. In this way, Sophocles implies that while there is often deceit in words, actions are a much better representation of truth.

●● All men are bound to endure with patience
The various chances of life which heaven brings.
But if they cling to trouble that's self-inflicted,
As you are doing, they don't deserve any pity
Or understanding. You've grown too brutal. You won't
Accept advice, and if somebody out of kindness
Makes a suggestion, you hate him as though he were
Your implacable foe. But still. I'm going to speak,
And I call on Zeus, god of oaths, to bear me witness.
Mark what I say, and carefully take it to heart.

Related Characters: Neoptolemus (speaker), Zeus, Philoctetes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Neoptolemus continues to try to convince Philoctetes to go to Troy, even after Neoptolemus has given back Philoctetes's bow and arrows. This passage further suggests that Philoctetes is wrong to stay on Lemnos and therefore does not deserve any sympathy for his suffering. Neoptolemus again refers to Philoctetes's wound and suffering as being imposed by the gods. All men must suffer what is imposed by the gods, as the gods control their fate, but Philoctetes's wound will be cured if he goes to Troy, which will effectively end his physical suffering and end his time on Lemnos. Neoptolemus thus refers to Philoctetes's suffering as now being "self-inflicted," because he refuses to abandon his grudge against the Greek army and go with them to Troy.

Philoctetes has "grown too brutal" in his hate for Odysseus and Atreus's sons, and he refuses to listen to reason. Philoctetes knows that Troy will fall if he agrees to go and fight, but he refuses to lift a finger to help the same men who abandoned him so heartlessly on Lemnos is the first place. Neoptolemus implies that Philoctetes's extreme hate for Odysseus and Atreus's sons is making him hate in general, and he won't listen to anyone, not even those who are his friends. Notably, Neoptolemus invokes the name of Zeus to be his "witness," and it is indeed Zeus who speaks through Heracles at the end of the play. In this way, Zeus himself confirms that Philoctetes must soften his heart and agree to do what is best for the Greeks, even though it means sacrificing his own desires.

●● Now that you know this, surely you must agree,
And gladly. You have so much to gain. First,
To come into healing hands, and then to be judged
The foremost hero of Greece, by taking Troy,
The city of sorrows, and winning the highest glory.

Related Characters: Neoptolemus (speaker), Helenus, Philoctetes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Neoptolemus continues to try to convince Philoctetes to go to Troy. This quotation is significant because it refers to Helenus's prophecy, but it also underscores Philoctetes's determination to hold onto his grudge against Odysseus and Atreus's sons and continue to suffer because of it. According to Helenus, a Trojan prophet captured by the Greek army, Troy can only be captured if Philoctetes comes to Troy and sacks the city, at which time he will also be healed of his wound, officially putting an end to his suffering.

Given all of this, Neoptolemus doesn't understand why Philoctetes wouldn't *want* to go to Troy. Not only will his wound be healed, but he will be hailed as the greatest of Greek heroes after conquering the city with his unerring bow and arrows. However, this isn't enough to convince Philoctetes to go. He is so blinded by his hate for Odysseus and Atreus's sons that he can't conceive of fighting on their behalf, even if it means his wound will be healed and he will become a hero. In this way, Sophocles highlights the common human emotions of hate and resentment and the struggle that often comes along with them. Sophocles implies that Philoctetes's anger is certainly justified, but Philoctetes must also know when to let his anger go, or else he will be completely consumed by it.

Closing Scene (Lines 1408 – 1472) Quotes

●● You'll go with Neoptolemus to Troy,
Where first your painful wound will soon be healed.
Then, chosen for your prowess from the host,
You'll use my bow and arrows to bring down
Paris, the cause of all this bitter strife.
When you've sacked Troy, the army will present
You with the prize of valour, and you'll bear
Your spoils back to your home on Oeta's heights
To show your father Poeas. Do not fail,
Whatever spoils the army grants to you,
To lay a portion on my pyre in tribute
To my bow.

Related Characters: Heracles (speaker), Poeas, Paris, Neoptolemus, Philoctetes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Heracles appears and orders Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to go to Troy. It is significant both because it finally convinces Philoctetes to go to Troy and because it underscores Philoctetes's obligation to the greater good of the Greece, and more importantly, his obligation to the gods. Philoctetes must go to Troy, as he is the only one with the "prowess," bestowed upon him by Heracles by way of the bow and arrows, to bring down Troy and end the war. According to myth, Philoctetes shoots and kills Paris, the prince of Troy, which effectively ends the war.

This quote also implies that Poeas, Philoctetes's father, isn't really dead after all as Philoctetes had feared. Since Poeas never seemed to get the messages to come and pick Philoctetes up that Philoctetes sent through the rare visitors to the island, it seems that the messengers couldn't be bothered to deliver the messages of a cripple, just as Philoctetes feared. Philoctetes is so devalued by society because of his disability that visitors won't even deliver a message to his father, but both Heracles and Sophocles imply that Philoctetes must rise above the anger he feels for the Greeks to do what is in their best interest, even if they have neglected his. More importantly, Heracles's visit suggests that Philoctetes's first obligation is to the gods. Heracles was the one to give Philoctetes the bow and arrows in the first place, and he is the one who will dictate how and when they are used.

●● Now, Neoptolemus,
My words concern you too. You'll not take Troy
Without his aid, nor he without your help.
No, each one guard the other, like two lions
Prowling the bush together. [to Philoctetes:] I shall send
Asclepius to heal your wounds in Troy.
The citadel must be captured by my bow
A second time. But when you lay the land
To waste, remember this: show piety
Towards the gods, since nothing ranks so high
With Zeus. For piety does not die with men.
Men live or die, but piety cannot perish.

Related Characters: Heracles (speaker), Zeus, Asclepius, Priam, Neoptolemus, Philoctetes

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

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Explanation and Analysis

This quote also occurs as Heracles appears and orders Neoptolemus and Philoctetes to go to Troy, and it foreshadows what will happen when they get there. Additionally, it underscores Neoptolemus and Philoctetes's obligation to the greater good of Greece and to the gods. The gods have decreed that only Neoptolemus and Philoctetes can capture Troy, and therefore that is the way it must be. If Neoptolemus and Philoctetes don't go, the war will rage on and countless Greek lives will be lost in vain. This quote also identifies Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing, as the one who will heal Philoctetes's wound and deliver him from his suffering at last.

Heracles's claim that they must sack Troy for a "second time" refers to the previous war between the Greeks and Trojans, which took place during the time of King Laomedon, Priam's father. Heracles's reminder to Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to "show piety" even as they sack Troy has meaning when considered in context with Odysseus, who mistakenly believes he can be "god-fearing" after the war despite behaving immorally during the war. The mention of piety also refers to what will happen when they get to Troy, which Heracles already knows. According to myth, Neoptolemus kills Priam, the king of Troy, after Priam runs into the palace shrine for sanctuary, and in doing so, Neoptolemus fails to show piety and respect for the gods. By hinting at this future event, Sophocles implies that Neoptolemus and Philoctetes's obligation to the gods should trump even their obligation to the greater good of Greece.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SCENE 1 (LINES 1 – 134)

Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive on the island of Lemnos. The island is completely deserted and not a house or ship can be seen. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, that this island is where Odysseus and his crew marooned Philoctetes, the son of Poeas, at the behest of his superiors. The **wound** on Philoctetes's foot had been "oozing with pus," and his constant screams of pain disrupted their prayers and offerings to the gods. Philoctetes's cries had carried with them "sounds of ill omen," Odysseus says. But, he tells Neoptolemus, they mustn't be detained by Philoctetes's story. Now isn't the time for talking at length, Odysseus says.

Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that Philoctetes must not know Odysseus is on the island, which is why Odysseus needs Neoptolemus's help. He orders Neoptolemus to find the cave that Philoctetes has been living in. It has a double entrance, Odysseus says, and is near a stream. It only takes Neoptolemus a moment to find such a cave. The makeshift shelter has a mattress made of leaves and a crude cup for drinking, and Neoptolemus finds bandages drying in the sun that are soiled with "revolting pus."

The cave must be Philoctetes's shelter, Odysseus says, and his **wound** must be as bad as ever. Philoctetes has to be nearby, Odysseus continues, as his "old affliction" won't allow him to travel far. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that it is time to "prove [his] worth." Odysseus's plan may sound strange to him but Neoptolemus must remember, Odysseus says, that he is "here to serve." Neoptolemus will "trick" Philoctetes, Odysseus orders, and tell Philoctetes that he, Neoptolemus, has just left the Greek army after a terrible fight with his superiors.

Odysseus's comment that they mustn't be detained by Philoctetes's story underscores the discrimination against the disabled in Greek society. Atreus's sons order Odysseus to abandon Philoctetes on the deserted island of Lemnos because Philoctetes's wound and suffering—his disability—makes them uncomfortable. Odysseus and his men don't understand Philoctetes's suffering and think it a bad omen, and Odysseus's refusal to acknowledge Philoctetes's full story is further evidence of Odysseus's contempt for the disabled Philoctetes.



Philoctetes's meager lodging on the island is evidence of his isolation and the suffering he endures because of it. He is forced to sleep on leaves and lives without many of life's necessities. Neoptolemus's comment regarding Philoctetes's bandages and his "revolting pus" also underscores discrimination against the disabled in Greek society. Neoptolemus speaks of Philoctetes and his wound with disgust and disrespect rather than sympathy or compassion.



Philoctetes's "old affliction" refers to the snake bite he endured on the island Chryse, and the wound is symbolic of Philoctetes's isolation and suffering. Philoctetes's wound never heals during his long isolation, which suggests that wounds (perhaps both physical and emotional) cannot heal without support from others. Through Odysseus's orders to Neoptolemus and his comment that Neoptolemus is "here to serve," Sophocles also implies that serving in the army often requires one to commit dishonest acts that go against one's moral fiber.



Neoptolemus is to tell Philoctetes that the Greek army approached Neoptolemus and begged him to come to Troy, as the Trojan War can't be won without him. Odysseus orders Neoptolemus to tell Philoctetes that he agreed to go with them, but when he asked the Greeks for his father, Achilles's, arms, they refused and instead gave them to Odysseus. "Yes, you can be as rude as you like / About me," Odysseus tells Neoptolemus. "I shan't take it amiss." However, Odysseus says, if Neoptolemus fails to convince Philoctetes that he is telling the truth, it will be bad for the whole of Greece. Neoptolemus will not be able to capture Troy without Philoctetes and his **bow and arrows**.

Only Neoptolemus will be able to gain Philoctetes's trust, Odysseus says, because Neoptolemus (unlike Odysseus) was not part of the expedition that abandoned Philoctetes on Lemnos. Neoptolemus must find a way to steal Philoctetes's **bow and arrows**. Odysseus knows that it isn't in Neoptolemus's nature to be deceptive, but since it will help the Greeks win the Trojan War, it is worth it, Odysseus says. He tells Neoptolemus to forget his morals for just a little while. Afterwards, Neoptolemus can be as moral as he wants.

Neoptolemus is hesitant to agree. Odysseus is right, Neoptolemus says: it is not in his nature to be deceptive. Nor, Neoptolemus reminds Odysseus, was it in Achilles's nature. Neoptolemus would rather take Philoctetes by force. He wants to follow Odysseus's orders, Neoptolemus says, but he would rather fail "in a noble action than win an ignoble victory."

"It's words, not deeds, that shape the course of events," Odysseus says to Neoptolemus. Philoctetes's **bow and arrows** never miss the mark; therefore, he cannot be forced to give them to Neoptolemus, Odysseus says, and he cannot be persuaded, either. Neoptolemus asks Odysseus if he believes it is wrong to tell lies. Not if it leads to victory, Odysseus replies. Only Neoptolemus can bring down Troy, Odysseus reminds him, but he can't do it without Philoctetes and his bow and arrows. All of Greece will hail Neoptolemus as a cunning hero if he is successful, Odysseus says, and Neoptolemus, reluctantly, agrees.

Sophocles refers to the prophecy of Helenus several times throughout the play, who claimed that the Trojan War can only be won if both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes go to Troy. While the prophecy is true, Odysseus keeping Achilles's armor from Neoptolemus is a lie. According to myth, Odysseus and Ajax feuded over Achilles's armor after his death, which led to Ajax's suicide. Odysseus then gifted the armor to Neoptolemus. By inventing a conflict between himself and Neoptolemus, however, Odysseus is hoping the fake feud will win Philoctetes's trust. Philoctetes hates Odysseus for marooning him on Lemnos, so Odysseus reasons that he'll be more likely to trust Neoptolemus if he thinks that Neoptolemus hates Odysseus too.



Here, Neoptolemus is expected to behave deceptively—which goes directly against his moral fiber—on behalf of the Greek army. Odysseus acknowledges that such dishonesty can be challenging, but he takes it lightly, arguing that it's possible to set aside one's morals and reclaim them later. As the play goes on, however, Sophocles indicates that true morality requires avoiding deception altogether.



Neoptolemus's comment that he would rather fail "in a noble action than win an ignoble victory" underscores Neoptolemus's inherent moral nature, but his desire to honor his obligation to the Greek army also highlights Sophocles's argument that people often struggle between their own desires and what is best for the greater good of society.



Sophocles often explores deception in his plays and the difference between words and actions, and Odysseus's comment is evidence of this. Words, compared to deeds or actions, are often deceptive, yet they "shape the course of events." While Sophocles suggests that it is never ethical to use deception, even in war, he also maintains that sacrifices in morality are often required for the greater good, which results in a constant struggle in human beings that often cannot be reconciled.



Odysseus orders Neoptolemus to remain near Philoctetes's cave and wait for him to come back. Odysseus will return to the ship, but he will send a sailor disguised as a merchant to tell Neoptolemus and Philoctetes an "elaborate tale." After the merchant tells his story, Odysseus says, Neoptolemus will be on his own and will have to concoct his own lies to secure the **bow and arrows**. Odysseus calls to the god Hermes and the goddess Athena to bless their mission, and then he heads back to the ship.

*Hermes is the Greek god of deception, which is why Odysseus invokes his name before returning to the ship to execute his deceptive plan. The "elaborate tale" told by the merchant also subtly alludes to the elaborate lie concocted by Orestes to fake his own death in Sophocles's play [Electra](#), which was written around the same time as *Philoctetes* and explores many of the same themes.*



ENTRY OF THE CHORUS (LINES 135 – 218)

The chorus, a group of Greek sailors, arrives and asks Neoptolemus for their orders. He tells the sailors to inspect Philoctetes's cave but to keep their eyes peeled for Philoctetes's return. If Philoctetes sneaks up on them, Neoptolemus says, he may be dangerous. Philoctetes is likely out hunting for food with the **bow and arrows**, which is how he has been able to stay alive for so long despite the agony of his **wound**. But "nobody comes," Neoptolemus tells the chorus. "To comfort or cure [Philoctetes's] affliction."

In other versions of the myth of Philoctetes, the playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides made the chorus a group of native Lemnians. Sophocles, however, makes his chorus a group of Greek sailors. By removing the native Lemnians, Sophocles makes Lemnos entirely deserted, which highlights Philoctetes's isolation and guarantees that "nobody comes" to "comfort or cure" him.



The chorus laments Philoctetes's miserable plight. Philoctetes is all alone without anyone to care for him, and his infected **wound** likely makes him very sick. How Philoctetes is able to live such a life, the chorus doesn't know. They claim the gods are "deceitful" for allowing such a great man to fall. Philoctetes comes from a "noble house," yet he is made to live alone, plagued by hunger and unfathomable pain, without anything or anyone to bring him comfort.

Philoctetes's father, Poeas, is a Thessalonian king. Thus, Philoctetes comes from a "noble house." Philoctetes's noble identity implies that no one is spared from discrimination when disabled in Greek society—even the son of a king is disrespected after he is maimed, on his way to fight in a war no less.



Neoptolemus informs the chorus that Philoctetes's suffering has been ordered by the gods. Philoctetes was bitten by a poisonous snake after entering the shrine of Chryse, on the goddess's island of the same name, while he was part of the first expedition headed to the Trojan War. Therefore, Neoptolemus says, Philoctetes's agony is due to the will of the gods, and Philoctetes will not go to Troy with his **bow and arrows** until the gods decide it is time. Suddenly, the sounds of a man crying out in terrible pain pierce the air. It is Philoctetes, the chorus says, and he is returning to his cave.

Neoptolemus's explanation of Philoctetes's suffering implies that Philoctetes couldn't have avoided the snake bite, since it was something the gods plan. Neoptolemus's explanation therefore makes the discrimination against Philoctetes all the worse: Philoctetes is marginalized for something he has no control over, which Sophocles implies is always the case with discrimination against those with disabilities.



SCENE 2 (LINES 219 – 675)

Philoctetes approaches his cave and the strange sailors, and he immediately asks the chorus and Neoptolemus who they are and why they are there. Lemnos doesn't have a harbor, he says, nor does anyone live there—other than Philoctetes, that is. He thinks the men are Greeks, and he hopes that they are so he can listen to their language. He tells them not to be scared by his “wild appearance.” He is but a “miserable wretch,” Philoctetes says, without anyone to help him.

Neoptolemus confirms that he and the chorus are indeed Greeks, and Philoctetes, excited to hear this, asks them why they have come to Lemnos. Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes that he is the son of Achilles. Neoptolemus and his men have just left Troy, he says, and are headed home to the island of Scyros. Philoctetes is confused; Neoptolemus wasn't with the initial expedition to Troy. Neoptolemus feigns surprise and asks Philoctetes if he, too, was involved in the Trojan War.

Philoctetes is distraught. The gods must despise him, Philoctetes says to Neoptolemus and the chorus, if no word or rumors of him have reached the Greeks. Philoctetes tells the men that he has been “cast out” by the same people who have silenced his story “in delight,” all while his **wound** is worsening. He tells them that he is Philoctetes, the son of Poetas, and the one who owns Heracles's **bow and arrows**. He was marooned on Lemnos by Odysseus after he was bitten by a poisonous snake on the island Chryse while en route to Troy. Odysseus and his men left Philoctetes “to rot” on the very next island, which was Lemnos. As Philoctetes slept, the men carried him to the cave and left him with “a few beggarly rags” and a little food.

When Philoctetes woke and found himself alone on Lemnos, he tells Neoptolemus and the chorus, he was devastated. He had cried when he saw the Greek ship sailing away toward Troy because he knew that the island was deserted. There would be no one to comfort or care for him and his **wound**. Philoctetes's life is only “pain and distress” on Lemnos. The cave offers him shelter and his **bow and arrows** ensure food; however, Philoctetes is merely surviving, and there is no “cure for [his] sickness.”

Philoctetes's “wild appearance” is evidence of his miserable and painful life on Lemnos, but it also adds to the discrimination he endures because of his disability. The few Greeks that have stopped on Lemnos have been put off by Philoctetes's appearance and refused to help him because of it, which only added to Philoctetes's suffering and misery.



Neoptolemus's story is, of course, a lie, and it is a key example of deception in Philoctetes. Neoptolemus must pretend that he doesn't know who Philoctetes is because Philoctetes was a very famous archer before he was marooned on Lemnos, which Sophocles implies most Greeks know about, too; they simply leave him there because he is disabled and ostracized by society.



Philoctetes's treatment by Odysseus and the Greek sailors is reprehensible, and it underscores the poor treatment of disabled people in Greek society. Philoctetes is a respected warrior and hero, yet he is easily rejected by the army and society at large after he is injured on his way to fight on behalf of Greece in the Trojan War. Philoctetes's sacrifice to his country alone warrants him more respect, but he is repeatedly mistreated by everyone he encounters, including, at times, Neoptolemus and the chorus.



Philoctetes's wound never heals, and there is no “cure” for it, which makes his suffering on Lemnos all the more miserable. Philoctetes's wound, though physical, is also symbolic of the emotional pain and isolation he feels on the deserted island. Furthermore, his recounting of his abandonment underscores his marginalization within Greek society because of his disability.



No one comes to Lemnos because they want to, Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus and the chorus. Only if they are “forced,” he says. There have been a few people over the years, and they always “say” they feel badly for Philoctetes (they even give him food and clothing), but no one will bring him home to Greece. He has “been rotting away” on Lemnos for nine years now, all because of Atreus’s sons and Odysseus.

Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes that he knows all about how terrible Atreus’s sons and Odysseus are, as they have offended him, too. Odysseus had come to Scyros and told Neoptolemus that it had been prophesized that the city of Troy could not be captured without Neoptolemus. Neoptolemus immediately agreed to sail for Troy, but when he got there, Atreus’s sons refused to give him Achilles’s arms. Achilles’s armor belongs to Odysseus now, Atreus’s sons said.

Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus that their shared anger with Atreus’s sons and Odysseus must mean that he can trust him. Philoctetes knows that Odysseus will do or say anything to serve his selfish means, so he isn’t surprised to hear he treated Neoptolemus so badly. He is, however, surprised to hear that Ajax allowed such an atrocity. Neoptolemus claims that Ajax died in battle beforehand and was not there to protest. “I’m sorry,” Philoctetes says of Ajax’s death. “But Diomedes and Sisyphus’ / Spawn, whom Laertes bought, will never / Die. They should not have been born!”

Philoctetes begs Neoptolemus not to leave him on Lemnos all alone and asks if he might find passage on their ship. He only needs a small corner of the ship, Philoctetes says. He knows that it will be difficult to travel with him, but he begs Neoptolemus to agree to take him anyway. Even if Neoptolemus only agrees to bring Philoctetes to Scyros, he will surely be able to get word to Poeas, if he is still alive, to come get him. Philoctetes has already sent word to Poeas through others who have come to Lemnos, but Poeas has not come. He may be dead, Philoctetes says, “or else my messengers couldn’t / Be bothered with me.”

Philoctetes again claims he has been left on the island to “rot” because of his disability. Notably, Neoptolemus is actually an example of the very kind of visitor that Philoctetes describes here. He has been “forced” to come to Lemnos against his will, since Odysseus and Atreus’s sons have ordered him to go. And like the other Greeks, Neoptolemus initially “says” he feels badly for Philoctetes but is really attempting to deceive him.



Obviously, Neoptolemus’s story is part of Odysseus’s elaborate lie, and it is meant to gain Philoctetes’s trust through a common hatred for Atreus’s sons and Odysseus. Ironically, Neoptolemus really does have cause to despise Atreus’s sons and Odysseus, since they are the ones who have forced Neoptolemus to go to Troy and lie to Philoctetes; the lie contains a bit of truth, and Sophocles implies that simply telling that truth might have been a nobler and more effective way to win Philoctetes over and serve the Greek army.



Laertes is Odysseus’s father, but Philoctetes implies here that Sisyphus, who represents deception in Sophocles’s play, is Odysseus’s real father. According to myth, Sisyphus seduced Odysseus’s mother before Laertes paid her dowry, and Philoctetes therefore suggests that Laertes “bought” Odysseus, too. Diomedes is a close friend of Odysseus’s, and in many versions of the myth of Philoctetes, Diomedes accompanies Odysseus to bring Philoctetes to Troy instead of Neoptolemus.



It is later revealed that Poeas is not dead, which implies that the other Greeks simply couldn’t be “bothered” to help Philoctetes because they were so put off by his disability. Philoctetes’s willingness to be relegated to a corner of Neoptolemus’s ship suggests that Philoctetes, too, considers himself repulsive because of his disability and his festering wound, which further underscores the prejudice against those with disabilities in Greek society.



The chorus implores Neoptolemus to agree to take Philoctetes and not leave him alone on Lemnos. Neoptolemus tells the men that they are eager to help now, but when they are forced to live with Philoctetes onboard the ship they may “change [their] tune.” The chorus wants to help Philoctetes anyway and Neoptolemus agrees. Philoctetes is overjoyed. He has waited for this day for so long, but he would first like to tell the island goodbye. Suddenly, they are approached by two Greek sailors, and one is disguised as a merchant.

The merchant tells Neoptolemus that he is a trader of wine headed from Troy to his home, the island of Peparethos, and when he discovered Neoptolemus’s ship nearby, he knew he had to stop and warn him. The Greeks have a new plan that concerns Neoptolemus, the merchant says, and it is already in motion. A ship has sailed from Troy to find Neoptolemus and bring him back, and Odysseus and Diomedes have left on another ship to find someone else. Neoptolemus asks who this other person is, but instead of answering, the merchant points to Philoctetes and asks who he is.

Neoptolemus tells the merchant that the man is Philoctetes, the famous archer, and the merchant tells Neoptolemus he must leave Lemnos immediately. Odysseus and Diomedes are en route to retrieve Philoctetes at this very moment, the merchant says, and have vowed to bring him to Troy by either force or persuasion. Neoptolemus asks the merchant what Atreus’s sons could possibly want with Philoctetes now, since they ordered him marooned here so many years ago.

The merchant tells Neoptolemus and Philoctetes that the Greeks had recently captured Helenus, the prophet and son of Priam, and he claimed that Troy would never be conquered without Philoctetes. Upon hearing this, Odysseus immediately left for Lemnos. Philoctetes claims he will never return to Troy with Odysseus, saying that Odysseus would have an easier time persuading Philoctetes to abandon the underworld and return to life like Odysseus’s “cheat of a father.” Philoctetes would rather obey the snake that bit him, he maintains, and there is nothing Odysseus can do or say to make him return to Troy. The merchant exits, wishing both men luck.

Neoptolemus’s comment that the men will change their minds once they are forced to live with Philoctetes again highlights prejudice against the disabled in Greek society. Philoctetes’s wound drains foul, putrid pus, which means that no one wants to live in close quarters with him and are willing to leave him “rotting” on the island just to avoid it. Sophocles’s language, that the men will “change [their] tune,” also reflects the musical nature of the chorus, whose lines are often meant to be sung.



The merchant means to imply that Odysseus and Diomedes are en route to Lemnos to bring Philoctetes to Troy, which again alludes to other versions of the same myth in which it is Diomedes, not Neoptolemus, who accompanies Odysseus to Lemnos. The merchant, of course, knows full well who Philoctetes is; he is simply advancing Odysseus’s deceptive plot to trick Philoctetes into going to Troy.



Neoptolemus’s question again underscores prejudice against disabled people in Greek society. Atreus’s sons ordered Philoctetes to be abandoned on the island because his disability disrupted the Greek army and made them uncomfortable, but they are willing to take him back now that he is valuable to them. Sophocles implies here that Philoctetes has been valuable all along, and that his poor treatment is a gross injustice.



Sisyphus, who Philoctetes implies is Odysseus’s real father, is known for his deception in Greek mythology. As the story goes, Sisyphus told his wife to throw his body in the street after death as a test of her love and respect (if she refused to do such a disrespectful thing, he would consider her a good wife). She indeed threw his body in the street, and so Sisyphus convinced Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, to let him return to earth to haunt his wife, thereby cheating death and the underworld.



Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes and the chorus that they must sail at once, and Philoctetes goes to his cave to fetch his extra **arrows** and the herb he uses to quell the pain of his **wound**. Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes if the bow in his hands is the famous bow of Heracles, and Philoctetes confirms it is. Neoptolemus asks if he may hold the bow, and Philoctetes agrees. He now considers Neoptolemus a friend, and therefore trusts him with the bow. Philoctetes invites Neoptolemus into his cave. With his wound still so painful, he wants Neoptolemus close by.

CHORAL SONG (LINES 676 – 728)

The chorus continues to lament Philoctetes's plight. He has never hurt a soul and has always lived in peace with his fellow Greeks, yet he has been destined to live this horrible existence on Lemnos, alone with no one to care for him. Now, the chorus says, Philoctetes has met Neoptolemus, the son of the greatest Greek hero, Achilles, and Philoctetes will soon sail away from Lemnos back to his father, Peas, on the island Mális.

SCENE 3 (LINES 730 – 1080)

As Neoptolemus enters the cave, Philoctetes begins to moan loudly. Neoptolemus asks if his **wound** is causing him pain, and Philoctetes confirms it is. He screams and prays to the gods, no longer able to keep his immense pain hidden. He begs Neoptolemus to cut his foot off with his sword and not spare his life. Neoptolemus acknowledges that the pain must be unbearable, and Philoctetes says it is indeed indescribable, but Neoptolemus can still show compassion. "What can I do?" Neoptolemus asks. Philoctetes says he can stay with him until the pain has passed.

Philoctetes hands Neoptolemus the **bow and arrows** and asks him to keep them safe until his acute attack of pain subsides. Once the attack is over, Philoctetes will fall into a deep sleep. After he wakes, his pain will be better and more manageable. He warns Neoptolemus not to let Odysseus have the bow if he arrives while Philoctetes sleeps. If he does, Odysseus will surely kill them both. Neoptolemus takes the bow and promises to keep it safe. No one else will touch the bow, Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes.

Philoctetes's willingness to let Neoptolemus hold his bow is evidence that he is beginning to trust Neoptolemus and believe his deceptive story. Sophocles suggests that the pain of Philoctetes's wound is made worse by his isolation and loneliness; thus, Philoctetes wants Neoptolemus to remain near him, especially since he is gearing up for an acute episode of pain.



This brief choral song again underscores the injustice of the discrimination against Philoctetes. He has literally done nothing to deserve his poor treatment—he was an innocent victim when he was bitten by the snake, and until then he was a dedicated and respected member of the Greek army. Sophocles implies that Philoctetes deserves better, as do others who face senseless discrimination.



Philoctetes sheds valuable light on the way that isolation can exacerbate pain and suffering. Often, there is not much that can be done to ease one's physical pain, but Neoptolemus's question "What can I do?" and Philoctetes answer suggests that it is support and companionship that can ease pain and suffering. Neoptolemus may not be able to heal Philoctetes's wound, but he can offer empathy, and Sophocles suggests that doing so might actually be the most powerful way to diminish Philoctetes's pain.



From the moment Neoptolemus promises Philoctetes that he will not let another soul touch his bow and arrows, it is clear that Neoptolemus will not be able to go through with Odysseus's dishonest plan to steal Philoctetes's bow. It is against Neoptolemus's nature to lie, especially since he witnesses the agony Philoctetes is forced to endure alone on the island. But at the same time, Neoptolemus knows that this choice could cause the Greeks to lose the war. Through this example, Sophocles suggests that when it comes to balancing individual morality with the greater good, sometimes there's no right answer.



Neoptolemus prays to the gods to ease Philoctetes's pain, but Philoctetes says it is no use. The blood has begun to flow, and it will only get worse. As Philoctetes cries out in pain, he begs Neoptolemus not to leave him and curses Atreus's sons and Odysseus. Philoctetes calls to death and asks why it never comes. He looks to Neoptolemus and pleads with him to burn him in the volcano on Lemnos, just as Philoctetes did for Heracles.

Neoptolemus promises Philoctetes that he won't leave him, just as Philoctetes falls into a delirium. Neoptolemus notices that a river of infected blood has begun to drain from Philoctetes's **wound**, and he tells the chorus to leave him to sleep. As Philoctetes sleeps, the chorus asks Neoptolemus what their next move is. Neoptolemus already has the **bow and arrows**, the men say, and it is the perfect time to flee. Neoptolemus agrees but refuses to leave. If they sail without Philoctetes, taking the bow will mean nothing. The gods have decreed that they must bring both the bow *and* Philoctetes to Troy. Plus, they have already lied to Philoctetes, Neoptolemus says, and it would be shameful to make it worse by leaving him.

The chorus again tries to convince Neoptolemus to leave Philoctetes. He refuses and tells the men to keep quiet as Philoctetes begins to wake. Philoctetes opens his eyes and can't believe that Neoptolemus hasn't left him. He asks Neoptolemus to help him to his feet and Neoptolemus offers the help of the chorus, but Philoctetes declines. He doesn't want to offend the men with the terrible smell of his **wound**, since living on the ship with him will be difficult enough. Neoptolemus helps Philoctetes to his feet and begins to cry.

Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes that he is "torn apart" but cannot tell him why. He is disgusted with himself for acting against his "true nature," and he is sure that the whole of Greece will consider him awful. Philoctetes is confused. Neoptolemus's actions have not been awful, but Philoctetes isn't so sure about his words, and he begins to worry that Neoptolemus doesn't really plan to take him on the ship. Neoptolemus reassures Philoctetes that he will take him, but Philoctetes will regret going.

Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes that he must sail to Troy to help the Greeks win the Trojan War, which is where they will be going when they leave Lemnos. Philoctetes claims that Neoptolemus has deceived him and swears that he will never go to Troy, not after the Greeks have treated him so badly. Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes that he had no choice, but Philoctetes refuses to listen and demands to have his **bow and arrows** back.

According to Greek myth, before Heracles was deified, he was a mortal hero who wanted to be placed on his funeral pyre while he was still alive, to end his suffering. However, no one would agree to light the pyre except for Philoctetes, so Heracles gifted Philoctetes his unerring bow and arrows as a reward for this good deed.



This passage is further evidence of Neoptolemus's inherent good nature. Neoptolemus won't leave Philoctetes, even though it would be easy to do so, because it goes against his moral compass to leave a man in distress. This passage also refers to Helenus's prophecy again. It won't do the Greeks any good to go to Troy without Philoctetes, as he is the one who is destined to kill Paris, the prince of Troy and the one who started the war when he ran off with Menelaus's wife.



Neoptolemus begins to cry because he has been forced to deceive Philoctetes against his better judgment. Meanwhile, Philoctetes's concern that he will offend the men with his wound is further evidence of the prejudice against those with disabilities in Greek society. Contempt for those with disabilities is so widespread that even Philoctetes believes that his wound makes him repulsive.



Neoptolemus is "torn" between deceiving Philoctetes, as he has been ordered to under his obligation to the army, or honoring his "true nature" to be a decent human being. Sophocles implies that human beings frequently struggle between satisfying their own desires and acting in the interest of the greater good, which is often a lose-lose situation, as something will always be sacrificed.



Like Neoptolemus, Philoctetes, too, struggles with the decision to either act on his own desires or in the interest of the greater good. Philoctetes hates the Greek army for marooning him on Lemnos, and Sophocles implies that his grudge is warranted; however, Sophocles also suggests it would be nobler if Philoctetes sacrificed his grudge and went to Troy for the greater good of the Greeks.



Neoptolemus refuses to return the **bow and arrows**. “Right and interest alike demand it,” he says to Philoctetes. Philoctetes curses Neoptolemus and asks if he has any shame. Without the bow and arrows, Philoctetes won’t be able to sustain life on Lemnos. He cries to the wild beasts that inhabit the island to hear what dishonorable thing Neoptolemus has done to him. He promised to take Philoctetes home but was deceiving him the entire time. Philoctetes wishes that he had come across Neoptolemus before his **wound**, saying that then Neoptolemus wouldn’t have had the courage to perpetrate such a “cowardly trick.”

Philoctetes returns to his cave without the **bow and arrows**, resolved to die on Lemnos. The chorus looks to Neoptolemus and again asks what they should do, but Neoptolemus doesn’t know. He is torn between his orders and his terrible pity for Philoctetes, and he wishes that he had never left Scyros for Troy. Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus that Neoptolemus isn’t a bad man; he has simply allowed bad men to lead him. He tells Neoptolemus to go home while he still has the chance—he just needs to give Philoctetes the bow and arrows first.

Odysseus suddenly appears and tells Philoctetes that he has been on Lemnos all along. In a panic, Philoctetes again begs Neoptolemus to give him the **bow and arrows**. Odysseus tells Philoctetes that he is not getting the bow, and adds that if he doesn’t come with them to Troy, they will force him. Odysseus says that the gods have determined that Philoctetes must go to Troy and there is nothing to be done about it. Philoctetes again refuses and tries to throw himself from a cliff, but the chorus stops him and holds him down.

Philoctetes curses Odysseus, but he can see that Neoptolemus is feeling remorseful. Philoctetes asks Odysseus why he must go to Troy. He is, after all, a “stinking cripple” and is sure to disturb their prayers again. Odysseus tells Philoctetes that he likes winning, but he is happy lose in this case. He tells the chorus to let go of Philoctetes and allow him to stay on Lemnos. There are plenty of other Greek marksmen who can shoot the **bow and arrows**. As Odysseus heads back to the ship, he tells Neoptolemus not let his morals get in the way.

Both Philoctetes and Sophocles suggest that deception is never ethical, not even in war. However, Sophocles also implies that it isn’t right for Philoctetes to condemn the Greeks to further death and suffering through the continuation of the Trojan War just to satisfy his grudge against Odysseus and Atreus’s sons. This is reflected in Neoptolemus’s comment that “right and interest alike demand” he keep the bow, as it is in the best interest of the Greeks that the Trojan War end, which can only be achieved with Philoctetes and his bow. Again, competing versions of what is “right” make it impossible for either man to know exactly what the best choice is.



Philoctetes’s claim that Neoptolemus is a good man who has allowed bad men to lead him again implies that the military causes otherwise moral people to behave in immoral ways (such as killing and lying). This passage also reflects the struggle of serving one’s own desires or the greater good, which are often at odds with each other.



As Philoctetes’s arrows never miss their mark, the bow and arrows had to be taken from Philoctetes before he could be forced to go to Troy. Now that Neoptolemus has the bow and arrows, Philoctetes is no longer dangerous. Philoctetes’s attempt to throw himself from the cliff again illustrates the struggle between personal desire and the greater good—Philoctetes wants to die rather than serve the men who betrayed him, but it is better for the Greeks if he goes to Troy and ends the war.



Odysseus and the Greek fleet initially abandoned Philoctetes because his cries of pain disturbed their prayers, which must be conducted in absolute silence. Philoctetes’s reference to himself as a “stinking cripple” again underscores prejudice against the disabled in Greek society. Philoctetes is condemned by himself and others simply because of his disability, which Sophocles implies is a tragic injustice. Here, Odysseus also demonstrates one way of choosing the greater good over self-interest. He likes to win and so would prefer to force Philoctetes to go to Troy, but he nonetheless recognizes that getting away with the bow and arrows is the most important thing



The chorus tells Philoctetes that Odysseus is their superior and they must obey him, but Neoptolemus orders the chorus to stay with Philoctetes anyway. It will take a while to ready the ship and say their prayers and Philoctetes may change his mind in the meantime, Neoptolemus says, as he runs toward the ship with the **bow and arrows**.

The chorus's claim that they must obey Odysseus again implies that the military forces people to act directly against their moral compasses. Neoptolemus's decision to disobey Odysseus is further evidence of Neoptolemus's inherent morality and further reflects Sophocles's argument that the decision of whether to act on behalf of one's own desires or in the best interest of the greater good is a constant struggle.



LAMENT (LINES 1081 – 1218)

Philoctetes cries in his cave. He is not destined to leave Lemnos after all, and since he has lost the **bow and arrows**, the island's animals will now witness his death. Philoctetes has no one to blame but himself, the chorus tells him. It is his own bad decision that is keeping him here, they say, but Philoctetes doesn't appear to hear them over his constant lamentations. The chorus begs Philoctetes to curb his hate for Atreus's sons and Odysseus and not throw away their friendship.

This passage again reflects the struggle between acting on behalf of one's own desires and in the best interest of the greater good. Philoctetes is destined to leave Lemnos; he is simply blinded by his hatred and desire to hold a grudge. Here, Sophocles implies that it is a bad decision on Philoctetes's part to remain on Lemnos to the detriment of the Greeks—and, though he can't yet see it, to his own detriment as well.



Philoctetes imagines Neoptolemus mocking him as he holds the **bow and arrows**, but the chorus says that Neoptolemus was merely following orders. The chorus is only trying to help Philoctetes, they say, but he won't listen. Only Philoctetes can free himself from "this sickness," the chorus claims, by going to Troy. Philoctetes again refuses and tells the chorus to leave him. They turn to go, but Philoctetes begs them to stay. He apologizes as the chorus stands in confusion. Those in extreme pain often say what they don't mean, Philoctetes says.

The chorus's claim that Neoptolemus was only following orders again implies that the military makes otherwise moral men behave in unethical ways. According to Helenus's prophecy, Philoctetes will be cured of his "sickness"—that is his wound will be healed—only once he goes to Troy. Therefore, it is only Philoctetes who can free himself from his suffering, as only he can decide to finally go to Troy. Philoctetes's apology also underscores how pain and isolation can go hand in hand: because he is so miserably isolated, his pain makes him say things he doesn't mean, which only pushes people away and deepens his isolation.



Philoctetes again apologizes to the chorus, but he can never agree to go to Troy and help the same men who marooned him alone on this island simply because of his **wound**. He asks the chorus to give him an axe or sword so he may kill himself and again see his father, Poeas, who is surely dead by now.

Again, Poeas isn't dead, but Philoctetes doesn't know this yet. Philoctetes refuses to go to Troy and, like Neoptolemus, decides to act according to his own desires rather than the best interest of the Greeks.



SCENE 4 (LINES 1219 – 1407)

Neoptolemus appears, still with the **bow and arrows**, followed by Odysseus. Neoptolemus says that he must “undo the wrongs” he has done in listening to Odysseus and the Greek army, who have forced him to take the bow using deception. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that his actions are mad, but Neoptolemus says he must return the bow to Philoctetes. It was wrong to take it in the first place. Odysseus tries to stop Neoptolemus, citing the full force of the Greek army. He is being “foolish,” Odysseus says, but Neoptolemus says he would rather be “right than wise.”

Neoptolemus yells to Philoctetes to come out of his cave. He tells Philoctetes that he has “change[d] his mind,” but wants to know why he refuses to come to Troy. Philoctetes again says he won’t be persuaded, and Neoptolemus agrees to stop trying. He tells Philoctetes that he has come to return the **bow and arrows**, but Philoctetes is dubious. “My actions will prove me true,” Neoptolemus says. “Put out your hand.”

Odysseus appears and forbids Neoptolemus to give Philoctetes the **bow and arrows**. He says he will force Philoctetes to go to Troy regardless of what Neoptolemus says. Philoctetes takes the bow and draws back an arrow. Neoptolemus tells him not to shoot and grabs his hand, and Odysseus runs back to the ship. Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus that the Greeks talk a big game, but they are really cowards. Neoptolemus, however, is not “a cheat like Sisyphus.” Like his father, Achilles, Neoptolemus is a hero, Philoctetes says.

Neoptolemus is glad to hear that Philoctetes has forgiven him, but he tells Philoctetes that if he continues to hold fast to his grudge against the Greeks and stay on Lemnos, he doesn’t deserve any sympathy. Philoctetes’s **wound** and pain are sent by the gods, Neoptolemus says. Philoctetes had unwittingly disturbed Chryse’s shrine, and he will never find relief unless he goes to Troy and sees Asclepius, the only one who can cure his wound.

Neoptolemus’s claims that he must “undo the wrongs” of the Greek army because he would rather be “right than wise” again implies that military service forces otherwise moral men into acting in ways that are unethical. Neoptolemus is so dedicated to doing the right thing, he can’t even be persuaded by the force of the entire army. Of course, Neoptolemus is acting on behalf of his own desires and is completely ignoring the needs of the Greeks, which is to get Philoctetes to Troy to end the war. Again, it’s unclear exactly what “right” means, which underscores how hard the decision that Neoptolemus has to make is.



This passage again reflects the idea of actions versus words, which are often deceptive in Sophocles’s plays. Neoptolemus’s words in previous scenes were mostly lies, but the act of returning the bow and arrows reflects his true nature, which is to respect Philoctetes and not lie to him. Neoptolemus has “changed his mind” because he will no longer deceive Philoctetes on behalf of the Greek army.



Odysseus runs back to the ship several times during the play, an action that suggests he is truly a coward, which is at odds with the tough words he speaks. Neoptolemus’s attempt to stop Philoctetes from killing Odysseus again reflects Neoptolemus’s firm sense of morality, and Philoctetes’s claim that Neoptolemus is not “a cheat like Sisyphus” suggests that Odysseus is a cheat, since Sisyphus is allegedly Odysseus’s biological father.



Neoptolemus’s claim that Philoctetes doesn’t deserve any sympathy if he stays on Lemnos to the detriment of the Greeks seems to be Sophocles’s primary argument. While Sophocles does argue that the discrimination faced by Philoctetes is tragic and unjust, he also implies that it would be nobler if Philoctetes sacrificed his desire to hold a grudge for the greater good of the Greeks.



Helenus, the prophet, has prophesized that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus will bring down Troy and be hailed as heroes. There is more to gain by going to Troy, Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes, than by staying in Lemnos, but Philoctetes still refuses. Neoptolemus shouldn't want to help the Greeks either, Philoctetes says, since Atreus's sons won't give him Achilles's armor. Neoptolemus should return to Scyros and "leave those rotten men to a rotten death."

Philoctetes reminds Neoptolemus that he promised to take him home, and he asks him again to make good on his promise. Neoptolemus finally agrees, even though he knows that the Greeks will kill him for it. Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus not to worry as long as they have the **bow and arrows**, and they head toward the ship.

CLOSING SCENE (LINES 1408 – 1472)

Suddenly, Heracles appears from the sky above and tells Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to stop and listen to him. Heracles has brought the word of Zeus, and the men must abandon their current plans. Philoctetes must return to Troy with Neoptolemus, Heracles says, where his wound will be healed. Then, Philoctetes will use the **bow and arrows** to kill Paris and conquer Troy. Afterwards, Philoctetes can go home to his father, Poeas, and tell him of his bravery.

Heracles tells Philoctetes and Neoptolemus that they must go to Troy together to end the Trojan War, and they both immediately agree to go. Heracles disappears, and Philoctetes bids the island of Lemnos farewell as the chorus prays for their safe passage to Troy.

Philoctetes's comment that Neoptolemus should leave the Greek army to "rotten deaths" echoes Philoctetes's claim that they left him "to rot" on the island. Of course, Achilles's armor is not really being withheld from Neoptolemus and is just another part of Odysseus's elaborate lie.



Ultimately, both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus decide to act on behalf of their own desires rather than the greater good of the Greeks. Neoptolemus acts on behalf of his morals, and Philoctetes acts according to his grudge.



Heracles's appearance is what is known as a deus ex machina in Greek literature. Heracles is written into the story for the purpose of resolving a complex problem that otherwise cannot be resolved. With the appearance of Heracles, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus are finally convinced to go to Troy—and act in the best interest of the greater good instead of following their own desires.



Presumably, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus would not have agreed to go to Troy without Heracles's intervention, which further underscores the struggle between one's own desires and what is in the best interest of the greater good. Sophocles's play illustrates the difficulty involved in such decisions and further suggests that such decisions are a lose/lose situation, as something must always be sacrificed no matter which decision is made. Only divine intervention, it seems, can help humans resolve these impossible situations.





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