

Thersites in Sophokles, *Philoktetes* 445

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PHILOKTETES enquires of Neoptolemos, "...there was one Thersites...—do you know if he is alive?" The young hero replies: οὐκ εἶδον αὐτόν (αὐτός Nauck, Burges), ἡσθόμην δ' ἔτ' ὄντα νιν. αὐτόν means *ipsum* here (Paley), 'in the flesh'; the change to αὐτός is needless. Jebb¹ comments that here Thersites survives Achilles. "But, according to the commoner legend, he died before him..." Thersites had mutilated the corpse of Penthesilea and accused Achilles of loving her; whereupon Achilles killed him. This is in fact the early form of the legend, which according to Proklos was already given by Arktinos in the *Aethiopsis*.² Correctly, the scholiast on *Philoktetes* 445 remarks τοῦτο παρ' ἱστορίαν.³

Are we to infer from Neoptolemos' remark, therefore, as J. Schmidt suggested,⁴ that there was a version of the legend in which Achilles predeceased Thersites? Surely not: Neoptolemos is lying,⁵ and the audience is meant to know that he is not telling the truth. The lie is due less to the dishonourable circumstances in which Achilles killed Thersites than to the train of the conversation between Philoktetes and Neoptolemos. As Schneidewin pointed out,⁶ Neoptolemos answers as he does to strengthen Philoktetes in his view that in war only the wicked survive and prosper. Nestor, it is true, is still alive but only as a result of the self-sacrifice of his son Antilochos,⁷ and he too πράσσει νῦν κακῶς. The greater Ajax and Patroklos are dead, whereas Odysseus and Thersites are alive; and Odysseus, not Neoptolemos, is alleged to have the arms of Achilles (365–6).

Neoptolemos lies in order to strengthen Philoktetes in his conviction that πόλεμος οὐδέν' ἄνδρ' ἐκὼν | αἰρεῖ πονηρόν, the better to win

¹ *Sophocles* pt. iv: *The Philoktetes* (Cambridge 1890) p.79.

² *Chr.* p.105 ed. T. W. Allen.

³ *Schol. vet. ed.* Papageorgius p.364.

⁴ *MythLex.* 5, col. 667.

⁵ *Cf. schol. on Philoktetes* 1402, p.393 P.

⁶ *Sophokles* (Leipzig 1853) 185.

⁷ vv.424–5; *cf. Pindar, Pyth.* 6.30ff.

the outcast's sympathy. Hence the rather devious reply to the question—not a direct “he is alive” but “I *heard* that he is still alive.” Contrast *χοῦτος τεθνηκῶς ἦν*, said confidently (and truly) of Patroklos (435). Philoktetes is intended to take the devious answer as a sign that the noble son of Achilles had deliberately avoided the odious Thersites at Troy; it is not, I think, as Wecklein supposed, evidence of the obscurity of Thersites.⁸

This is the only passage in the extant plays and fragments of Sophokles where Thersites is mentioned by name: perhaps the poet regarded him as essentially unbecoming to the dignity of tragedy. In a fragment of the *Ἀλεάδαι* however,⁹ there may be an allusion to him: *πλοῦτος* is the subject—*καὶ γὰρ δυσειδὲς σῶμα καὶ δυσώνυμον | γλώσση* (“accursed for his tongue”) *σοφὸν τίθησιν εὐμορφόν τ' ἰδεῖν*. In this play too, therefore, Thersites may have been said to prosper; nor, in spite of *Iliad* 2, is such prosperity implausible, for he was of royal descent, being a son of Agrios son of Porthaon or Porthheus,¹⁰ and so a kinsman of Diomedes.

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November, 1966

⁸ *Philoc.* ed. N. Wecklein (Leipzig 1875) *ad loc.* Cf. A. Taccone, *Sofocle, Filottete* (Florence 1948) 72, “Risposta quanto mai adatta alla dignità di Neottolemo. Egli aveva avuto ben altro pel capo che curarsi di un simile individuo.”

⁹ fr. 88.9–10 Pearson.

¹⁰ Q. Smyrn. 1.770ff; cf. *Il.* 14.115f and Schmidt (*supra* n.4) 667.