

The Power of the Word in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

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λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, GORGIAS

THE *Philoctetes* is a much-discussed play.¹ Most of its critics feel that it is one of the harder of Sophocles' plays to make intelligible to the modern reader, who tends to ask questions like: Is Philoctetes or Neoptolemus the hero? If Philoctetes, wherein lies his tragedy? What function does Odysseus serve? Such questions are embarrassing, perhaps unanswerable.² There remains the possibility that they are the wrong *kind* of questions to ask about a play like the *Philoctetes*.

Perhaps we should try a different approach; the *Philoctetes* is a case-study in the failure of communication, involving three individuals who fail to come to terms with one another because they are, in effect, speaking with different voices. Their tragedy, if you will, is a collective one: there is a breakdown in that communication which is at the basis of human society and which is epitomized by the Greek term *λόγος*.

To start with Philoctetes himself. He has lived for over nine years on

¹ For earlier discussion see Schmid-Stählin, *GeschGriechLit* I.2 (1934, repr. 1959) 397–407; more recently, A. Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*² (Göttingen 1964) 127–130; recent literature in H. Friis Johansen, "Sophocles 1937–1959," *Lustrum* 7 (1962) 247–255.

The following throw some light on the play: S. M. Adams' chapter in his *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto 1957) 134–159; Karin Alt, "Schicksal und ΦΥΣΙΣ im Philoktet des Sophokles," *Hermes* 89 (1961) 141–174; Harry C. Avery, "Heracles, Philoctetes, Neoptolemus," *Hermes* 93 (1965) 279–297; Lilian Feder, "The Symbol of the Desert Island in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *Drama Survey* 3 (1963) 33–41; P. W. Harsh, "The Role of the Bow in the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles," *AJP* 81 (1961) 408–414; M. H. Jameson, "Politics and the *Philoctetes*," *CP* 51 (1956) 217–227; B. M. W. Knox, "Philoctetes," *Arion* 2 (1964) 42–60 (= *The Heroic Temper, Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* [Sather Lectures 35, Berkeley 1964] 117–142); I. M. Linforth, *Philoctetes: the Play and the Man* (Univ. of Calif. Publs. in Class. Philol. 15, 3 [1956] 95–156); and R. Muth, "Gottheit und Mensch im 'Philoktet' des Sophokles," *Studi in onore di Luigi Castiglioni II* (Florence 1959) 641–658.

² Or they provoke answers which are misleading, as, for example, Weinstock's misemphasis on Neoptolemus and his "Bildung" (*Sophokles*² [Berlin 1937] 95–122).

Lemnos, an island which is, for dramatic purposes at least, deserted.³ His isolation is emphasized by the chorus (172, 183) and by Philoctetes himself (471, 487). On one level, then, Philoctetes is unable to communicate with his fellow men because he lives entirely alone. The poet makes it clear that this impossibility of communication is keenly felt by Philoctetes and was one of his bitterest griefs. "To his bitter cries," the chorus say, "a ceaseless, distant echo alone responds" (189–190). And again, "he had no neighbor of his woes to whom he might pour out his lament and receive an answering cry" (694). So common a thing as that, *λόγοι* between men, the cheapest commodity in Athens; and yet the absence of this ordinary everyday converse through speech was one of Philoctetes' deepest sorrows. He could tell his pain to no one and hear no word of consolation in return.

But the matter is more complicated than that. Even if there had been other humans on the island, Philoctetes would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to communicate with them, for, a good part of the time, Philoctetes' pain makes him incapable of rational speech. Bestial cries, vocal embodiments of pain, are all he can utter. Even before his actual appearance, the sailors who form the chorus say they hear "the far-off voice of a man destroyed" (208). "He comes not with trill of shepherds' pipes," they say grimly,⁴ "but his cry can be heard from afar . . . His dread shriek goes before him" (213–218). This man-destroying pain, an agony so blindingly intense that it makes rational discourse impossible, is a fact of Philoctetes' life. It results from the wound in his foot received ten years before when, on his way to Troy, he had transgressed the holy precinct of Chryse and was bitten by the sacred snake. It is now so real as to be thought of as almost a companion of Philoctetes on his island, a mate for the rocks and the endless sea. These are the sub-rational cries for which, as we are told in the opening lines, he was put ashore on Lemnos: his "wild cries of ill-omen, shrieking, groaning" had interfered with the Greek sacrifices (8–11). And, as the play unfolds, we are given a moving portrayal of the actual breakdown of speech which prevents Philoctetes

³ This seems to have been an innovation of Sophocles'; see Jebb's introduction, p. xiii, and his note on line 2. (Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 52.7, remarks on the indifference of Aeschylus to the implausibility of bringing a chorus of Lemnians face-to-face with Philoctetes for the first time in over nine years.) For the loneliness of the Sophoclean hero, especially Philoctetes, see Knox, *Heroic Temper* 32–33.

⁴ This is a favorite oxymoron, used by Sophocles of Philoctetes elsewhere: *μέλη βοῶν ἀναυλα καὶ ῥακτήρια* fr. 699 P. For occurrences elsewhere in tragedy, see *TAPA* 93 (1962) 369 n.29.

from communicating with his fellows and dissolves his humanity in a torrent of meaningless cries. "Come on," Neoptolemus urges as they are making for the ship; "why are you silent for no reason?"⁵ Philoctetes' only reply is a shriek; he cannot explain his sufferings, he can only manifest them in his cries. When he cries out again, Neoptolemus asks impatiently, "What's the matter? Will you not speak out? Will you remain thus silent?" (740–741). Philoctetes begins to speak, in halting, broken phrases which are interrupted by one long, dreadful wail (746). As Knox well remarks, Neoptolemus here finds himself confronted with Philoctetes' "momentary obliteration of personality, of all traces of humanity, under the pressure of intolerable pain."⁶ His suffering is terrible, beyond words (756). In the course of the scene he suffers another attack which leads him to call upon death (797–798) and to long for immolation on the Lemnian fire.

Isolation and pain: first the one and now the other prevent Philoctetes' communication with his fellows. But these obstacles are overcome in the course of the action: Philoctetes *does* find another human being with whom to communicate and his pain subsides sufficiently to make intelligible speech possible. Here we have the central paradox which is at the heart of the play's meaning: the boy with whom Philoctetes thought he could finally set up a bond of communication after so many silent years in fact turns out to be a liar.⁷ True *λόγος* is impossible because of Neoptolemus' *misuse* of speech.

That this is the final, crushing blow which sends Philoctetes back into the cave of his wounded self has not been fully appreciated. We have to go back to the point where his hopes of creating a speech-bond are first aroused in order to comprehend the full effect of the dashing of those hopes. When Philoctetes first saw Neoptolemus and his men he had said, "Your garb is Greek, but I wish to *hear your voice*" (224–225). "Speak to me . . . answer. For it is not right that I should lack this of you nor you of me."⁸ When they identified themselves as Greeks, Philoctetes burst out, "O most beloved sound! O to hear the

⁵ 730–731, ἐξ οὐδενὸς λόγου σιωπᾶς, a slight pun.

⁶ Knox (*supra* n.1) 52 (= *Heroic Temper* 131).

⁷ Adams is eager to save Neoptolemus from literal untruth. Even if his view (which, as he admits, is "open to objection," 140 n.5) be accepted, the boy's intent is to deceive; "der Trug ist herrschend, und nicht nur Odysseus ist der Falsche," as Reinhardt remarks (*Sophokles* [Frankfurt/Main 1933] 183).

⁸ 230–231; ἀλλ' ἀνταμείψασθ'· οὐ γὰρ εἰκὸς οὔτ' ἐμὲ | ὑμῶν ἀμαρτεῖν τοῦτό γ' οὔθ' ὑμᾶς ἐμοῦ. ἀμαρτεῖν in a deeper sense as well, cf. 1012 and 1224.

address of such a man after so long a time! Tell me everything . . .” (234–238). *φώνημα, πρόσφθεγμα, γέγωνε*—it is as if he were savoring the synonyms for the speech-act. This was Philoctetes’ last chance, not only to get off the island—for that is really of secondary importance—but to emerge from his physical and spiritual isolation into the world of men.⁹ Now his hopes to set up a human contact are dashed. He withdraws once again into himself and contents himself with his island, where he has only the harbors, the headlands, the wild mountain creatures and rocks to call upon (938–39),

. . . I pour out these laments to you, my
Customary company, for I do not know to whom else to speak . . .

What has led Neoptolemus to be a part of this evil scheme, this frustration of the speech-act? He has fallen under the influence of a man for whom *λόγος* is not primarily intended as a means of truthful communication among men, but just another means to victory. “I was young once and had an inactive tongue,” Odysseus tells Neoptolemus in the opening scene, “but I have now learned that the tongue, not deeds, leads all before” (96–99). Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus later, “I know that Odysseus would touch any evil argument with his tongue” (407–408). And when Philoctetes asks him of “a worthless man, but one quick and clever of tongue” (440), Neoptolemus not unreasonably thinks the reference is to Odysseus, although it turns out that Philoctetes was referring to Thersites. And later, after the “trader” has told his story, Philoctetes bursts out, “That Odysseus should hope to lead me off with soft words! . . . I would rather listen to my worst enemy, the snake that bit me. Odysseus would say *anything* . . .” (629–633).

Odysseus would, indeed, say anything. And there are indications in the play that he has used his lies even on Neoptolemus. In Neoptolemus’ story to Philoctetes, the lad says that Odysseus and Achilles’ guardian Phoenix came to him with their own deceptive *λόγος*, saying that he was to have the honor of capturing Troy in his dead father’s place, “and there was fair promise in their speech” (352). But when they arrived at Troy their *λόγος* changed and became “most audacious” (363): they offered him anything else of Achilles’ but his weapons; these were now Odysseus’. Now, Neoptolemus has been

⁹ The undertones in this scene are well brought out by Reinhardt (*supra* n.7) 178–179.

put up to telling this tale by Odysseus, and it may be that this detail of Neoptolemus' being cheated out of his father's arms, as an element in it (62ff), is simply untrue. But it seems more likely that Neoptolemus has incorporated a true detail in an otherwise deceptive account,¹⁰ and when, towards the end of the play, Philoctetes refers to the Greeks "plundering him of his father's prize" (1365),¹¹ the boy does not correct him. In any case we are presented in the opening scene with a clear example of Odysseus' deceit. Neoptolemus is wondering how he can overcome his innate aversion to lying and Odysseus insists that it is a matter of profit, *κέρδος*: Troy is to be taken with Philoctetes' arrows. Neoptolemus asks in surprise, "Am I not, then, to be the sacker of the city *as you said*?" (114). It is only a hint, but an important one; Neoptolemus has himself been the dupe of a lying *λόγος* of Odysseus, who, however, hastily covers himself by saying that it is the combination of Philoctetes' bow and Neoptolemus' strength which is to prevail over Troy.

Let us examine the process by which the young and pliable Neoptolemus falls under the spell of this Master of Deceit. As the play opens we see the lad being worked on by the wily words of Odysseus, the man of action who has no time for long speeches (11–12). At first, he outlines what Neoptolemus' part in the plot is to be only in vague terms: "you must steal away the soul of Philoctetes in speech with words."¹² The boy is horrified at hearing the plot and his share in it. "Words which I am pained to hear I am loath also to do. It is not my nature to do anything by evil craft . . ." (86–88). "What are you ordering me to do except tell lies?" he asks, and Odysseus replies: "I am telling you to take Philoctetes by guile" (100–101). "Do not you consider it shameful, then, to tell lies?" Neoptolemus asks incredulously. For here is a world of values completely foreign to him. This misuse of the speech-act, this perversion of *λόγος*, clearly goes against his grain. He is his father's son; all must be straightforward and above-board. But Odysseus succeeds in casting his verbal spell, and

¹⁰ As Adams, 137, maintains: "Urged to deceive, he is himself deceived."

¹¹ Jebb followed Brunck in deleting the last part of 1365 and the following 1½ lines, on what seem to me insufficient grounds (see his Appendix, 251–252; his explanation of why they were inserted in the first place is unconvincing). But even if this deletion be accepted, the important words *πατρός γέρας σωλῶντες*, remain at the beginning of 1365. Neoptolemus' comment at 1373, *λέγεις μὲν εἰκότ'*, may indicate that he admits the truth of Philoctetes' account.

¹² 55; the redundancy of *λόγοισιν . . . λέγων* seems intentional.

Neoptolemus takes over the values of his temporary master: profit, victory at all costs. Lies and deceit count for nothing in the pragmatist's world where success is its own justification.

What ultimately wins Neoptolemus over is an appeal to κλέος, which is really a variation of the λόγος-theme: the young man is naturally anxious about what others will say about him, his reputation in the eyes of the world. Odysseus makes his famous pragmatic request in these terms: "Give me yourself for one short and shameless day, and for all future time *be called* the holiest of men" (83–85). The deception involved in Odysseus' plan is loathsome to him, and yet, he says, "sent as your assistant I shrink from *being called* a betrayer" (93–94). Ultimately it is this appeal to reputation which breaks down the young man's resistance to telling a lie: "you will be called wise as well as good," Odysseus promises (119). Odysseus is σόφισμα personified, but it is not a quality usually associated with Achilles. The promised word of praise on others' lips for this new quality, in which he is to surpass his father, is enough to win over Neoptolemus.

We are not surprised when, later, Philoctetes makes a contrary appeal to Neoptolemus, an appeal also based on κλέος. He asks to be taken to Lemnos: "To noble natures, disgrace is hateful, what is noble brings fair repute. If you leave me you will have ignoble disgrace; if you do as I ask, you will have the greatest prize, fair repute, εὐκλεία" (475–478).¹³

If it is quite natural that Neoptolemus should be moved by an appeal to reputation, it is exceedingly strange that Odysseus should be the one to make such an appeal. For Odysseus himself seems impervious to such considerations. What people say about *him* no longer bothers him. On this level he stands in antithesis to Neoptolemus. He encourages Neoptolemus to make his story more plausible by speaking whatever abuse he wishes against him (64–65). The lines should not be passed off too lightly, for the poet returns to the point. In the "trader's" story we are told that the Trojan prophet Helenus was captured by Odysseus, "about whom men speak all shameful and abusive words" (607).

Once he has fallen under the evil spell of Odysseus, Neoptolemus seems even to outdo his master, for he throws himself into his deceptions

¹³ Κλέος is an important element in Philoctetes' thinking, too. See lines 251–256 and Avery (*supra* n.1) 296 n.1; on κλέος generally, Schmid-Stählin 400 n.19 and Alt (*supra* n.1) 149–150, 153 n.1, 171–172. Odysseus spoke of εὐκλεία in Euripides' version of the story (Dio Chrys. *Or.* 52.12).

with real gusto. The success of this central scene is due partly to the zest with which Neoptolemus carries out his task. He is, if we can put it this way, *sincere* in his deception, and it is this very sincerity, ringing through his words, that wins Philoctetes over. He succeeds in persuading Philoctetes, as well as some critics,¹⁴ of the truth of his grievance over his father's armor. His lies are completely successful, and they are on the verge of departing for the ship, when the false "trader" appears. The scene is entirely unnecessary to the plot, for Philoctetes is already duped, but it is a splendid *charade* which reinforces the lies which have gone before in a kind of *living* lie. Odysseus had told Neoptolemus that he would send the "trader" if there were too much delay and Neoptolemus is to take his cues from the man's devious speech (130–131). Neoptolemus now carries out his instructions to the letter. It is all played with elaborate detail and (one imagines) to high theatrical success. Phoenix and the sons of Theseus are pursuing him, Neoptolemus, while Odysseus and Diomedes are in pursuit of—but before he can give the name, the trader says, "tell me who this is, and whatever you have to say, say it in a whisper" (573–574). When Neoptolemus identifies Philoctetes, the trader exclaims, "say no more . . . get out of here" (576–577). Philoctetes' guard is up at these whispered intrigues. "What is he saying, boy?" he asks. And then, with an ironical reference to the actual situation, "What dark deal is he making about me with you in words?" (578–579). Neoptolemus replies with a lie, contained in a triple reference to the theme: "I do not know what he is saying. He must speak out openly what he will say . . ." (580–591). The trader then feigns fear that his news may put him in disfavor with the army: "Do not charge me before the army of saying what I should not" (582–583). But Neoptolemus reassures him of Philoctetes' mutual hatred of the Atreidae. The trader finally begins his story: Diomedes and Odysseus are sailing in pursuit of Philoctetes and intend to take him off either by persuasion or by force. When Neoptolemus asks why they are after Philoctetes, the trader tells the (probably true) story of the capture of the Trojan prophet Helenus by Odysseus.¹⁵ The prophet had said that they

¹⁴ E.g. Adams, 137, and Alt, 151–152; the truth of Neoptolemus' tale is heartily disputed by Knox, *Heroic Temper*, 191 n.30.

¹⁵ The story of Helenus' capture is again told at 1337–1342, this time by Neoptolemus who now has no reason to lie. Helenus' prophecy figured also in Euripides' *Philoctetes* (Dio Chrys. Or. 59.12); there was probably an alternate version which gave Calchas as the author of the prophecy (Quintus Smyrn. 9.325ff).

would never capture Troy's towers if they did not persuade Philoctetes to return.

Assurance has been made doubly sure. If Philoctetes had been ready to leave with Neoptolemus earlier, he is now, after hearing the trader's tale, more eager than ever that they should depart. The ruse is about to work with complete success, Philoctetes is to be hustled aboard Neoptolemus' ship bound for Troy, when the spell which Odysseus' words have cast over the boy begins to lift, and his true nature begins, albeit hesitantly, to reassert itself. This emergence of the true Neoptolemus first makes itself apparent by his silence at 804–805, a reversal of their rôles at the opening of the scene,¹⁶ but the process had probably begun with Neoptolemus' handling of the sacred bow in the preceding scene (656–657). The hopelessness of his position finally hits Neoptolemus with full force. "Ah! What am I to do?" he asks in anguish. "Where do you wander in speech?" asks Philoctetes (896). "I do not know where to turn this impossible utterance," says Neoptolemus (897). When he speaks meaningfully of the real offense of departing from one's true nature and says that he is troubled at appearing shameful, Philoctetes begins to suspect from Neoptolemus' words that all is not well: "What you are saying gives me pause" (907). "O Zeus, what shall I do?" Neoptolemus shouts. "Must I be twice convicted of treachery, in hiding what I should not and speaking the most shameful of words?" (908–909). When he hints vaguely of a "grievous voyage," Philoctetes asks, "What are you saying? I don't understand . . ." (914), and Neoptolemus finally tells him that he must sail to Troy. "Ah! What are you saying?" Philoctetes cries (917). Neoptolemus replies lamely that he is only obeying orders.¹⁷ Philoctetes' request to have his bow returned encounters only silence from Neoptolemus: "he no longer addresses me," says Philoctetes (934). He tries one more time. "Give back the bow. Be *yourself* again. What do you say? . . . You are silent, I am destroyed" (951). In the course of the next scene, which can only be described as a shouting-match between Odysseus and Philoctetes, the latter turns a third time to Neoptolemus and asks pitifully, "Am I no longer to be addressed by your voice, son of Achilles?" (1066–1067). It is a futile attempt to re-establish the old contact, to set up again the

¹⁶ This reversal is noted by Alt, 158 n.1.

¹⁷ 925; just as Odysseus claimed to be acting on orders in putting Philoctetes ashore at Lemnos (line 6).

old bond of communication which Philoctetes had thought possible after so many silent years. But Neoptolemus' lies have destroyed all that. His shame and confusion are manifested by his hundred-line silence between his anguished question, *τί δρώμεν, ἄνδρες*; (974) and his speech at 1074.¹⁸ In the plaintive *κόμμος* which follows, Philoctetes laments: "obscure and hidden words of a crafty mind came on me unawares" (1111–1112), but he significantly does not specify whether these were Odysseus' or Neoptolemus'. To his laments and reproaches the chorus interpose: "It is man's task always to speak what is just, but, in doing so, not to inflict pain with an invidious tongue" (1140–1142), a sentiment which has, as so often in Sophoclean choruses, more application to the larger action than to the immediate situation.

When Neoptolemus returns, his actions, and, more important, his words make plain that he has undergone a change. He is now in command of the situation, and his tone of voice shows it. He speaks with assurance, even with authority. Odysseus is at his heels, wondering what the youth is planning. When Neoptolemus speaks of "undoing the wrong I did before," Odysseus remarks: "You speak fearfully" (1225). He elicits by stages the other's purpose in returning and, when Neoptolemus finally refers to the bow, he cries, "O Zeus, what will you say? You don't intend to give it back? . . . Are these words of yours a joke?" (1233, 1235). "If it is a joke to tell the truth!" Neoptolemus retorts. "What are you saying?" Odysseus asks in shock and disbelief; "what word have you spoken?" (1237). "Do you want me to plough up the same words twice and three times?" "I wish I had not heard them once to begin with." "Know this well," Neoptolemus firmly proclaims, "you have heard the whole *λόγος*" (1240). When Odysseus threatens him with the might of the "whole Achaean army," Neoptolemus replies acidly, "You are wise, but this saying of yours is not" (1244). "Neither your words nor your actions are wise." "But if they are *just*," the lad responds, "they are better than wise" (1246). He thus decisively rejects Odysseus' earlier offer of a reputation for wisdom as well as goodness (119). When Odysseus threatens to draw his sword, Neoptolemus calls his bluff and does the same, and Odysseus backs down with a lame and blustering, "I shall go and tell this to the whole army, who will punish you."

¹⁸ Adams, 153, calls this "one of the great dramatic silences." Reinhardt (*supra* n.7) 196 n.1, quotes Radermacher's comment, "Das Stillschweigen des Neoptolemos . . . ist bedeutsamer als jede Rede."

Neoptolemus has the last word with Odysseus, praising the prudence of his decision to depart (1259–1260). Next he calls to Philoctetes to come out of the cave, and, when the latter emerges, he attempts to reassure him: “Take heart. Hear the words with which I have come” (1267). Once burnt, twice wary: “I suffered harm from your fine words before, persuaded by your words.” And again, “you were such in words before . . .”¹⁹ “Not now,” says Neoptolemus, “I simply want to hear whether you have decided to stay or sail with us.” “Stop!” Philoctetes shouts. “Say no more. All that you say will be said in vain” (1275–1276). “This is your decision?” Neoptolemus asks. “More than I can say” (1277). “Well, I would have wished that you had been persuaded by my words, but if I do not happen to be speaking to the point, I shall stop.” “Yes,” retorts Philoctetes, “for you will say everything in vain” (1280). It is clearly not accidental that the *λόγος*-theme recurs in this climactic scene with almost embarrassing frequency.

Philoctetes begins to curse Neoptolemus, but the latter interrupts to tell him to take back the bow. “What are you saying?” asks Philoctetes in surprise. When Neoptolemus swears by Zeus, Philoctetes replies, “O you who speak most welcome words, if you speak the truth” (1290). As Neoptolemus is handing back the bow, Odysseus makes one last effort to intervene. “I forbid it . . .,” he blusters. “Whose voice is that?” asks Philoctetes. Told that it is Odysseus, Philoctetes aims the bow at his hated enemy and would shoot, but is restrained by Neoptolemus; Odysseus is thus given a chance to escape. “Know this,” says Philoctetes; “the first men of the army, the lying heralds of the Greeks, are cowards at the spear and bold only in words” (1307).

The bow has been returned to its rightful owner. When Neoptolemus points out that Philoctetes no longer has any cause for anger against him the latter agrees (*ξύμφημι*, 1310). He praises the young man and his father Achilles. “I rejoice,” Neoptolemus begins, “at your good words for me and my father” (*εὐλογοῦντα*, 1314), but he rebukes Philoctetes’ hardness of heart. His injuries, he tells him, are self-inflicted; he has become a savage, has cut himself off from human contact. “If someone advises you, speaking out of good will, you hate him . . . Nevertheless I will speak . . .” (1322–1324). Neoptolemus

¹⁹ The theme is reinforced by the repetition: *λόγους* at 1267, *λόγων* and *λόγους* in the emphatic position at the end of 1268 and 1269, *λόγοισι* in 1271.

makes one final attempt to get through to him. He explains that Philoctetes' wound is heaven's will, but that it is equally the will of heaven that he come to Troy to be healed by the sons of Asclepius and take Troy with his bow. They know this to be true from the prophecy of the Trojan Helenus, who staked his life on the truth of his words (1338–1342). Just as both Odysseus and Philoctetes had earlier appealed to Neoptolemus' desire for *εὐκλεία*, so now the young man holds out to Philoctetes the prospect of *κλέος ὑπέρτατον* as the taker of Troy (1347).

Philoctetes is in an agony of indecision. "How shall I distrust his words" (1350–1351). And yet how yield and go to Troy? His self-respect forbids him to return to face his former enemies. "I wish you would trust the gods and my own words," Neoptolemus pleads (1374). When he suggests sailing to Troy where his foot can be healed, Philoctetes breaks in, "Are you not ashamed to say these things before the gods? (1382) You will destroy me, I know, with these words" (1388). "No," Neoptolemus says, "but I say you do not understand. . . . What can I do if I cannot persuade you in words of anything I say?"—and the repetition again helps to underline the theme (1393–1394).

Neoptolemus has failed. His *λόγος* has proven fruitless. The moment has passed when he might have penetrated Philoctetes' shell and spoken to a common humanity within him. But, for his part, Philoctetes, who had emerged briefly from the dark spiritual exile at the promise of communion with another soul, has now put himself beyond the reach of reasoned argument. The human contact through speech at which he had grasped so eagerly earlier in the play had proven to be deceptive. Neoptolemus' fair words were nothing but a pack of lies. Now, although the young man presents his case with complete honesty and persuasiveness, Philoctetes turns a deaf ear on him. Contact is no longer possible, for Philoctetes prefers to nurse his grievances against the Atreidae, against all men, content to suffer in body as he suffers, without being aware of it, in soul.

Neoptolemus says despairingly, "the easiest course is to cease my words . . ." (1395). When Philoctetes reminds him yet again of his promise, Neoptolemus agrees to take him home and Philoctetes cries out: "O you who have spoken nobly!"²⁰ The pity is that his nobility

²⁰ 1402; both Odysseus and Philoctetes had appealed to *τὸ γενναῖον* in Neoptolemus (51, 478), but Odysseus' understanding of it was distorted. The Scholiast on 1402 remarks,

has shown itself too late. Philoctetes had been afraid to face the Greeks at Troy, but how will Neoptolemus face them if he fails in his mission to restore Philoctetes? “I will be at hand,” Philoctetes reassures him. “With what assistance?” “With the shafts of Heracles—” “What are you saying?” “—I shall keep them from drawing near.”

The characters in the play have been working at cross-purposes. Each time one tried to communicate with one of the others, he failed because of some factor which interfered with, frustrated, *λόγος*, the reasoned discourse between men. Odysseus had misused speech in trying to corrupt the young Neoptolemus and make him a copy of himself, an unprincipled man-of-action, ready to use his tongue as the occasion demanded, as an instrument of victory, fair or foul. Neoptolemus had allowed himself to forget his true nature and become entangled in this web of words: so much so that he outdid Odysseus in weaving falsehoods about the unsuspecting Philoctetes. “Men who break the law become base through the words of their teachers,” Neoptolemus says to Philoctetes, without realizing how true the words are of his own situation.²¹ When the young man does, finally, return to himself he finds that he has lost his chance to make contact with Philoctetes. The latter had come out of his shell at the sound of a Greek voice, had been beguiled by the living lie perpetrated by Neoptolemus and the “Trader,” had recoiled violently and bitterly when he learned the truth from the conscience-stricken youth. There is no reaching him now; he has withdrawn too far into himself for even the truth to have any persuasive effect on him. “How can I mistrust his *λόγοι*?” he asks agonizedly (1350–1351). And yet how return to the light of day and human converse? “By whom will I be addressed?” (1353).

There is no answer to the dilemma, at least none in terms of human *λόγος*. It takes a god from the machine to provide one, and then not in the *λόγοι* of reasoned persuasion and argument but as a divine *fiat*: the *μῦθος* of divine command. As Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are about to depart, the deified Heracles suddenly appears above and addresses Philoctetes directly. “Do not leave until you have heard my *μῦθοι*,” he orders (1409–1410). The *λόγος* of rational argument is here transcended; we have in their place the *utterance* of a divine

ἀπατᾶ δὲ καὶ θέλει ἄξει εἰς τὴν Τροίαν, but this would make the irony of Philoctetes’ *γενναῖον* . . . *ἔπος* appalling, and I believe the Scholiast is simply mistaken.

²¹ 386–397; at 971–972 Philoctetes points out the evil effect his “teacher” has had on the boy (cf. also 436, 604, 1015, 1387).

voice, against which there can be no objection, no delay. "Consider this the voice of Heracles . . . I shall tell you Zeus' will for you . . . you hearken to my *μῦθοι*" (1411–1417). The poet seems to be going out of his way to devise a distinction in terminology between the *λόγος* of human discourse and divine utterance, for which he here reserves the term *μῦθος*. For it can hardly be accidental that *μῦθος* is used with reference to Heracles' speech three times in this closing scene (1410, 1417, 1447), never in the preceding lines, although elsewhere in Sophocles it is interchangeable with *λόγος*.²² "First, I shall tell you of my own fate," Heracles continues. "Just as I won deathless *ἀρετή* by going through my sufferings, so you will win a far-famed life (*εὐκλέα βίον*) from these sufferings. . . ." He foretells Philoctetes' cure at Troy, his slaying of Paris with the bow, the sack of Troy, and his return home to his father laden with spoil.

Human *λόγος* had been kept from Philoctetes for the period of his lonely island life. When it did come, it came as a web of intricately interwoven lies. Finally, in its genuine form, the impassioned plea of the boy Neoptolemus to return with him to Troy, it had been powerless to move the proud man whose spirit had been wounded no less than his body. The content of Heracles' words is now no different from that of Neoptolemus' earlier pleas, but this time they are spoken with an authoritative divine voice, from the *θεολογεῖον*,²³ and they at last find a response in Philoctetes: "O longed-for voice," he exclaims, in words similar to those he had first addressed to Neoptolemus (1445, cf. 234–235), "I shall not disobey your *μῦθοι*."²⁴ *Λόγοι* have proven deceptive, and then ineffectual; they are now replaced by the *μῦθοι* of a divine personage. Although Philoctetes has not been persuaded, he will nevertheless not disobey. As he leaves Lemnos Philoctetes speaks a parting word of farewell to "the cave, the nymphs, the beat of the sea . . . where often Hermes' Mount sent a lament in echo to my voice" (1458–1460): *στόνον ἀντίτυπον*, a phrase which itself echoes an earlier utterance by the chorus (694).

²² Cf. F. Ellendt, *Lexicon Sophocleum* (Berlin 1872) s.v. *μῦθος*.

²³ This seems likelier, in spite of Pickard-Cambridge's denial of a *theologeion* in Sophocles (*Theatre of Dionysus* 48), than that Heracles "may have come out of the cave itself and spoken from the rock platform in front of it" (*ibid.* 50). The *theologeion* would also have been used by Athena in *Ajax* and the Ghost of Achilles in *Polyxena* (see also A. Spira, *Untersuchungen zum Deus ex Machina bei Sophokles und Euripides* [Kallmünz 1960] 32 n.51).

²⁴ 1447; the phrase is a Homeric echo, *Iliad* 1.220–221, also by a human to an immortal (note the similarity to 1350–1351, *πῶς ἀπιστήσω λόγοις | τοῖς τοῦδ'*, with the significant change to *μύθοις*).

ADDENDUM

The Pervasiveness of λόγος

The critical importance in the *Philoctetes* of speech, in its various forms, and the ultimate ineffectiveness of human speech have been discussed. (It is a pleasant coincidence that Dio Chrysostom, in describing the differences among the three great tragedians' handling of the Philoctetes-myth, refers to Sophocles' version as *ποίησιν τραγικώτατα καὶ εὐεπέστατα ἔχουσαν*, Or. 52.15.) How overwhelmingly recurrent is the theme can perhaps best be shown by an analysis of the relevant vocabulary of the play.

1.a.i. Various synonymous verbs directly signifying "to speak":

λέγω 12, 26, 55, 57, 64, 100, 101, 107, 108, 136, 150, 152, 199, 210, 335, 341, 345, 368, 380, 426, 507, 559, 574, 580, 581, 583, 590, 596, 814, 898, 909, 914, 938, 991, 1047, 1073, 1174, 1233, 1235, 1236, 1258, 1261, 1275, 1277, 1279, 1290, 1322, 1324, 1338, 1342, 1373, 1382, 1384, 1394, 1407, 1418

φράζω 25, 49, 137, 332, 341, 544, 551, 559, 573, 1222, 1280, 1336, 1415

φημί 89, 578, 580, 804, 805, 951, 994 *bis*, 1028, 1073, 1237, 1242, 1380, 1389 (*ξύμφημι* 1310)

αὐδάω (*αὐδάομαι*) 130, 240, 430, 852, 907 (*ἀπαυδάω* 1293; *ἐξαυδάω* 1244; *ἐπαυδάομαι* 395)

εἶπον 223, 246, 363, 371, 414, 442, 443, 615, 841, 917, 1141, 1276, 1288, 1290

ἐρῶ 329, 441, 740, 1204 (*ἐξερῶ* 329, 439)

εἴρηκα 1237, 1276, 1402

φωνέω 80, 229, 574, 662, 905, 1225, 1245 (*ἀντιφωνέω* 1065; *προσφωνέω* 934)

ἐννέπω 142, 348

καλέω 1080, 1324, 1452 (*ἐκκαλέω* 1264) [for *καλοῦμαι* see below, 2.a.]

γέγωνα 238

λάσκω 110

φθέγγομαι 863

ii. Varieties of speech:

ἀνακλαίομαι 939
 ἀποιμώζω 278
 βοάω 11, 216 (προβοάω 218)
 εὐλογέω 1314
 θρασυστομέω 380
 θρηγέω 1401
 θροέω 209, 1185, 1195
 ὁμολογέω 980
 προσάδω 405
 στενάζω 11, 917
 στένω 340, 806 (ἀναστένω 737)

iii. Verbs entailing or implying speech:

αἰνέω 451, 889, 1380, 1398 (ἐπαινέω 452; παραινέω 121, 621,
 1351, 1434; συναινέω 122)
 αἰτέω 63, 764 (ἀπαιτέω 362)
 ἀνιστορέω 253
 ἀμείβομαι 378, 844 (ἀνταμείβομαι 230)
 διαβάλλω 582
 ἐγκαλέω 328
 ἐλέγχω 338
 ἐξονειδίζω 382
 ἐπιμνησκόμαι 1400
 ἔρομαι 576
 ἐφίεμαι 770
 κελεύω 544, 865, 1196
 ὄμνημι 623, 941 (ἀπόμνημι 1289; ξυνόμνημι 1367)
 ὀνομάζω 605
 παραγγέλλω 1179
 πείθω 102, 103, 485, 612, 623, 624, 901, 1226, 1252, 1269, 1278
 ὑπομνησκω 1170
 ψεύδομαι 1342

iv. Verbs peripherally related to speech:

αἰτιάομαι 385
 ἀντιάζω 809
 γελάω 1023 (ἐγγελάω 1125)

διδάσκω 1387 (ἐκδιδάσκω 436, 604; προδιδάσκω 1015)
 εὐχομαι 1019, 1077 (ἐξεύχομαι 869; ἐπεύχομαι 1286, 1470;
 ἐξεπεύχομαι 668)
 ἱκετεύω 932
 ἰκνέομαι 470, 932
 ξυμμαρτυρέω 438
 σημαίνω [22], 37

b. Corresponding nouns:

- i. λόγος 12, 24, 49, 55, 86, 131, 165, 307, 319, 352, 363, 388, 389,
 407, 435, 521, 563, 579, 587, 593, 612, 629, 676, 731, 846,
 896, 964, 1048, 1237, 1240, 1267, 1268, 1269, 1271, 1278,
 1307, 1350, 1374, 1385, 1388, 1393, 1395
 ἔπος 607, 897, 909, 1047, 1112, 1204, 1238, 1402
 αὐδή 208, 1411
 βοή 876
 φάμα 846
 φάτις 1045
 φθέγγος 863
 φθέγμα 1445 (πρόσφθεγμα 235)
 φθογγά 205
 φωνή 225, 1066, 1458
 φώνημα 234, 1295
 [μῦθος 1410, 1417, 1447; see above pp. 244–245]
- ii. ἀρά 1120
 γόος 1401
 δυσφημία 10
 ἰυγή 752
 ἰωά 216
 κλαῦμα 1260
 οἰμωγή 190
 στόνος 752, 1460
- iii. ἄγγελος 500, 564 (αὐτάγγελος 568)
 ἀχώ 189
 γλώσσα 97, 99, 408, 440, 1142
 ἐφημοσύνη 1144
 ὄνειδος 477, 523, 968

στόμα 1156
 ψευδοκήρυξ 1306
 ψεῦδος 100, 108, 109, 842

iv. ἀπάτη 1228
 διδάσκαλος 388
 εὔχη 782
 εὔχος 1203
 λιτή 495
 μολπά 213
 πρόφασις 1034

c. Adjectives (all classes)

ἀθυρόστομος 188
 ἀντίφονος 1156
 ἀρνήσιμος 74
 διάσημος 208
 [δίστομος 16]
 διώμοτος 593
 ἔνορκος 72, 811
 εὔστομος 201
 ἰκέσιος 495
 λεκτός 633
 πολύστονος 1346
 προσήγορος 1353
 προσφθεγκτός 1067
 ῥητός 756
 ψευδής 992

2. The correlative theme, 'hearing,' occurs in the following lines:

- a. ἀκούω 52, 382, 549, 564, 588, 595, 603, 607, 614, 620, 1074, 1316
 (ἐξακούω 378, 472, 676; ἐπακούω 1417; ὑπακούω 190)
 κλύω 24, 53, 86, 261, 427, 591, 632, 681, 688, 839, 922, 925, 976,
 1239, 1273, 1412
 καλοῦμαι 85, 94, 119, 797 (ἀνακαλοῦμαι 800)
- b. ἀκοή 1412
 εὐκλεία 478
 κλέος 251, 1347
 κληδών 255

c. *εὐκλεής* 476, 1422
κλεινός 575, 654

3. Finally, we have the antithesis of speech in:

σῆμα 22, 258, 551
σιγάω 805, 865
σιγηλός 741
σιωπάω 731, 951 (cf. *στέγω* 136)²⁵

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