Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the Construction of Political Identity

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The Philoctetes *of Sophocles presents a conceptualization of selfhood and political identity that is an important contribution to the Western tradition of ethical and political thought. Sophocles portrays Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, the two main characters in the play, as struggling against traditional values while attempting to formulate a novel understanding of what it means to be a self. The Philoctetes presents a transgression of the boundaries of acceptable political behavior, setting individual choice and reasoning on a plane equal to the extended webs of social, filial and political duty with which the characters are confronted. When compared with one of Sophocles' earlier plays, the Ajax, the Philoctetes appears to introduce a new form of ethico-political thinking, one which gives weight to the autonomous individual at the core of ethical and political decisions. This shift in Sophocles' ethical presentation of selfhood signals an important transition in the history of Western political ethics.*

Introduction

The *Philoctetes* of Sophocles is a play that has been undervalued by moral and political philosophers, receiving relatively limited attention and commentary. When it comes to selecting a play that illustrates the multifaceted and multilayered nature of ethical, political and social relationships in ancient Greece it is often the *Antigone* that draws the attention of scholars and students alike. This focus on the *Antigone* has obscured the fact that the *Philoctetes* is an important political document and an invaluable asset for understanding how Athenian ethical and political ideas were undergoing substantial transformations in late fifth-century Athens. Considered alongside one of his earlier plays, the *Ajax*, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* signals an important change in the way that the relationship between the self, the community, and the traditional ethico-political structure was conceived and presented in Sophoclean tragedy. Tragedy, it has been suggested, represents "a rather special example of a social body carrying out publicly the maintenance and development of its mental infrastructure" (Meier, 4). If this is true then Sophocles' engagement with these issues represents an inner tension in the mental infrastructure of Athens itself. It also points toward the need for conceptual space in which was developed a new kind of politically active and autonomous self.

The goal of this paper is to argue that the *Philoctetes* is a profoundly important piece of ethical theory. The *Philoctetes* portrays a transgression of the boundaries of acceptable ethical and political action, setting individual choice and reasoning on nearly the same plane as the extended webs of social, filial, political with which students of ancient Greek thought are familiar. Set against the *Ajax*, the *Philoctetes* reflects a transformation in the way that Sophocles treats obligation to the political community, to one's friends, and to one's self. This change suggests that the image of selfhood that emerges near the end of that Sophocles' career opens up a range of political possibilities that had not previously existed in Greek political thinking. My concern in this paper is the way that individual characters conceive of the range of action open to them, and the violability or inviolability of the relationships within which they find themselves enmeshed. One way to ascertain the nature and limits of one's self is to answer the question "What can I do?" This separates psychological questions of identity from the concerns of social and political agency, and it is this latter set of concerns that pervades the plays under consideration. As the answer to the question "What Can I Do?" changes so, too, does the logic of individual action. Ajax's potential action is constrained in ways that no longer seem determinative to Philoctetes. For Ajax, the socially constructed and enforced constraints of heroic values constitute his self in that they constitute the range of possible actions. As I will argue below, Philoctetes' range of actions is not similarly constrained and this fact points to a different logic of action in Sophocles' later play, a different set of answers to the question "What can I do?"

The transformed logic of action from an early play (*Ajax*) to a later (*Philoctetes*) bespeaks a novel understanding of the relationship between the self and the community. The change in what I call the logic of political possibility is difficult to discern, but it is made clearer when read against the background of a central organizing principle in ancient Greek ethico-political life, namely friendship. Indeed, Aristotle dedicates nearly one-fifth of his Nicomachean Ethics to the question of friendship. Bringing friendship into any discussion of Greek thought is a tricky proposition, as the Greek word often translated as friendship (*philia*) has a notoriously wide range of meanings and associations in the original Greek. Generally speaking, *philia* can be said to refer to a category of relationships characterized by reciprocated goodwill and obligation. In Homeric usage *philia* refers to someone (or something) that is close to us, dear to us. By the classical age *philia* comes to refer to a somewhat more formal set of relationships, including friends, family, business associates, and fellow-soldiers. In the *Ajax*, as in the *Antigone* and the *Philoctetes*, friendship is a driving force and complicating factor. The manner in which the main characters treat the demands of friendship tells us a great deal about the underlying concept of self upon which they are acting.

Attic tragedy had a profoundly political component. It has been argued that particularly in Sophocles' plays we find "a strong political sensibility at work"

(Meier, 166). Patchen Markell has suggested that we may want "to read tragedy as a response and alternative, from within Greek antiquity itself, to the impossible Achillean pursuit of mastery and self-sufficiency" (65). He asks, "[w]hat if, in addition to making it possible to remember great deeds and to come to terms with the suffering such deeds involve, tragedy also worked as a mode of critique, through which dramatists drew attention to the limitations of certain specific ways of acting" (65)? Indeed, what if? Following Markell's lead, I treat these plays, and especially the *Philoctetes*, as examples of a mode of critique that questions the continuing efficacy of an inherited set of beliefs, referred to in a summary manner as heroic values, that are, quite literally pre-political. Taking up Markell's challenge, I read tragedy as drawing "attention to the limitations" of political action. Sophocles played a vital role in maintaining the mental infrastructure of Athens even as he documented the evolution of that infrastructure in his plays, reflecting back to the audience its own anxiety and in so reflecting, giving that anxiety form. He straddled the divide between the heroic and post-heroic Greek worlds.

The *Ajax* and the Heroic Self

The *Ajax*, thought to date from fairly early in Sophocles' career, opens with enmity and closes with friendship. Along the way, it travels a path filled with madness, barbarism, death, and destruction. The action is drawn from events following the Trojan War. Ajax harbors resentment against his former allies because they have decided to award Achilles' famous armor to Odysseus. Ajax is driven mad by this resentfulness, and by a mischievous goddess Athena. Ajax sets upon the camp of his former friends (now enemies) and descends upon the livestock in a killing spree, believing that he is murdering Greeks in an act of revenge for the perceived disrespect them have shown him. Athena offers Odysseus the opportunity to view the spectacle but Odysseus, partly from fear and partly from an unexpected respect, does not relish the opportunity to witness Ajax's misery. The language of enmity is evident from the opening lines, spoken by Athena:

> Odysseus, I have always seen and marked you
> Stalking to pounce upon your enemies

Athena expects Odysseus to delight in the madness of his enemy, Ajax, as though the very fact of the latter's insanity constitutes a victory for Odysseus—*schadenfreude* elevated to an ethical imperative, or at least a divine assumption. Odysseus is fearful of, and then feels pity for, his stricken foe, recognizing the common humanity that transcends traditional ethical and social imperatives:

> …Yet I pity
> His wretchedness, though he is my enemy,
> For the terrible yoke of blindness that is on him.

I think of him, yet also of myself;
For I see the true state of all of us that live—
We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow (121-126).

Odysseus is able to penetrate the wall that separates the heroic personality from its enemy's basic humanity. Ajax is not merely an enemy, as "Sophocles made Ajax into an almost paradigmatic version of the ancient hero" (Meier, 176). He represents the heroic, and the heights from which even a hero might fall.

Ajax's decline is interesting in that it could simply be ascribed to divine intervention, to Athena's malice (or, boredom). But Sophocles makes Athena surprised at Odysseus' refusal to celebrate Ajax's misfortune, thereby denying us the opportunity to interpret the play such that we (humans) are merely the playthings of the gods. Something more profound is being explored. Sophocles (78) makes the goddess express the shock that the audience may have felt when Odysseus refuses to gloat over his stricken foe:

But to laugh at your enemies—
What sweeter laughter can there be but that?

Odysseus, it seems, does not get the joke. As an enemy Odysseus would gladly face Ajax in battle, but to see Ajax so deluded is not to see him as an enemy but as a man to be pitied. Killing Ajax, the man, is not the same as killing Ajax, the enemy. Recognizing a common thread of humanity Odysseus retreats from his position of social and mythic power, to a position of sympathy. He views Ajax from outside of the framework of friendship and enmity, and sees instead the individual suffering to which fate may subject any one of us. Louis Ruprect (41) argues that Odysseus is unique among tragic heroes in "his capacity for sympathy…[which] is grounded in turn on his clear perception of the nature of the human *being* in the world, of human life as a chancy, changeable thing." Odysseus is able to see past the social construction of Ajax in a way that his friends and commanders, Menelaus and Agamemnon, are not; he is able to see the discrete individual at the heart of his (and by extension, our) chancy, changeable existence.

It is the changeability of such a fundamental institution as friendship that is disconcerting, for Ajax, for the Atreidae, and for the audience. Christopher Gill points out that "Ajax regards the refusal of the Greek leaders to award him the arms of Achilles as being a massive act of humiliation…and one which…represents a gross breach in reciprocal friendship and the exchange of acts of favor" (205-206). The breach of *philia* sets in motion the action of the play and provides the logical context to the dialogue throughout. As in the *Antigone*, *philia* is a central concern, especially as it relates to the treatment of the dead. After Ajax comes to recognize what he has done he is overcome by shame, and this leads him to contemplate

suicide. Self-inflicted death is seen as a means by which honor can be reclaimed (or, at least, as a method of eliminating some of the dishonor his insanity attached to him). His wife, Tecmessa, beseeches Ajax to reconsider by reminding him of his duty to protect his family, and eventually Ajax appears to relent. In what is sometimes described as Ajax's deception speech, he appears ready to let the pitiful thought of his wife and child being cast to his enemies convince him to change his mind and reject suicide (653). He suggests that he is simply going to visit his "bathing place" in order to wash away the stain of his actions, and to dig a hole in the ground, then to hide his sword (654-655). We are lead to believe that he was going to bury his sword in the ground at the water's edge. Instead, Ajax buries the hilt of the sword in the ground and falls upon the blade (burying it, as it were, in his body). With his last thoughts Ajax expresses his hope that his body will be found by *philoi*, rather than by enemies who may cast it to the dogs and birds.

The eventual suicide of Ajax forces the remaining, living characters into a situation not unlike that of Antigone: should the body, which is now, after all, the body of an enemy, be buried? Do the duties surrounding friendship and enmity outweigh the timeless law of the gods regarding the burial of noble men? Menelaus and Teucer (Ajax' half-brother) consider just this point (1130-1132):

> Menelaus
> Could it be that I failed to revere the gods' laws?
>
> Teucer
> Yes, if you intervene
> To interrupt the burial of the dead.
>
> Menelaus
> Of my own enemies! *They* must not be buried.

But Odysseus rejects the conclusion of Menelaus, though it is less clear that he rejects the logic of the argument. Rather, speaking to Agamemnon, Odysseus reinterprets tradition to allow for the burial of Ajax and this reinterpretation allows Odysseus to remain faithful to heroic values:

> It would be wrong to do him injury;
> In acting so, you'd not be injuring him—
> Rather the gods' laws. It's a foul thing to hurt
> A valiant man in death, though he *was* your enemy (1341-1343).

In death, valor and glory trump the compelling power of *philia* and friendly obligation, and the representatives of a heroic worldview (Menelaus and Agamemnon) are forced to confront the possibility that who a person is and what

that person is due in death exist outside of, or beyond, the matrix of duties and responsibilities that constrain and direct heroic action. Segal (109-110) suggests that Odysseus, in the *Ajax*, embodies the capacity of civilized communities "for reasonableness, flexibility, and intelligence." If we grant this point it seems to follow that the political community needed a new concept of self in order to remain civilized, and that the production of this concept had to happen from within the community so as not to cause undue chaos. Reading the *Ajax* this way (and also the *Philoctetes*, below), leads one to the possibility that that Sophocles was making important adjustments to the "mental infrastructure" that Meier describes. Prior to his death, Ajax comes to realize that friendship, the traditional nexus of duty and responsibility, is not necessarily a bedrock foundation on which one can construct an enduring self:

> …Have I not learned this,
> Only so much to hate my enemy
> As though he might again become my friend,
> And so much good to wish to do my friend,
> As knowing he may yet become my foe?
> Most men have found friendship a treacherous harbor (675-682).

Conceiving of the political self as little more than the sum of one's duties and obligations is unwise in face of the treacherousness of friendship's harbor, as Ajax comes to realize too late. Yet, Tecmessa can still appeal to *philia* in trying to talk Ajax out of suicide. Indeed, Gill suggests that *philia* is so central to the play that Ajax's so-called deception speech ought to be understood as an answer to Tecmessa's arguments against his suicide, namely, that he should remain alive to help/protect his *philoi*. It is possible to see the speech as a soliloquy, but Gill sees it as part of a conversation with Tecmessa, and, presumably, the audience. According to Gill, Ajax's attack on the Atreidae,

> constituted a protest at this breach in *philia*…. The failure of this protest means that, to stay alive, he would now have to come to terms with (to 'worship') friends who have, as he thinks, acted as enemies towards him; and also, in the future, to maintain the kind of qualified (or false) friendship presented in these lines (213).

Ajax must die to preserve the sanctity of the social institution by which he was betrayed, and that he describes as "a treacherous harbor".

Friendship had been an important organizing principle in Greek life for centuries, and to see it so obviously probed on stage— to see Ajax abandon his particular *philoi* in order to protect the universality of *philia* would have raised some questions— must have been, to say the least, disconcerting. Meier (185) suggests

that "[a] feeling must have arisen that certain areas, which till then had been regarded as inviolable (in spite of any individual transgressions), were now fundamentally under threat." So threatened was the stability of friendship that it is reversed or overturned several times over the course of the action, as with Odysseus' decision near the end of the play:

> And now I have a promise,
> Teucer, to make to you. From now on, I
> Shall be as much your friend as I was once
> Your enemy; and I should like to join
> In the burial of your dead—doing with you
> That labor, and omitting none of it,
> Which men should give the noblest of their fellows.

Indeed, Odysseus' decision to turn his back on the traditional construct of friendship and enmity by not only arguing for the burial of Ajax, but also by embracing Teucer as a friend, represents a personalization of friendship that continues to be a theme in Sophocles' subsequent work.

The changeability endorsed by Odysseus, and resisted by Agamemnon and Menelaus points toward the recognition of the existence of a discrete individual, a self whose recognition of the personal nature of being in the world threatens a worldview based on divine favor, reciprocity, and tightly defined social duties and expectations. Williams tells us that Ajax faces a moment of necessity, and that "the necessity that Ajax recognized…was grounded in his own identity, his sense of himself as someone who can live in some social circumstances and not others" (101). Ajax could not conceive of his identity apart from its construction in the matrix of heroic obligation. Having lost his place in that matrix, Ajax also lost his "means of self-validation" (Segal, 110). (It is also interesting to note that the herders slaughtered by Ajax existed outside of this matrix of obligation, and so did not even count as selves to be considered. They exist at the level of animals.) Odysseus, however, is a different case altogether. "For whom would I rather labor than myself?" he asks (1367), while the audience is left to recognize that, in the light of the treacherousness of institutions like *philia*, the question is perfectly legitimate. Though the question is raised, it is not settled, and the fact that it is Odysseus who speaks the words— Odysseus, that hated liar and notorious dissembler— allows the problem of the self to be put to one side.

Odysseus effectively undermines the institution of *philia* in order to protect the gods' unwritten laws and thereby shows himself, in the *Ajax*, to still be bound to some semblance of a heroic code concerned with nobility. Agamemnon and Menelaus see Ajax in terms of friendship and enmity, whereas Odysseus sees him in terms of nobility, and in terms of his complete life (the measure by which, according

to Aristotle, we are to judge a person). This opposition of *philia* and the gods' laws, of course, reverses the logic that supposedly underlies Antigone's rebellion against Creon's unjustified usurpation of *philia* for political purposes.

The *Antigone*: A Few Brief Words

The *Antigone* addresses some of the same themes as the *Ajax*: *philia*, burial, political authority, and the extent of one's obligation to the unwritten law. It tells the story of four siblings and their uncle, King Creon. The brothers, Etocles and Polyneices, find themselves on opposite sides of what is essentially a civil war in Thebes—a complicated back story, not represented on stage, has the brothers agreeing to rule in turn only to have the agreement not be honored when Etocles refuses to give up power—with the result being that both brothers are killed and their uncle assumes the throne. As a rebel against Thebes, Polyneices is refused a proper burial. Antigone is compelled by familial obligation to make sure that Polyneices' body is properly buried according to the appropriate religious custom, and she defies Creon in order bury her dead brother. Antigone is punished by being sealed in a cave (that is, buried alive), and facing the prospect of an agonizing and shameful death, she commits suicide.

Antigone is often cast "as the champion of *philia*" (Lane and Lane, 97) defending traditional ethical standards against unwelcome abuse and misuse by a ruler, Creon, who is blinded by his pathological need to maintain political power. Creon attempts to maintain power by recasting *philia* as something that exists to serve the state. He tries, in other words, "to replace blood ties by the bonds of civic friendship" (Nussbaum 2001, 57). Sophocles frames Creon's argument in this way:

> You cannot learn of any man the soul,
> the mind, and the intent until he shows
> his practice of the government and law…
> And he who counts another greater friend
> than his own fatherland, I put him nowhere….
> Nor could I count the enemy of the land
> friend to myself, not I who know so well
> that she it is who saves us, sailing straight,
> and only so can we have friends at all. (175-190)

Antigone preemptively rejects this argument, stating flatly (48) that it is not for Creon to keep her from her "own". Nussbaum argues that "Antigone shows a deeper understanding of the community and its values than Creon does when she argues that the obligation to bury the dead is an unwritten law, which cannot be set aside by the decree of a particular ruler" (Nussbaum 2001, 66). However, this conclusion is not without difficulties, and a reading of the heart of the *Antigone* as a clash of

irreconcilable goods is not unequivocally supported by the text. Sophocles is pushing against the limits of the goods, against the very idea that these "goods" are in fact laudable. He tries to have it both ways, aligning *philia* for, and then against (and then, once again for) the gods' unwritten laws.

It is difficult to sustain the argument that Antigone is simply defending traditional notions of *philia* from undue encroachment by the political, by Creon. Markell points out one difficulty: "Antigone and Creon present themselves as acting out of the virtue of *philia*— but neither one can make sense of *philia* in the abstract, without reference to the social identities that establish who, for each of them, is properly *philos*" (76). Indeed, this seems to be a more profound problem for Antigone, who abandons her sister and seems ambivalent towards her "patriotic" brother Eteocles. Antigone's famous defense of *philia* takes place, and *must* take place, after she has decided for herself where in the matrix of social relationships she is situated. And this decision is one made by her self, as an autonomous (i.e. self-ruling) self.

Williams describes Antigone's actions as "a shocking assertion of self rather than merely an acknowledgement of something required," and he suggests that this is "a ready and massive self-assertion" (Williams, 86). Knox appears to share this view, suggesting that "[t]he source of [Antigone's] heroic spirit is revealed, in the last analysis, as purely personal" (Knox, 107) and that her "appeal is not general but specific. She is not opposing a whole set of unwritten laws to the written laws of the polis," but, rather, is struggling "with her own emotions in a self-absorbed passion which totally ignores the presence of those around her" (Knox, 97, 106). This is not to deny her connection to Polyneices, but to suggest that the connection is more personal, that is, more subjective, than is usually supposed. Both the *Ajax* and the *Antigone* portray friendship as problematic, and both hint that the conception of self that is intimately tied up with that institution cannot be sustained in the face of the perpetual shifting of alliances, interests, and personal goals. However, Sophocles still crafts characters that are not yet aware of the precariousness of their position, or, more to the point, who have not yet figured out how to move forward, *except in death*. They have not yet figured out how to live as (what we might call) post-Sophoclean selves. It is left to Philoctetes to directly confront the implications of a self not situated in the web of traditional friendship, and to live with the consequences (though, as we shall see, *that* Philoctetes is allowed to live gives no answer regarding *how* he is to live). Let us, then, move forward several decades in Sophocles' career to see how some of the same issues are treated.

The *Philoctetes* and the Arrival of a New Self

The events depicted in the *Philoctetes* take place during the Trojan War. Despite having served as an archer for the Greeks in the war, Philoctetes is abandoned on the

isle of Lemnos after being stricken with a malady which causes severe pain and causes his companions great unease at his pained screaming and putrid wound. Philoctetes is abandoned, however, while in possession of the mythical bow of Heracles (presented by a dying Heracles himself). Subsequent to his abandonment, in which Odysseus played an active and substantial role, the Greeks came to learn by way of a prophesy that Troy would fall at the hands of a healed, and bow-wielding, Philoctetes. Odysseus departs with a sizeable crew and Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, in order to bring Philoctetes back to fight at Troy. As Philoctetes is virtually unassailable while in possession of the bow Odysseus deigns to resort to trickery, using Neoptolemus to do the dirty work. Neoptolemus affects friendship with Philoctetes and eventually steals the bow away from him, only to return it once his noble (that is, Achillean) conscience gets the best of him. Odysseus ends up being chased from Lemnos while Neoptolemus stays behind to convince Philoctetes to return to fight at Troy. It is only after Heracles appears to the new friends— Neoptolemus and Philoctetes form a new type of friendship new the end of the play, after a series of arguments—that Philoctetes relents and agrees to return to Troy.

Jameson (1956) makes much of the political atmosphere in which the *Philoctetes* was produced. Although my own interpretation departs significantly from Jameson's, I do share his view that the *Philoctetes* represents a dramatic reflection of tensions that had beset Athens, resulting as much from the success as the failures of the Athenian people. In the *Philoctetes* we see the type of internal critique and response that Markell describes. The treacherousness of friendship's harbor becomes most clearly evident, as does the sheer impossibility of negotiating a lasting peace between the heroic individual and the *polis*. Neoptolemus' struggles to reclaim his natural nobility take place alongside Philoctetes' exhausting movements towards, and then away from, friendship. As I will argue below, every time Philoctetes is moved into the role of friend, he is subsequently forced back within himself, forced to move from that recently reclaimed status as once-again-man, to his exiled status of about-to-be-beast. It is in this perpetual intermediate state that Sophocles leaves Philoctetes— and it is in this in-between that we are also abandoned— and only the *deus ex machina* can call for a final re-locating of the individual within a complex web of obligation and *philia*. Sophocles has so artfully rendered Philoctetes' personal and existential homelessness as natural that the arrival of Heracles strikes the reader as arbitrary, and not, as has been suggested, as simply showing the characters out of a thicket of deception into a clearing of truthfulness. Even the god's guidance seems to lead us towards the arbitrary, and we find ourselves in a state of ironic engagement with the idea that man is anything other than completely alone. In this existential loneliness rests Philoctetes' power, but it is shown to be merely the power to suffer and to embrace one's individual capacity to make human choices in a world governed by inhuman caprice. This tragic theme persists.

One of the themes of the play upon which commentators have focused deals with the education of Neoptolemus, and this aspect of the play is evident from the opening lines. Odysseus instructs Neoptolemus by introducing him to Lemnos, thereby establishing the youth and relative inexperience of Neoptolemus, as well as his early subordination. The connection this establishes between teacher and student not only sets the stage for Neoptolemus' transformation and reclaiming of his natural nobility, but it will also serve to highlight the isolation of Philoctetes and the importance of such relationships for a fully human life. Indeed, Philoctetes' isolation is depicted as particularly loathsome because it deprives him of a basic condition of humanity. The chorus expresses this pity, calling attention to Philoctetes' high birth, and the subsequent downfall that results in his life lacking "everything" including "neighbors" and a "friendly face" (170-190). Philoctetes' own description of his plight is more poignant:

> I have been alone and very wretched
> without friend or comrade, suffering a great deal.
> Take pity on me; speak to me; speak,
> speak if you come as friends. (227-228)

Ajax so hates the idea that he had become pitiable that he chose to commit suicide rather than to live as an object of pity; to be pitied was to be re-created as thoroughly pitiful. Ajax's fear of pity is a consequence of an understanding of himself as constructed, in part, by the estimation of others. To be pitied was shameful. Philoctetes, on the other hand, *begs* for pity! He is able to do so because he is already sufficiently distanced from society as to have been forced to be self-sufficient (and at a whole new level of self-sufficiency). Even as he begs for a return, Philoctetes shows himself to no longer belong to the heroic world. Although Philoctetes does not wholly and directly embrace Neoptolemus as a friend (*philos*) until quite late in the action, the language of friendship is evident throughout. (The prevalence of *xenia* is cause for some debate; Belfiore maintains that the word should be understood as "guest-friend" while Konstan (2001, 273) suggests that, for the bulk of the play, "stranger" more accurately reflects the meaning in context.) Indeed, Neoptolemus draws upon traditional notions of friendship— it is just to help friends and harm enemies— in order to establish a connection with Philoctetes; by establishing a common enemy Neoptolemus is attempting to prepare the ground for a friendship based on shared enmity (see Segal, 332). Of course, this friendship is as false as the enmity Neoptolemus professes to feel for Odysseus and the Atreidae: "May he that hates the Atreidae be as dear in the Gods' sight as he is in mine" (389). The initial interaction between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes is almost exclusively mediated by the traditional forms of address that they use and the traditional relationships within which they establish a connection. This is not to suggest that the formality extends so far as to be ritualized, but rather that the character of the individuals remains, at this early stage, largely irrelevant.

Neoptolemus feigns friendship, and the story of familial loyalty that he uses to do so recalls to us the dimension of *philia* that Segal (299) describes (somewhat oddly) as "heroic companionship and personal responsibility." Philoctetes, at least at one time, belonged to the world of Odysseus, Achilles, Ajax, and Phoenix, the world of heroes, the world Neoptolemus describes in a deceptive yet familiar manner. But Sophocles is, in the *Philoctetes*, at least, constantly reminding us that the heroic world no longer exists. Philoctetes is an outcast from that world; Neoptolemus is a generation removed; even Odysseus, while displaying his usual cunning and willingness to dissemble, no longer resembles the Homeric Odysseus. "Homer's Odysseus," Knox tells us (124) is still subject to the heroic ideal, but "[t]he Odysseus of this play [the *Philoctetes*] has no heroic code which binds him." The promise of the return to a civilized life is simultaneously an exploration of the possibility of returning to that heroic world, and it is telling that we only experience that world as a rumor that is circulated off-stage and only sporadically repeated by the characters. The promise cannot be kept, and the rumor must turn out to be false. The process of coming to grips with these facts dominates the play.

As the plot unfolds, the relationship between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus goes through several transformations. Philoctetes is understandably thrilled to host such excellent company as the son of Achilles, and thrilled at the prospect of leaving the island:

> Man, dear to my very heart,
> and you, dear friends, how shall I prove to you
> how you have bound me to your friendship! (531)

The willingness to prove one's self, the willingness to reciprocate good deed for good deed, the willingness to "bind" one's self to another at several levels—all of these recall a system of heroic values. Philoctetes' joy comes from the promise of regained humanity, the possibility of conversation, and the chance that wine (that symbol of the civilized life) might again pass over his lips. Yet, as the story progresses, and Neoptolemus is shown to have deceived Philoctetes in order to gain possession of the bow of Heracles, joy is replaced by bitterness and disbelief. It is not only a disbelief in the deceitfulness of the son of Achilles, but also a disbelief in traditional value structures in the face of the harsh reality that such values no longer ensure just action. Like Neoptolemus, Philoctetes is also receiving an education. Whereas the former learns what it might take to reclaim the nobility associated with his father's status, the latter learns that such nobility is premised upon a worldview that no longer captures the reality of the *polis* or civic life in general. Indeed, "[t]o take the simplest of the civilized qualities to be reconstituted, friendship, *philia*, has become an instrument of Odyssean trickery" (Segal, 331). If such a basic institution as friendship ends up being purely instrumental—a point that Sophocles had already more-or-less established in the *Ajax*— then it becomes a fool’s errand to pursue

blindly the path of traditional nobility.

When Neoptolemus' friendship is shown to be part of an elaborate scheme, it is Odysseus who is blamed; Philoctetes laments that "It was he [Odysseus] who took me prisoner, robbed me of my arms" (979). And Odysseus who, with a certain pride, takes the responsibility fully upon himself: "Yes, I, I and no other" (980). Not only has the supposed friendship dissolved, but the supposed friend (Neoptolemus) has also dissolved, reduced to nothing more than a tool, questions about his nature being momentarily pushed into the background. Odysseus says to a reluctant Neoptolemus (83), "give me yourself" and it is meant in a more literal way than we might first assume; Neoptolemus is not yet so self-possessed as to be able (let alone willing) to refuse such a request. Neoptolemus' sense of duty to Odysseus and naked expediency are constantly in tension with his nature and ancestry. After initially betraying Philoctetes, he ultimately returns to Philoctetes the bow that he (Neoptolemus) has come to possess through trickery. In so doing Neoptolemus explicitly recognizes that he has brought shame upon himself and acted in a way that undermines his claims to nobility. He shares these traits with Ajax. Their respective reactions to these transgressions against ethical and political expectations are instructive. Each recognizes the ruinous nature of their undertaking and the destruction of their nobility. Ajax can only reclaim some small portion of his formerly noble self through death. Even the cleansing rituals he tells Tecmessa he is undertaking cannot erase the stain left by his actions. Neoptolemus' situation is different.

He is able to simply able to repent, to approach Philoctetes as an autonomous individual seeking to regain his noble status by taking responsibility, personal and whole responsibility, for what he had done (1270). Having returned Philoctetes' bow, Neoptolemus sees "no further cause for anger or reproach" (1308). There is no ethical stain, but rather his transgression is simply negated by means of being reversed; Neoptolemus is able to dissociate himself from the means (strategy, trickery, and deception) by reversing the end (taking/giving back the bow). Ajax has no such option, not only because the livestock and herders he murdered can't be brought back to life, but more centrally because he lacked the conceptual apparatus to rid him self of the shame associated with the slaughter. Ajax recognizes his transgression, he is responsible for it, and is unable to rid himself of that responsibility except through death. Philoctetes also recognizes his transgressions and takes responsibility, though he is able to cleanse himself by as a consequence of embracing a concept of selfhood which takes for granted a novel form of personal autonomy (one in which ethical transgressions remain, as it were, between friends).

The bulk of the *Philoctetes* is taken up with the ebb and flow of trust, hope, resentfulness, and friendship, all of which leads to the pairing of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus as two individuals who are worthy of being described as *kalon*

k'agathon, and who, one defiantly and one tentatively, turn their backs on the traditional structure that is capable of designating individuals noble and good. In the end Philoctetes rejects nearly all human relationships, and in doing so he rejects the system of ethics in which these relationships are situated. Friendship, especially, has proven to be not only unreliable, but simply illusory and fantastic. The bonds of friendship are established and then dissolved, reconfigured and subsequently undermined, longed for and finally turned away from.

What remains when these bonds are shown to be illusion? What remains of the man who is no longer able to fashion these bonds with a sense of purpose and faith in their inviolability? Is he, like Antigone and Ajax, consigned to death? After all, Philoctetes would also like to commit suicide, though he is prevented from doing so (1000-1004). The *Philoctetes*, of course, departs from the *Ajax* and the *Antigone* at precisely this point. The suicides of Ajax and Antigone are preceded by considerable dramatic tension; Philoctetes simply tries to hurl himself off a cliff!

His lengthy isolation on Lemnos has distanced him from so many of the concerns that plague other of Sophocles' characters. Philoctetes, stranded on his island for so long, initially holds out hope of rescue, of a return to the world of men, and for some time he is still able to make a connection to that world, still able to situate himself in the old world order. But Lemnos represents more than mere isolation, it "is a place where an old self dies and is reborn and a new world order is symbolically regenerated" (Segal, 294). This new world, however, is not simply a duplication of the old one; Philoctetes never does leave the island—though he seems perpetually *about* to leave Lemnos—because he can't return to the world from which he came. Sophocles can't allow the action to move back to the world that Philoctetes used to know because that world doesn't exist. His future, like that of the audience, remains radically unsure.

Philoctetes is determined to enter that future alone. Trust and heroic obligation having been stripped from him, Philoctetes turns his back completely and withdraws from the heroic world into the world of individual concerns. "[T]ake me home as you promised," he says to Neoptolemus, adding,

> Remain in Scyrus yourself; let these bad men
> die in their own bad fashion. We shall both thank you,
> I and your father. You will not then, by helping
> the wicked, seem to be like them (1365-1372)

Philoctetes reiterates his willingness to turn away from the demands of heroic and friendly obligation after Neoptolemus asks, "How shall I avoid the blame of the Greeks?" Philoctetes simply replies, "Give it no thought" (1404-1405). After a promise of defense, Neoptolemus, too, is willing to abandon the Greeks and join

Philoctetes, not as a game-piece in a larger battle at Troy, not as a tool to be used to achieve glory, but rather as an individual man with whom a personal relationship of independent selves might be formed. To give no thought to the blame of the Greeks represents a radical departure from an ethical system wherein the estimation of others is so crucially important, and it is a departure from traditional notions of morality that would remain foreign to Ajax, and possibly even to the Odysseus of that earlier play.

It should not be overlooked that Neoptolemus, so concerned throughout the play with the background presence of his father, twice leaves his father and his so-called noble heritage (and only once returns). Initially reluctant to use deceit to achieve victory, Neoptolemus has "a natural antipathy" to "tricks and stratagems" (88). Odysseus, not surprisingly, is able to turn Neoptolemus' nobility to the service of the task at hand, first by repeating the name of Achilles in association with what Neoptolemus is going to be asked to do (50-59) and then by stressing the temporary nature—the "brief shameless portion of the day" (83)— of the task. Finally, evoking Achilles again, he argues for the precedence of the tongue over the deed (95-99), suggesting that Neoptolemus ought to expand his notion of nobility to include stratagems. It may be said that in turning away from his ersatz father, Neoptolemus is reclaiming his natural nobility; indeed, Philoctetes says as much (1310). However, this overlooks Neoptolemus' second turning away, the turning from the Greeks and the yet-to-be-fought (re)engagement at Troy. Like Philoctetes, Neoptolemus rejects not only Odyssean dissembling, but the heroic backdrop against which such dissembling is so problematic. Blundell suggests that the refusal to leave the island, even after all the years spent pining for just that option, represents "Philoctetes' assertion of his own autonomy" (209). Like Antigone, Philoctetes becomes capable of self-rule, but he is also able to exercise his autonomy openly, without couching it in terms of a defense of unwritten law. And, of course, he lives.

It is tempting to see Neoptolemus' refusal to help Odysseus as another example of the reclamation of his noble heritage. After all, the entire narrative structure of the *Iliad* hangs on Achilles' refusal to fight on behalf of Agamemnon and the Achaeans because of Agamemnon's unjust seizure of that for which Achilles worked. Achilles refused to fight because that which was owed to him by Agamemnon, namely respect, was withheld. Subsequently, Achilles withheld his arms until the death of his *philos*, Patroclus, necessitated a violent response. There are some superficial similarities between the respective refusals of Achilles and his son, but these similarities serve to highlight substantial and important differences. Achilles makes his decisions to fight or not to fight squarely ensconced in an ethical system made up of the heroic values we see replicated in the *Ajax*: pride, honor, loyalty, and *arête*. Neoptolemus' motivations mimic, but do not duplicate, his father's own motivations. Sophocles uses the familiarity of Achilles' refusal to fight—everybody in Sophocles' audience would have been intimately knowledgeable of the story—to demonstrate

how different Neoptolemus' own refusal really is.

Neoptolemus' second turning away leaves the audience in an unusual position. How can the desired fidelity to one's noble nature to be made to accord with the demands (stated and unstated) of the community? In the *Antigone*, the tension is resolved through a series of suicides that both affirm and deny the nobility of the customs that Antigone is thought to be defending, and by Creon's admission that one does best to respect the established laws. The playing out of different approaches to *philia* leads to death, misery, and regret for all of the affected *philoi*. And, as was discussed above, Antigone's motives may have been entirely personal. Far from being a self-less defender of familial loyalty Antigone is stubbornly vicious towards several members of her family and seems to be equal parts heroic and obstinate, and her selfish stubbornness results in serial suicide. On the other hand, the option of Philoctetes' suicide is offered and then withdrawn by Sophocles. In this way, the *Philoctetes* confronts traditional morality in a way that the *Antigone* avoids; Philoctetes continues to live and is subsequently forced to address the collapse of traditional values. From the rubble of this collapse Philoctetes and Neoptolemus emerge, and the former, having been preparing for this moment since his abandonment, resolves to instruct the latter in autonomy. It is exactly this way of living, one dedicated to the exercise of practical autonomy, which eluded Antigone. This would have been profoundly unsettling for the audience, not because they would have been shocked by this seeming rejection of their mythic past, but because they would have recognized the truth and necessity in such a rejection.

At this moment Heracles appears. He makes a single speech in which he promises that victory will be achieved, with Philoctetes and Neoptolemus working together as "twin lions" (1438); the healing god Asclepius will be sent to cure Philoctetes' wounded foot; and great spoils will be taken. Instantly, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus resolve to obey Heracles and to return to the battle at Troy. The appearance of the rescuing god is an unusual occurrence in the works of Sophocles and one might make a *prima facie* case to suggest that the arrival of Heracles reaffirms the heroic values of friendship and obligation. His appearance on the scene does offer a way out for Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, allowing them to return to the mental and ethical landscape from whence they came to Lemnos. But something about Heracles' appearance rings hollow. Kitto seems to think so as well, "[n]owhere in the whole of Sophocles is there a speech less impressive than this one which he wrote for Heracles….If Sophocles wanted to round off the action, to reverse Philoctetes' decision without giving any theological or intellectual or psychological reasons for the reversal, the speech is excellent" (Kitto, in Rabel, 300).

Perhaps Kitto's somewhat malicious and sarcastic statement is closer to the truth than he realized. After all, Sophocles had been wrestling with, to use Markell's phrase, "the limitations of certain specific ways of acting" since, at least, his earlier

Ajax and *Antigone*, that is to say, for over 30 years. In the meantime he would have witnessed war, defeats that would have undermined the Athenian self-understanding expressed as recently as Pericles' *Funeral Oration*, the fall and rebirth of Athenian democracy, and constant pressure to accommodate the concerns of individuals within the *polis*. It is conceivable that Sophocles had come to feel that there simply were *no good reasons*, theological, intellectual, or psychological, to reverse Philoctetes' decision. Heracles' arrival carries with it a hint of ironic resignation; Sophocles appears to be winking at his audience, as if to acknowledge that Heracles' message is as empty as the system of heroic values he is meant to represent.

Heracles serves to offer the reaffirmation of belief in the traditional values that both Philoctetes and Creon, each in their own way, appear to reject. Creon comes to see the danger in rejecting traditional values only as his niece, son, and wife meet their deaths. His about-face comes at the cost of a series of deadly lessons and it strikes us as the admission of a beaten man. Sophocles creates a Creon who loses before he changes his mind; he loses his family, loses his prestige and perhaps even his political authority. The case is different at the conclusion of the *Philoctetes*; Neoptolemus and Philoctetes survive, unscathed. Odysseus is beaten, verbally, strategically, even physically—he runs like a coward from the bow and is only saved by the man, Neoptolemus, who has rejected him—and the unlikely pair, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, retain control of Heracles' mythical bow. Rather than certain misery, the now-friendly duo faces uncertainty, and perhaps even contentment. Whatever they face, they (and this may be especially true of Philoctetes) face it as new selves, as individuals sufficiently distanced from *philia* and the socially mediated self it both represents and fosters, to see it from the perspective of outsiders. Ajax thought of himself as an outcast but he was never outside of the only system that made sense to him, and being unable to escape it, the system called for his death. Nothing calls Neoptolemus and Philoctetes to do anything, except for the half-hearted entreaty of a demigod who appeals to exactly the relationship, *philia*, which had already been rejected by the men that Heracles was seeking to convince. Although they may have been convinced they are convinced on their terms, and only after having established that they have seized the capacity to say no.

Conclusion

The *Philoctetes* is an anxious play. It reflects the anxiety of Athens as its day in the sun was drawing to a close. We witness in the *Philoctetes* something we don't see in earlier Sophoclean plays, namely, a sense of impending loss. We see the recognition, in Sophocles and by extension in his audience, that the social structure that had sustained Athens, and much of the Greek world, for centuries was effectively gone. It had been hollowed out and a suitable replacement was nowhere to be found. The protagonists are forced to leave unresolved all questions about their future. Their future as individuals remains shockingly unsettled at the end of the

play, as does the future of each individual qua individual. It is unclear what form of living, and what range of political agency, would even be possible for them. The social self that had been constituted by way of widely acknowledged obligations, such as those involved with *philia*, was no longer tenable. Paradoxically, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus find out together that they are ultimately alone. This sense of aloneness in the world is a necessary condition for the type of questions famously posed by Socrates. In the *Philoctetes*, Sophocles points to the need to revisit the injunction to "Know Thyself," since Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are left with an unclear picture of who they might be, and who they might become.

In the *Philoctetes* we encounter many of the same issues that appear in the *Ajax* and the *Antigone*, but in a way that moves beyond simple identification and problematization. Sophocles recognizes the need for a new understanding of what it means to *be*. Whereas Ajax could not exist outside of the complex of social and political relationships that ordered his life, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus find a way out. They do not leave friendship entirely behind but they each discover enough of an inner self to be able to abandon the ethical, social, and political obligations embodied in friendship only to immediately return to it as autonomous (self-ruling) individuals. In the history of political thought this is a crucial move. There is something about this conceptual development that calls to mind Hegel's description of Socrates. Hegel famously saw Socrates as, *inter alia,* bringing about a shift from *Sittlichkeit* to *Moralität*, that is, from a customary ethic based on social obligation to a personal (and more autonomous) morality based on the reflective recognition of an inner self. In the *Ajax* and the *Philoctetes* we encounter struggles between traditional ethical demands and an emerging sense of the autonomous person. We see characters who respond to the question "What can I do?" with a much broader array of options than were available to Ajax, or even to Antigone and Creon.

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