THE WOUND OF PHILOCTETES

BY

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δυσχέρεια
πολλή τοῦτο τοῦ φορήματος

"Great is the discomfort [loathsomeness]
of such a freight [passenger]" *

(Sophocles Philoctetes 473-4)

The purpose of this article is to offer some defense for Odysseus as he is presented in the Philoctetes. In doing so I fly in the face of the vast majority of modern critics who between them all have placed him in a spectrum ranging from Mephistopheles to the most ruthless, self-aggrandizing sophist. Perhaps it is the uncompromising moralistic tone of so many analyses that persuades me of their imbalance, this generally grants Odysseus no credit whatsoever for any plan or action in the play, while Philoctetes and Neoptolemus correspondingly usually benefit from approval that they do not always fully earn. The main problem is polarization of the play.

* The translations of the play are Jebb's. Where Jebb's choice of words is too gentle, I have supplied in brackets alternatives which restore the emphasis as I see it.

1) A radical—even heretical—antidote to the traditional worship of Neoptolemus in criticism of this play is William M. Calder III, Sophoclean Apologia: Philoctetes, GRBS 12 (1971), 153-174. Deploring the generally pietistic approach to this play and the general adulation of Neoptolemus and his φόνος ("inherited qualities"), he writes: "Modern imitations of Sophocles' play have conspired with misdirected critics to turn Neoptolemus into Parzifal" (168). He pinpoints several problems neglected in standard commentaries which substantiate his thesis that Neoptolemus is lying throughout the whole play: was not Thersites dead? had Neoptolemus been to Troy? if not (which is unlikely), how many ships were there, and if only one, how could Neoptolemus take Philoctetes home in Odysseus' ship? Also there is Neoptolemus' traditional reputation as a callous cheat and a cold-blooded killer, a point perhaps hinted at by Heracles' animadversions about τῶοεβία ("reverent conduct") on the field at Troy. Most commentators either
into the triumph of right over wrong, thereby obscuring it somewhat as an excruciating demonstration of the terrible decisions (and their consequences) that have to be made during social and political crises. The *Philoctetes* is particularly vulnerable in that the graphic nature of the bow and the wound enhances such polarization. Without meaning to denigrate the fruitfulness or potency of such symbols and what scholars have done with them, I shall try to restore the balance of the play by focussing on the wound as a literal object only.

The wound of Philoctetes has inspired much writing, a great deal of it brilliant. The brilliance has been inspired considerably by the wound’s potential as a symbol, especially as a symbol standing in tension with another supernatural element of the play, the bow. Charles Segal writes: “Modern-looking is the tension between the alienated individual, repulsive but indispensable, and the society that needs and (ab)uses him, the tension between ‘the wound and the bow’, in Edmund Wilson’s celebrated formulation.” In his two chapters on this play Segal lays out a complex web of imagery and symbolism and dazzles with his erudition and imagination. His exposition is a breathtaking tour de force of creative interpretation. The references are endless, the connections innovative, the scrutiny minute and the details instructive. Yet enjoyable and useful as this interpretation is, like most modern interpretations of the *Philoctetes* it does the play a disservice.

Granted that the wound, with its smell and painful effluences,