

Sophocles
Philoctetes



Translated by Ian Johnston

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Philoctetes

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Sophocles Philoctetes

Background Note

Philoctetes was one of the warrior leaders who set off with the Greek fleet led by Agamemnon and Menelaus to attack Troy. On the way he was bitten by a snake, and the wound refused to heal. His cries of pain and the stench of his wound so upset the Greeks that the leaders decided to abandon him on the deserted island of Lemnos, where he remained all by himself. The action of the play takes place ten years after this event.

During the course of the war, the Greeks captured Helenus, the Trojan prophet. He told them that they could win the war only by, among other things, getting the poisoned arrows of Hercules, which were in the possession of Philoctetes (who had acquired Hercules' bow and arrows as a reward for lighting Hercules' funeral pyre), and bringing Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, to Troy to join in the fighting. Odysseus sailed away to Scyros to fetch Neoptolemus, and they both arrive on Lemnos to confront Philoctetes at the start of the play.

Sophocles (c. 496 BC-406 BC) was a major and extremely successful Athenian writer of dramatic tragedies. Of his 120 or more plays, only seven have survived complete. His tragedy *Philoctetes* was first performed in 409 BC and won first prize in the drama competition.

Note that in the play the forces fighting to capture Troy are normally called the *Argives* or the *Achaean*s, as in Homer.

Translator's Note

In the following text the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text, the numbers without brackets refer to the English text. In numbering the lines, the translator has normally counted a short indented line and the short line immediately before it as a single line.

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance provided by Sir Richard Jebb's commentary on Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.

Philoctetes Dramatis Personae

ODYSSEUS: king of Ithaca, a leading warrior of the Greek army

NEOPTOLEMUS: young son of the great Greek hero Achilles

PHILOCTETES: a Greek warrior abandoned on Lemnos

CHORUS: sailors from Neoptolemus' ship

MERCHANT TRADER: a spy posing as a Merchant

HERCULES: mortal son of Zeus, later made a god.

[The dramatic action takes place on the island of Lemnos, just outside Philoctetes' cave. The opening to the cave is on stage, above the level of the orchestra. Enter into the orchestra Odysseus and Neoptolemus with a sailor attending on Neoptolemus]

ODYSSEUS

So here we are on the shores of Lemnos,
a lonely place—well off the beaten track,
surrounded by the sea. No one lives here.
This was this place, Neoptolemus,
son of Achilles, bravest and best
of all the Greeks, where, many years ago,
I left Philoctetes, son of Poeas,
a man from Malis. I abandoned him,
acting on orders from our two commanders.
His foot was dripping with infectious sores, 10
painful ulcers. He kept screaming all the time.
His strange, wild howling rang throughout the camp. [10]
He cried so much we couldn't pray in peace
or make libations and burnt sacrifice.
But what's the point in talking of that now?
This is no time to tell lengthy stories,
for if he learns I'm here, then my whole scheme,

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the one I think will catch him quickly, fails.
Look, your job is to carry out the tasks
we still have left to do—to find a rock 20
somewhere round here which has two openings,
so shaped that when it's cool there are two seats
facing the sun, and when it's hot, the breeze
wafts sleep in through the chamber tunnel.
To the left below it you might glimpse [20]
a water spring, if it's still functioning.
Climb up there. Keep quiet. Then signal me
if you see those features there or somewhere else.
After that I'll tell you my entire plan.
Then both of us will carry out my scheme. 30

[Neoptolemus begins exploring the rocks, moving up towards the opening of the cave]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Lord Odysseus, that task you mentioned—
I think we're close. I see a cave up here
quite like the one you mentioned.

ODYSSEUS

Above you?

Or below? I can't see it.

NEOPTOLEMUS *[approaching the mouth of the cave]*

It's up here.

High up. I can't hear a sound—no footsteps.

ODYSSEUS

Watch out. He may be there, in bed asleep. [30]

NEOPTOLEMUS *[peering into the cave]*

The place is empty—I don't see anyone.

ODYSSEUS

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Anything in there which might indicate
some human lives inside?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes, there is—
a bed of leaves pressed down Someone's stayed here. 40

ODYSSEUS

Is it empty otherwise? Nothing else
hidden in the cave?

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's a wooden cup,
crudely made, some wretched craftsman's work—
and kindling, too, set to light a fire.

ODYSSEUS

What you describe must be his possessions.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Look here, there's something else. Rags left to dry—

[Neoptolemus inspects the rags]

Agh, they're full of pus! The stench!

ODYSSEUS

This is the spot.
Obviously our man lives here and is near by. [40]
His foot is crippled with that old disease.
He can't go far. He's gone to find some food 50
or a remedial herb he's seen somewhere.
Send that man of yours to be our lookout,
in case he stumbles on us unawares.
He'd rather catch me than any other Greek.

[Neoptolemus comes back down and whispers instructions to his attendant, who then leaves]

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NEOPTOLEMUS

He's on his way. He'll be our sentry on the path.
If there's something else you need, just say so.

ODYSSEUS

Son of Achilles, to fulfill your mission, [50]
you must be loyal to your ancestry—
that's more than something merely physical.
If you hear a plan you've not heard before 60
and it sounds strange, you must obey it—
you're with me here as my subordinate.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are your orders?

ODYSSEUS

With Philoctetes—

when you speak to him, tell him a story.
You have to trick him, lead his mind astray.
When he asks you who you are and where you're from,
say you're Achilles' son—no deception there.
But tell him you intend to sail for home.
You've left the Achaeans' naval forces
because you truly hate them. And here's why— 70
in their prayers they summoned you from home [60]
to Troy, since you're the only hope they've got
to take the city. But then they judged you
not good enough to have Achilles' arms,
although you came to claim them as your right.
Instead they gave them to Odysseus.
Say what you like of me—pile up the insults,
the worst there are. That won't injure me.
But if you don't go through with what I say,
you'll hurt the Argives, every one of them. 80
If we don't get our hands on that man's bow,

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you'll never capture Troy successfully,
 never destroy the realm of Dardanus.¹
 Let me tell you why you can talk to him [70]
 and safely win his trust, while I cannot.
 You've joined the Trojan expedition freely—
 you'd made no oath to anyone. In fact,
 you weren't a member of that first contingent.
 But I was, and I can't deny the fact.
 If he sees me while he still has his bow, 90
 I'm lost, and you, as my companion,
 will share my fate. That's why we need to plan—
 we need some way you can be the means
 to steal his bow, which is invincible.
 My boy, I know your nature is not fit
 to make up lies or speak deceitful things. [80]
 But winning victory's prize is sweet indeed,
 so force yourself to do it. After this,
 the justice of our actions will be clear.
 So now, for one short day, follow my lead, 100
 without a sense of shame. In time to come
 they'll call you the finest man there is.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Son of Laertes, I hate to carry out
 an order which it hurts to listen to.
 It's not my nature to do anything
 based on deceit. My father, so they say,
 was just the same. But I am prepared [90]
 to take the man by force, no trickery.
 He's just one man on foot. He'll never win
 against so many of us in a fight. 110

¹When Achilles, Neoptolemus' father, was killed, the Greek army awarded his weapons to Odysseus. Dardanus was a son of Zeus and the legendary founder of Troy.

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NEOPTOLEMUS

I've no chance at all
if I move out to challenge him?

ODYSSEUS

None whatsoever, unless, as I've said,
you use some trick to grab him.

130

NEOPTOLEMUS

So you don't think
there's any shame in saying something false?

ODYSSEUS

No—not if the falsehood will save us all.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But how can anyone control his face
when he dares speak such lies?

[110]

ODYSSEUS

When what you do
brings benefits, you shouldn't hesitate.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If that man comes to Troy, how do I benefit?

ODYSSEUS

The only way the city can be captured
is with his bow and arrows.

NEOPTOLEMUS

So I'm not the one
who'll take that city, as you told me?

140

ODYSSEUS

Yes, but you need them, and they need you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If that's true, we must track them down, it seems.

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ODYSSEUS

By doing this work, you'll garner two rewards.

NEOPTOLEMUS

How? If I knew that, I'd not refuse it.

ODYSSEUS

In this one act, you'll get yourself a name
for shrewdness and nobility.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right, [120]
I'll do it. I'll set all shame aside.

ODYSSEUS

That story I sketched out for you just now—
do you recall it?

NEOPTOLEMUS

You can be sure of that,
since I've at last agreed to do it. 150

ODYSSEUS

Then, right now you stay here and wait for him.
I'll move off, so I'm not seen around you.
And I'll return our lookout to his ship.
Now, if I think you're taking too much time,
I'll send that same sailor here again—
but I'll disguise his actions and his clothes,
to make him captain of some merchant ship,
beyond all recognition. Then, my boy, [130]
when he tells you some fancy tale, you listen,
taking from it anything that helps you. 160
Now I'm going to my ship. It's up to you.
May Hermes, who guides men through deceptions,
lead us through this, and with Athena, too,
goddess of victory, our city's patron

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and the one who always rescues me.

[Exit Odysseus. Enter the Chorus, members of Neoptolemus' crew]

CHORUS

My lord, tell me what I must conceal
and what I should say to this Philoctetes.
He's bound to be full of suspicion.
For I'm a stranger in a foreign place.
The art and judgment of the man 170
who rules with Zeus' godlike sceptre [140]
exceed the skills of ordinary men.
That age-old authority of kings
has now come down to you, my son.
So tell me what I need to do to serve you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Right now perhaps you're eager to inspect
the place here on the shore in which he lives.
You can look through it—there's no need to fear—
that dangerous man has left his cave for now.
When he gets back, stand ready to come out 180
when I give the signal. Try to help me—
give whatever aid I may then require.

CHORUS

My lord, this help you talk about [150]
has long been my chief concern—
always to keep my eyes alert
above all to what's best for you.
Tell me about this man,
the kind of shelter where he lives,
and where he might be now.
That's something I should know, 190
in case he comes at me somewhere
when I'm not ready for him.

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Where's he gone off to?
Is he at home in there,
in that cave, or here outside?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Here's his dwelling with two entrances,
a den carved in the rock.

[160]

CHORUS

The man who lives here—
where's the poor wretch gone?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I think that's clear.

He's dragging his foot along some place nearby,
looking for things to eat. I've heard it said
that that's the way he usually lives—
in his wretched state it takes all he has
to shoot his feathered arrows at his prey,
and no one ever ventures close enough
to help him cure his sad condition.

200

CHORUS

Well, I pity him for that—
with no human to look after him,
and no companion's face to see,
he lives a miserable life,
alone, always alone,
infected with a cruel disease,
confused about what he should do
to cope with every pressing need—
how does he bear a fate so grim?
It's the workings of the gods.
What a wretched race of men they are
whose life exceeds due measure.

[170]

210

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This man Philoctetes, [180]
for all we know, is just as good
as any member of the finest clan. 220
But here he lies all by himself,
apart from other human beings,
with shaggy goats and spotted deer,
suffering from hunger pangs
and from his painful wound.
It's pitiful—he has to bear
an agony that has no cure,
and as he cries in bitter pain,
the only answer comes from Echo,
a distant, senseless babble. 230 [190]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, nothing in all this surprises me.
Let me explain just how I understand it.
This man's sufferings come from the gods,
both those afflicting him from savage Chryse
and those he suffers now without a cure.¹
The gods are planning that Philoctetes
won't aim his bow at Troy and shoot his shafts,
those all-conquering arrows from the gods,
until the time is right, when, people say,
those weapons take the city—that's Troy's fate. 240 [200]

CHORUS LEADER

My lad, be quiet.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why, what's the matter?

¹*Chryse*: This name refers to the nymph who punished Philoctetes with the snake bite for desecrating her shrine. It is also the name of a small island close to Troy.

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CHORUS LEADER

I heard a noise—a sound that may have come
from someone in distress. From over there,
I think, or maybe there. Yes, I hear it—
I hear the voice of someone hurt. That’s it—
someone forced to crawl along the path.
That heavy groaning of a man in pain,
even from a distance, is hard to miss.
The cries are just too clear. Now, my lad,
you should listen . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS [*interrupting*]

To what?

CHORUS

I’ve just been thinking.

250 [210]

This man’s not far away—he’s close to us,
bringing music home, not like a shepherd
piping his flocks back to some melody,
but screaming as he stumbles.
Perhaps his echoing howls
come from his body’s pain
or else he’s seen our ship
at its unwelcoming anchorage.
Either way, his cries are dreadful.

[*Enter Philoctetes*]

PHILOCTETES

You there, you strangers,

260 [220]

What country are you from? Why land here,
put into such a desolate location,
without a decent harbour? If I guessed
your homeland or your family, what answer
would be right? You look as if you’re Greeks,
at least from how you’re dressed, and that’s a sight

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that pleases me. But I'd like to hear you speak.
Please don't be afraid of me and run away,
scared because I look like such a savage.
Take pity on a wretched, lonely man,
abandoned without friends, in misery. 270
If you come as friends, speak up. Answer me. [230]
It's only right we talk to one another.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, stranger, the first thing you should know
is that we're Greeks. That's what you want to hear.

PHILOCTETES

Ah, that language gives me such delight—
to hear such words spoken by a man like this,
after so many years! Tell me, young man,
what's made you land here? Something you need?
Some business? Or a friendly wind? Speak up—
tell everything, so I know who you are. 280

NEOPTOLEMUS

My birthplace is the island Scyros. Right now,
I'm sailing home. I'm Neoptolemus— [240]
Achilles' son. Now you know everything.

PHILOCTETES

My lad, son of a man I truly loved,
and from a land I cherish, you were raised
by old Lycomedes, your mother's father.
What business brings you to this island?
Where are you sailing from?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, if you must know,
I'm sailing now away from Troy.

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PHILOCTETES

What's that you say?

I'm sure you weren't one of those on board
when our first expedition sailed for Troy. 290

NEOPTOLEMUS

Did you take part in that great enterprise?

PHILOCTETES

My boy, you mean you don't know who I am,
you've no idea who you're looking at?

NEOPTOLEMUS

How can I know a man I've never seen? [250]

PHILOCTETES

You don't know my name? You've never even heard
a rumour of my deadly suffering?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Let me assure you I know none of that—
I've no idea what you're asking.

PHILOCTETES

O how truly miserable I must be, 300
how bitter to the gods, if not a word,
not even rumours of my living here,
have reached my home or any part of Greece.
Those men who broke god's laws to leave me here
have hushed it up and laugh, while my disease
keeps flourishing and getting worse. My boy,
young lad whose father was Achilles, [260]
the man who stands here right in front of you
is someone you perhaps have heard about
as master of the arms of Hercules. 310
Yes, I am Poëas' son, Philoctetes,
the man those two commanders of the army

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and that Cephallenian king Odysseus
 so disgracefully threw out,¹ deserted here,
 while I was suffering from this cruel disease.
 I was bitten by a savage deadly snake.
 Our fleet had sailed from Chryse by the sea. [270]
 It landed here. Then, my boy, they left me
 with this infection as my sole companion.
 Yes, they left me here alone. Once they saw 320
 my storms of pain had passed and I was sleeping,
 they were so happy to abandon me
 under an overhanging rock, here onshore,
 setting out some rags, some scraps of food,
 a pittance—enough to please a beggar.
 I hope they get the treatment they gave me!
 My boy, can you imagine how I felt
 after my sleep that day, when I awoke,
 when I got up to find they'd disappeared?
 How I wept, how I cried out in distress, 330
 when I saw the ships on which I'd sailed
 had all gone off, with no one else around, [280]
 no one to help, no one to soothe the pain
 of my disease? I looked everywhere,
 but all I found around me was my pain—
 of that, my lad, I had more than my share.
 Well, time went by for me, month after month,
 alone in this small shelter. I was forced
 to look to my own needs all by myself.
 This bow gave me the food my stomach craved, 340
 by shooting birds as they passed overhead.
 Each time an arrow flew out from this string [290]
 and struck, I'd go crawling after it, in pain,

¹*Cephallenian*: Cephallenia was an island in Odysseus' kingdom, but the name is often applied to his territory generally (and his soldiers are commonly called Cephallenians).

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dragging this wretched foot behind me.
In winter, when I needed to fetch water,
often there was frost—at that time of year
it's not uncommon—and I'd have to break
some firewood. I'd drag myself outside,
in agony, and get it. Then, at times,
I had no fire. But by rubbing stones 350
I finally produced the hidden spark
which keeps me going day by day. In fact,
living here under this roof and with my fire
I have all I need, except, of course,
relief from my disease. You see, my lad, [300]
you should know some facts about this island.
No sailor ever comes too near this place—
not if he can help it. There's no moorage,
or any port where he can buy and sell
to make a profit or find a welcome host. 360
Sailors with any sense don't travel here.
If someone ever came unwillingly—
such things do happen often over time
in the full span of one's life—well then,
when they arrived, my boy, they'd talk to me,
speak a few sympathetic words, and then,
from pity, add some food or clothing.
But there's one thing no one would ever do, [310]
once I suggested it—take me safely home.
This is the tenth year of my misery, 370
wasting away in hunger and distress,
eaten up by this gluttonous disease.
This is the work of those sons of Atreus
and Odysseus, that brutal man. They did this.
May the Olympian gods give them someday
full retribution for my agonies!

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CHORUS

Son of Poetas, I pity you, as well—
just like those visitors you had before.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I, too, can testify to what you say.
You speak the truth. For I've experienced 380 [320]
how bad the sons of Atreus can be,
and Odysseus' brutality as well.

PHILOCTETES

What's that? You mean you, too, have complaints
against those accursed sons of Atreus—
something they did to you to make you angry?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I wish one day my hand could vent my rage,
so then they'd learn in Sparta and Mycenae,
that Scyros is the mother of brave men.¹

PHILOCTETES

Good for you, my lad. But what's your reason?
Why are you so angry? What's the grudge 390
you have against them?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'll tell you, son of Poetas,
but it's hard to say what I went through [330]
on their account when I arrived at Troy.
When fate declared Achilles had to die . . .

PHILOCTETES [*interrupting*]

What's that? Stop there. Answer this question first—
is Achilles, son of Peleus, dead?

¹*Sparta . . . Mycenae . . . Scyros*: Menelaus is king of Sparta, and Agamemnon is king of Mycenae. Neoptolemus was born and raised on the island of Scyros.

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NEOPTOLEMUS

He is.

But no mortal killed him. It was a god.
Phoebus Apollo brought him down, they say,
with an arrow shot.

PHILOCTETES

Both noble beings,
the killer and the killed. Now I'm not sure,
my boy, what I should do next—question you
about your suffering or mourn Achilles.

400

NEOPTOLEMUS

Your own afflictions are enough for you,
I think. You unhappy man, you don't need
to mourn the next man's troubles.

PHILOCTETES

You're right.

So tell me once again what you went through,
how those men harmed you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

They came to get me
in a fancy decorated ship—Phoenix,
who raised my father, and lord Odysseus.
They said—I don't know if it's true or not—
that since my father had been killed,
destiny decreed that no one except me
could seize those towers in Troy. Well, my friend,
once they'd said that, they gave me little time
before we left. We sailed there at top speed,
mainly because I had a great desire
to see my father's corpse before the burial,

410

[350]

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since I'd never seen him. In addition,
 what they'd told me was truly wonderful—
 if I went back with them, I'd capture Troy. 420
 Well, we rowed and had a favourable wind,
 so on my voyage by the second day
 we came to Sigeum, that bitter place.¹
 Then, when I disembarked, all the army
 at once came crowding round to welcome me,
 swearing they could see the dead Achilles
 alive again. But he just lay there dead.
 In my grief I wept for him. Soon after that, [360]
 I went to Atreus' sons, as friends of mine,
 or so I thought, to claim my father's arms 430
 and all the rest of what belonged to him.
 They gave me the most shameless of replies—
 "Seed of Achilles, you may take away
 all your father's things except his weapons.
 Another man is master of them now,
 Laertes' son, Odysseus." I jumped up—
 my anger was immediate and intense—
 tears were in my eyes. Full of bitterness,
 I yelled at them, "You miserable men,
 have you two dared award my weapons 440
 to another man rather than to me [370]
 without even keeping me informed?"
 Then Odysseus spoke up—it so happened
 he was there nearby—"Yes, boy, they did.
 And rightly, too, because I rescued them.
 I was there to save their master's body."
 In my rage I began to heap on him
 every insult I could think of, all at once.
 If he meant to steal those weapons from me,

¹*Sigeum*: a prominent coastal location northwest of Troy.

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then there was nothing I was holding back. 450
 Hurt by my abuse, though not enraged,
 Odysseus said, “You’ve not been where we have—
 you weren’t around when we all needed you.
 And now, since you cannot speak politely, [380]
 you’ll never sail to Scyros with those arms.”
 After hearing such rebukes and insults
 I’m sailing home without my property,
 thanks to that low-born criminal Odysseus.
 But I don’t lay the blame so much on him
 as on those in command. For any city 460
 depends completely on those in control,
 and so must all the army. And when people
 grow unruly, it’s what their teachers say
 that makes them so corrupt. That’s my story,
 all I have to tell. If there’s any man
 who hates those sons of Atreus, I hope
 the gods will cherish him the way I do. [390]

CHORUS

All-nourishing mountain mother Earth,
 mother of Zeus himself,
 you who live and rule 470
 in great Pactolus,¹ rich in gold,
 most dread and sacred mother,
 over there I called on you,
 in Troy, when sons of Atreus
 heaped all their insults on this man,
 while they were handing over
 his father’s armour to Odysseus,
 paying highest honours to that man—
 such awe-inspiring things.
 Hail, blessed goddess, as you sit 480 [400]

¹*Pactolus*: a river in Asia Minor celebrated for its rich deposits of gold.

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there on your finely decorated throne,
where carved-out lions slaughter bulls.¹

PHILOCTETES

You've sailed here carrying your grief,
sorrows like my own, a clear guarantee.
You and your story harmonize with mine,
so I can recognize how those men act,
the sons of Atreus and that Odysseus,
a man who, I know well, would set his tongue
to every evil lie or debased act
to get the unjust end he's looking for.
No, what you've said does not surprise me,
though I do wonder how great Ajax,
if he was there, could bear to witness it.

490

[410]

NEOPTOLEMUS

My friend, Ajax was no longer living—
had he been alive, they'd not have robbed me.

PHILOCTETES

What's that you say? Did death get Ajax, too?

NEOPTOLEMUS

He's dead and gone. Imagine Ajax
no longer standing in the sunlight.²

PHILOCTETES

No, no. It's dreadful. But Diomedes,
son of Tydeus, and that Odysseus,
son of Sisyphus (so people say), sold

500

² . . . *slaughter bulls*: This detail seems to suggest (according to Jebb) that the goddess is riding on lions or that her throne is a chariot drawn by lions.

¹ *Ajax* is Telamonian Ajax, king of Salamis, the greatest Achaean warrior after Achilles. He expected to be awarded the arms of Achilles, and when he was not, Ajax went berserk and killed himself. Sophocles' play *Ajax* tells the story of his final day.

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to Laertes still in his mother's womb,
they'll not die, for they don't deserve to live.¹

NEOPTOLEMUS

No they won't. That's something you can count on.
In fact right now within the Argive army [420]
those two are really thriving.

PHILOCTETES

And Nestor?

What about that fine old friend of mine
from Pylos? Is he alive? He's the one
who with his prudent counsel often checked
the nasty things that those two men would do. 510

NEOPTOLEMUS

Right now he's not doing well. That son of his,
Antilochus, who stood by him, is dead.

PHILOCTETES

That's more bad news. Those two men you mention—
I really didn't want to hear they'd died.
God knows what we should look for in this world,
when such men perish and Odysseus lives,
and at a time when we should hear the news
that he was dead instead of those two men. [430]

NEOPTOLEMUS

He's a slippery wrestler, Philoctetes,
but even clever schemes are often checked. 520

² . . . *deserve to live*: Sisyphus, the founder of Corinth, was famous for his devious ways. According to one story very popular among Odysseus' enemies, Sisyphus was the father of Odysseus and sold his mother to Laertes while Odysseus was still in the womb. Diomedes, a young Achaean warrior-king, was often a comrade of Odysseus in his schemes. In some quarters, the two became a by-word for nasty trickery.

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The gods are careful to look out for them. 540
Somehow with all those stubborn criminals
they like to turn them back from Hades,
while always sending good and righteous men [450]
down to their deaths. How can I sort that out?
How can I praise the gods? When I give thanks
for how the world's divinely organized,
I find the gods themselves disgraceful.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, Philoctetes, you son of Poeas
from Oetea, in future I'll be careful—
I'll keep watching what's going on at Troy 550
but from a distance, and I'll do the same
with those two sons of Atreus. Where I see
lesser men in someone's camp prevail
over their betters, so good men waste away,
while cowards rule—among such groups as these
I'll never make my friends. No, Scyros' rock
will be enough for me from this day on.
I'll be a happy man in my own home. [460]
Now I'll get back to my ship. Farewell,
Philoctetes—as best you can fare well. 560
I pray the gods will rid you of disease,
in answer to your wishes. We must be off—
ready to sail out when the god permits.

PHILOCTETES

My lad, are you setting off already?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes—our opportunities are telling us
to watch for a good wind close to our ship
and not too far away.

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PHILOCTETES

And now, my boy,
by your father, by your mother, by all
the things you love in your own home,
I come to you a suppliant—don't leave me, 570 [470]
not alone like this, living helplessly
in such distress. You see what this is like.
You've heard how much I suffer. Think of me
as something incidental. Yes, I know
you have a great disgust for such a load.
But even so, bear with it. Noble minds
find unkind deeds disgraceful and good acts
commendable. If you deny this plea,
what people say about you won't be good.
But my boy, if you do help, you'll get 580
the greatest tribute given to honour,
if I can reach Oeta's land alive.
Come, not even one full day of trouble. [480]
Take the chance. Let me aboard and set me
any place you wish—in the hold, the bow,
the stern—wherever I will least offend
the others in the ship. Give your consent,
my boy—by Zeus himself, god of suppliants,
let me convince you! I'm down on my knees
in front of you, though I'm weak and wretched, 590
a cripple. Don't leave me alone like this,
so far from any routes men travel on.
No. Take me safely to your home, or else
to Euboea, where Chalcodon lives.
From there it's no long trip for me to reach [490]
Oeta, the Trachianian heights,
and the fair-flowing Spercheius river,
so you can show me off to my dear father,
although for some time now I've been afraid

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he's gone from me. I've often summoned him, 600
sending urgent prayers with those who've come here,
for him to send a ship to rescue me
and take me home. But either he is dead,
or, what I think more likely, those I sent,
thinking my affairs a trivial matter,
hurried to complete their voyage home.
But now in you I've come across a man [500]
who can escort me and be my messenger.
Have mercy, and rescue me! Bear in mind
how everything for human beings is strange 700
and so precarious—things can go well,
then change into their opposite. A man
who stays away from harm has to watch out
for dreadful things, and when a man succeeds,
then he must really look at how he lives,
just in case he's killed without a warning.

CHORUS

O my king, have pity.
He's spoken of his struggles,
all that suffering and pain,
ordeals I hope no friend of mine 710
will every have to undergo.
And if, my lord, you hate [510]
those savage sons of Atreus,
I'd transform their evil acts
into some benefit for him
and carry him, as he has asked,
in your rapid well-stocked ship
back to his home, and so avoid
the righteous anger of the gods.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Take care—right now you're just a bystander. 720

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It's easy. But later, when you've had your fill
of his infection by living with it,
you may no longer stand by what you've said.

[520]

CHORUS

That won't happen. You'll never have just cause
to make that charge against me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, I'd be shamed
if this stranger found me less prepared than you
to work on his behalf. So come on, then,
if it seems all right, let's put out to sea.
The man should start his trip without delay.
Our ship will carry him. We won't refuse.
May the gods let us safely leave this land
and sail from here wherever we may choose.

730

PHILOCTETES

What a glorious day! O you sweet man,
you dear sailors, I wish I could do something
to show you how you've made me your true friend!
Let's be gone, my lad, once we've kissed the ground
in ritual farewell to my home in there,
that was no home, so you can also learn
how I sustained myself, how I was born
with a determined heart. For I believe
the very sight of it would have convinced
anyone but me to give up this ordeal.
But from necessity I've had to learn
to bear such misery.

[530]

740

[Philoctetes starts to lead Neoptolemus up to his cave]

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CHORUS

Wait a moment!

Two men are coming. We should talk to them.

One's a sailor from your ship, the other one
a stranger. Let's hear what they have to say.

[540]

Then you can go inside.

[A sailor enters, leading a spy disguised as a Merchant]

MERCHANT

Son of Achilles,

I asked my companion here, who was on watch,
guarding your ship with two other sailors,
to tell me where I might run into you.

750

I did not intend to have this meeting,
since I was driven to this very coast

by chance. I've been sailing my own ship
without much company on my way home,
back from Troy to wine-rich Peperethus.

But once I heard that all these sailors here
were from your crew, it seemed a good idea

[550]

to say something, not to resume my trip
until I'd talked to you and then received

760

a fair reward. You may not understand
some matters which concern you—the Argives
have new things in store for you, not just plans
but actions they've already set in motion,
no longer mere ideas.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If I'm a worthy man,
stranger, this favour you are doing for me
by your concern will make me your good friend.
So tell me of these things you spoke about.

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I need to understand just what you know
about the latest schemes the Argives have.

770 [560]

MERCHANT

Old Phoenix and the sons of Theseus
have set sail with a naval escort—
they're coming for you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

To take me back by force,
or to persuade me to go back again?

MERCHANT

I don't know. I'm here to tell you what I heard.

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Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston is a retired professor who taught for many years at Malaspina University-College (now Vancouver Island University) in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. He maintains a web site on which are posted his translations from Greek, German, and French, together with the text of various lectures and workbooks, at the following web address:

<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>.

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Johnston's translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have also been issued as recordings by Naxos Audiobooks (both the complete and abridged editions).

Sophocles
Philoctetes
Translated by Ian Johnston

The story of Philoctetes, a warrior leader on the Greek expedition to Troy, has long been a favourite of writers and visual artists. Wounded by a snake bite on the journey to Troy, Philoctetes was abandoned on a deserted island by the Greek leaders, because the smell of his wound and his cries of pain prevented the other leaders from carrying out their duties. Years later the Greeks, now at Troy, discovered from a prophet that they needed the arrows of Hercules, which Philoctetes possessed, in order to capture the city. They sent Odysseus and Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, to fetch the weapons from Philoctetes by force.

Sophocles' treatment of this popular story (a play which won first prize at the drama festival in 409 BC) is, among other things, a famous exploration of the conflict between morally acceptable behaviour and practical expediency. For Neoptolemus, a young man determined to live up to the excellence of his family tradition, is required by the sly Odysseus, his superior officer, to deceive and trick Philoctetes so that the Greeks may take the bow and arrows of Hercules and win victory and fame in Troy, even if that means lying to Philoctetes and leaving him on the island without the one weapon which has enabled him to survive for ten years. Once Neoptolemus witnesses the immense suffering of Philoctetes and hears his story, he experiences the greatest difficulty in carrying out what the practical realities of the political situation demand. Yet he cannot evade having to make a decision about what to do.

Ian Johnston's new translation of this classic play is an accurate rendition of the Greek in a fluent modern English, immediately accessible to the reader and particularly well suited to dramatic performance.

About the Translator



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.