

Sophocles
Philoctetes



Translated by Ian Johnston

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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*.

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

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

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,
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,

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.

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
Since I was ordered here to work with you,
I'm not anxious to be called disloyal.
Still, my lord, I'd much prefer to fail
in something honourable, than to win out
with treachery.

ODYSSEUS

You noble father's son,
when I was young, I, too, had a quiet tongue.
I let my active hands speak up for me.
But now I've gone out into adult life,
faced all its trials, I see with mortal men
the tongue, not action, rules in everything. 120

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are your orders, then, apart from lying? [100]

ODYSSEUS

I'm ordering you to use deceitful means
to seize Philoctetes.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But why deceit?
Why not persuade him?

ODYSSEUS

The man won't listen.
And he's not someone you can take by force.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Is he that confident, that powerful?

ODYSSEUS

Indeed, he is. His arrows never miss.
Every shot brings death.

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.

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,
I'll do it. I'll set all shame aside.

[120]

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
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,
in case he comes at me somewhere
when I'm not ready for him.
Where's he gone off to?
Is he at home in there,
in that cave, or here outside?

190

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

[170]

210

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.

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.

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.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why, what's the matter?

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,

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

260 [220]

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.

PHILOCTETES

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

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 Poeas' son, Philoctetes,
the man those two commanders of the army
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]

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).

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,
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!

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
you have against them?

390

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

[330]

PHILOCTETES [*interrupting*]

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

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.

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.

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— 410
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 [350]
to see my father's corpse before the burial,
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,

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

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,
 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
there on your finely decorated throne,
where carved-out lions slaughter bulls.²

480 [400]

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

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

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.

no longer standing in the sunlight.¹

PHILOCTETES

No, no. It's dreadful. But Diomedes,
son of Tydeus, and that Odysseus, 500
son of Sisyphus (so people say), sold
to Laertes still in his mother's womb,
they'll not die, for they don't deserve to live.²

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

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.

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.

PHILOCTETES

Of course, he does.

No evil people ever get destroyed.

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 Poetas

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.

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
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
It's easy. But later, when you've had your fill [520]
of his infection by living with it,
you may no longer stand by what you've said.

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. 730
May the gods let us safely leave this land
and sail from here wherever we may choose.

PHILOCTETES

What a glorious day! O you sweet man, [530]
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 740
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.

[Philoctetes starts to lead Neoptolemus up to his cave]

CHORUS

Wait a moment!
Two men are coming. We should talk to them.
One's a sailor from your ship, the other one [540]
a stranger. Let's hear what they have to say.
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, 750
to tell me where I might run into you.

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 Peparethus.
But once I heard that all these sailors here [550]
were from your crew, it seemed a good idea
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.
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.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Are Phoenix and his comrades on the ship
so keen to do a favour for those men,
the sons of Atreus?

MERCHANT

You can be sure
they're doing it, not wasting any time.

NEOPTOLEMUS

How come Odysseus was not prepared
to make this trip and bring the news himself?
Did some fear prevent him?

780

MERCHANT

He was getting ready,
along with Tydeus' son, to apprehend
some other man, just as I was leaving.¹

[570]

NEOPTOLEMUS

What kind of man was Odysseus chasing?

MERCHANT

He was a man. . .

[The Merchant pauses and nods towards Philoctetes]

. . . but first of all tell me
who this man is. And keep your voice down
when you speak.

NEOPTOLEMUS

This man here in front of you,
stranger, is the famous Philoctetes.

MERCHANT

Then question me no more. Get out of here.
Sail from this place as quickly as you can.

790

¹. . . *Tydeus' son*: a reference to the famous Greek warrior Diomedes, a frequent companion of Odysseus on various adventures.

PHILOCTETES

What's he saying, my boy? Why is this sailor
trying to haggle with you about me
in the shadows?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I don't know what he means.

[580]

But what he speaks, he must say openly,
to me, to you, and to the crew, as well.

MERCHANT

Seed of Achilles, don't make the army
resent me for saying what I should not,
since I get many benefits from them
as payback for the services I give,
the sorts of things a poor man carries out.

800

NEOPTOLEMUS

Those sons of Atreus are my enemies.
This man hates them, too—that's the reason
he's my greatest friend. You've come here
out of a sense of friendship towards me,
so when you speak, you must not hide from us
anything you heard.

MERCHANT

Think of what you're doing.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I've been thinking of that for some time now.

MERCHANT

I'll hold you responsible. . . .

[590]

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right. Speak up.

MERCHANT

Then I'll explain it to you. That man there—
he's the one the two of them are chasing,
those men I spoke of, brutal Odysseus

810

and Diomedes, son of Tydeus.
They've sworn an oath to sail and bring him back,
either by persuading him with reasons
or by overpowering force. All Achaeans
clearly heard Odysseus when he said that.
He was confident they'd be successful,
much more so than his comrade Diomedes.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why were the sons of Atreus so keen 820
after so long to redirect their thoughts
onto this man, whom they'd kept in exile [600]
for so many years. What's got hold of them?
What do they want? Or is it some power
from the gods, the force of retribution
making them pay for evils they have done?

MERCHANT

That's something you've probably not heard,
so I'll explain it all. There was a prophet—
his name was Helenus—of noble birth,
a son of Priam. One night Odysseus, 830
who has a reputation for deceit
and every kind of shame, went out alone
and used his trickery to capture him.
Odysseus tied him up and brought him back,
then put him on display among the Argives,
like a splendid captured beast. Well, Helenus
foretold all sorts of thing to them and then, [610]
concerning Troy, he made this prophecy—
they'd never smash down its great citadel
unless they could persuade Philoctetes, 840
reason with him, and lead him back to Troy
from the island which he now inhabits.
Once he'd heard this prophecy from Helenus,
Odysseus quickly promised he'd get him
and show him to the Argives. He believed
he'd bring Philoctetes with his consent—

that was the likeliest scenario—
but if he was unwilling, he'd use force.
And he said if he did not succeed in this,
anyone who wished should cut off his head.
Now, boy, you've heard it all, and I'd advise
that you and anyone you care about
act now without delay.

850

[620]

PHILOCTETES

That's bad news for me.
Has that man, that source of every injury,
sworn that he'll convince me to return,
go back to the Achaeans? If I do,
once I'm dead I'll be persuaded to rise up
into the light from Hades, just the way
his father did.¹

MERCHANT

I don't know about all that.
But I'm going back to my own ship. I pray
somehow god brings you the very best of help.

860

[Exit Merchant]

PHILOCTETES

My boy, don't you think it's extremely odd
Odysseus would ever entertain the hope
his reassuring words could bring me back—
lead me from his ship, and then show me off
there in the middle of the Argives. No!
I'd rather listen to my greatest foe,
the worst of all, the snake that crippled me
and made me what I am. That Odysseus

[630]

¹ . . . *father did*: The reference here is to Sisyphus who ordered his wife not to bury him. When he came to Hades, he complained about his wife's conduct and was given permission to go back to punish her. Once out of Hades, Sisyphus stayed on earth. Calling Sisyphus the father of Odysseus here is the second reference to the insulting story that Sisyphus sold Odysseus while he was still in his mother's womb to Laertes (see line 501 above).

will say anything and attempt them all. 870
So now I know he's coming to this place.
Come, my lad we should get going from here
so there's a wide stretch of sea between us
and Odysseus' ship. Let's go. Well-timed haste
brings sleep and rest once the work is done.

NEOPTOLEMUS

We'll set sail when the wind stops blowing in
right at our bow. It's course is now against us. [640]

PHILOCTETES

But whenever one's escaping trouble
is always an excellent time to sail.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No. This wind is blowing in their faces, too. 880

PHILOCTETES

There's no wind can hold back any pirates
when they're intent of plundering and theft
and using force.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, if that's what you think,
let's be off, once you've taken from in there
the things you need or really want to keep.

PHILOCTETES

Some things are necessary, but not much.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's there that we won't have on board my ship?

PHILOCTETES

I have a certain herb I always use,
the most effective treatment for this wound [650]
until it is completely cured.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Bring that. 890

Is there something else you still want to get?

PHILOCTETES

Any of the arrows I've forgotten
or overlooked, in case I leave them there
for someone else to take.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What you're holding there—
is that the famous bow?

PHILOCTETES

The very one.
What I have in my hands is no substitute.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Is there some way I could inspect the bow
more closely, hold it, get a feel for it
as something sacred?

PHILOCTETES

For you alone, my son,
I'll grant this wish and whatever else I can
that's in your interest.

900

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'd love to hold it,
but I want that only if it's lawful.
If not, then forget I asked about it.

[660]

PHILOCTETES

What you say, my boy, is just and pious.
You're the only one who's offered me
the light of life, the hope that I will see
the land of Oeta, my aged father,
and my friends. When I was lying there,
at my enemies' feet, you raised me up
beyond their reach. Take courage. This bow
is yours to hold and then give back to me,
the one who gave it to you. You can claim,

910

thanks to your virtue, you're the only man
who's touched it. That's the reason I myself
acquired the bow—by acting virtuously.¹

[670]

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm glad I found you and became your friend.
Whoever knows how to return a favour
for a favour he's received proves himself
a friend more valuable than all possessions.
Please go inside.

PHILOCTETES

I'll go in there with you.
My sick condition craves your company.

920

[Philoctetes and Neoptolemus enter the cave together]

CHORUS

Though I never saw it happen,
I have heard the distant rumour
how a man once stole up to
Zeus' marriage bed—and then
how the mighty son of Cronos
lashed him to a whirling wheel.²
But from all I've heard and seen
I know no other mortal man
who's run into a fate as harsh
as has Philoctetes, a man
who did no wrong to anyone
by thievery or violence,
but acted fairly towards those
who treated him respectfully,
and then, without deserving it,

[680]

930

¹ . . . *acting virtuously*: The virtuous act Philoctetes is referring to is lighting the funeral pyre for Hercules, who was dying in agony from a poisoned tunic.

² . . . *whirling wheel*: This is a reference to Ixion, the first mortal charged with murder. Zeus pardoned his crime. But then Ixion attempted to seduce Zeus' wife Hera in her own bed. Zeus had Ixion tied onto a wheel of fire in Hades.

he was abandoned here to die.
Amazement seizes me to think
how, as he listened by himself
to breakers crashing on the shore, 940
he somehow kept a hold on life [690]
which brought him so much misery.
He had no neighbour but himself
and lacked the power to walk. No one
for a companion in the place
throughout his illness, no one there
to answer him with sympathy
when he screamed out against the plague
that ate his flesh and made him bleed,
no one to gather healing leaves 950
when he succumbed to an attack,
to take them from the fertile earth [700]
and staunch the burning streams of blood
oozing from the ulcerous sores
on his wounded foot. No. He crept
back and forth, crawling like a child
with no dear nurse attending him,
to any place where he might find
relief to ease his pain, and then
his all-consuming agonies 960
eventually would subside.
And he could not collect his food
by taking what the earth provides
or any other nourishment
of those of us who feed ourselves
with our own work, except those times [710]
he eased his hunger with a meal
he got himself with feathered arrows
from his swiftly striking bow.
He's lived a miserable life. 970
He's enjoyed no succouring wine,
but always for the past ten years

has had to look around and find
whatever puddles he could reach.
But now, with all these troubles past,
he'll find success and happiness— [720]
he's met a noble family's son
who'll take him, after all this time,
aboard his own seaworthy boat
and sail to his ancestral home, 980
the place where nymphs of Malis dwell,
along Spercheius river banks,
where, high up on Oeta's heights,
that bronze-shield warrior rose up,
ascended to the gods, ablaze
in his own father's sacred fire.¹

[Neoptolemus and Philoctetes come out from the cave. Philoctetes is carrying his bow and is in obvious pain]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Let's move out of here, if that's what you want. [730]
Why are you so silent? There's no need for that.
Have you been paralyzed?

PHILOCTETES

Aaiiii . . . aaiii.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's wrong?

PHILOCTETES

It's nothing serious, my boy. 990
Just keep going.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Are you suffering pain
from the disease which always bothers you?

¹ . . . *sacred fire*: These lines are a reference to Hercules who was burned alive at his own request on top of Mount Oeta. Hercules was a mortal son of Zeus, who, because of his amazing exploits, was taken up into heaven as a god.

PHILOCTETES

No, no. I think it's better now. O you gods!

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why scream like that and call out to the gods?

PHILOCTETES

For them to come to me in person . . . save me . . .

Aaaiiiii! . . . Aaaaaaiiiii!!! . . . Aaaaaiiiiiiiii!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's troubling you now? Why not speak up?

[740]

Why don't you tell me? It's obvious enough
you're in some kind of pain.

PHILOCTETES

I'm done for, my boy.

I can't conceal this dreadful thing from you . . .

1000

Aaiiii . . . It goes right through me . . . shooting pains.

It's horrible . . . I'm in such agony!

I'm being destroyed, my lad, eaten up . . .

my god . . . O my god . . . such awful pain!

O my boy, if you've got a sword at hand

by the gods I beg you slice my foot off,

here, where my leg ends. Amputate it now!

Don't worry about my life. Do it, my boy!

[750]

NEOPTOLEMUS

What new pain makes you scream so suddenly?

Why groan and cry like this?

PHILOCTETES

You know, my son.

1010

NEOPTOLEMUS

What is it?

PHILOCTETES

My boy, you know the reason.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, I don't. What's wrong with you?

PHILOCTETES

How could you not know? Aaaaaiiii!

NEOPTOLEMUS

It's the agonizing weight of your disease.

PHILOCTETES

That's right . . . the pain . . . it's indescribable.
Have pity on me!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What shall I do?

PHILOCTETES

Don't get afraid and just give up on me.
The disease attacks me only now and then,
perhaps when it's done with roaming elsewhere.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Alas, you've had such a miserable life, 1020
poor man, it seems you've really suffered [760]
every kind of trouble. What do you want?
Can I help you up? Do you need my hand?

PHILOCTETES

No. Don't do that. But take this bow for me—
you just asked me if I'd let you hold it.
Make sure you look after it. Keep it safe,
until this present fit from my disease
eases off. Once the agony gets less,
I'll be overcome with sleep—it won't leave 1030
before that time, so let me sleep in peace.
If those two men get here while I'm asleep,
don't give them the bow—no, by the gods, [770]
I tell you don't—not of your own free will,
or without wanting to, or through a trick—
you may get yourself destroyed and me,

and I'm your suppliant.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't worry.

I'll be careful. No one's hands will touch the bow
but yours and mine. Let me take it from you,
and may it bring good luck!

PHILOCTETES

Here, lad, take it.

Give the gods' jealousy due reverence, 1040
in case this bow brings you much suffering,
as it has me and the man who owned it
before I did.¹

NEOPTOLEMUS

Gods grant both of us success—
a prosperous quick trip to whatever place 780
we come to on our trip which god thinks right.

PHILOCTETES [*still in great pain*]

My boy, I'm afraid your prayers are useless.
Dark red blood is dripping down, oozing out
from deep within my sore, and I expect
there'll be new attack. Ahhh . . . aaaiiii . . .
it's really bad . . . this accursed foot . . . 1050
it brings me such torment . . . creeping up . . .
it's almost here . . . aaiii, it hurts so much . . .
You know what's going on—don't abandon me, 790
don't leave . . . aaaaiiii . . . Ah, Odysseus,
you who were once my guest, how I now wish
you were in such agony, with pains like this
driving straight through your chest! It's hard for me . . .
aaaiii . . . it strikes again! You two commanders—

¹ . . . *before I did*: This is a reference to Hercules, who also suffered a great deal in life and had an agonizing death. Philoctetes (Jebb notes) is reminding Neoptolemus that whoever owns the bow seems to get punished by the gods who are jealous of any man's possessing such a weapon.

you, Agamemnon and Menelaus,
may this disease feed on the pair of you 1060
instead of me and for as many years . . .
it's too much for me . . . O death, death,
here I keep calling for you all the time.
Why can't you ever come? O noble lad,
my child, my good friend, carry me away,
and burn me in that famous Lemnian fire. [800]
I thought it right to do that service once
for Zeus' son—and in return I got
those weapons you are holding for me now.¹
Why do you say, lad? What do you say? 1070
Why so quiet? What's on your mind, my son?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I feel so sorry for you—what you're going through
has for some time now filled me with distress.

PHILOCTETES

Don't worry about that, my lad. Cheer up.
These fits are severe but pass off quickly.
So I beg you, don't leave me alone.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't be afraid. We'll stay. [810]

PHILOCTETES

You won't leave.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You can be sure of it.

PHILOCTETES

Well, my lad,
I don't think it's fair to make you swear to it.

¹ . . . *Lemnian fire*: Jebb notes that this seems to be a reference to a volcanic mountain called Mosuchlos on the east coast of Lemnos, near Philoctetes' cave. Hercules was taken up to the top of Mount Oeta by Hyllus, his son, who helped construct the pyre but would not set it alight. Philoctetes did so and, as a reward, got Hercules' bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's no need. It would be against the law
for me to go without you.

1080

PHILOCTETES

Give me your hand—
a pledge of trust.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I will stay. Here's my pledge.

*[Neoptolemus and Philoctetes shake hands. Then a new fit attacks
Philoctetes and he falls to his knees]*

PHILOCTETES

Take me back—in there.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Where do you mean?

PHILOCTETES *[indicating the opening to the cave above them]*

Up there—there!

NEOPTOLEMUS *[grabbing Philoctetes]*

Is this another fit?

Why roll your eyes up at the sky?

PHILOCTETES

Let go!

Get your hands away from me!

NEOPTOLEMUS

If I do,

where will you go?

PHILOCTETES

Take your hands off me!

NEOPTOLEMUS

I won't do that, I tell you.

PHILOCTETES

You'll kill me

if you keep grabbing me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right, I'll let go,
if you really think that's better for you. 1090

PHILOCTETES

I'm close to death—O Earth, embrace me now!—
these fits won't let me stand up any more. [820]

[Philoctetes collapses prone on the ground]

NEOPTOLEMUS

I think sleep will overpower him soon.
His head is sinking back. His whole body
is soaked in sweat, and a black flow of blood
has burst through on his heel. Leave him alone,
my friends, so he can fall asleep.

CHORUS

O Sleep who knows no pain,
sweet Sleep so free of suffering,
come to us with joy, my king, 1100
and bring him happiness.
Hold before his eyes that light [830]
which shines around them now.
Come down, I pray, and heal him.

CHORUS LEADER

My son, think about where you are right now
and how you sort out where we go from here.
Do you see him there? He's asleep. Let's act.
Why hesitate? For Opportunity,
which takes everything into account,
often wins decisively in one quick blow.¹ 1110

¹ . . . *one quick blow*: Opportunity (Kairos) is here personified as if it were divine. Jebb notes that there was an altar to Kairos at the entrance to the Olympian stadium, where athletes could ask for success at a key moment in the competition.

NEOPTOLEMUS [*looking down at sleeping Philoctetes*]

He cannot hear a thing. But even so,
I know if we set off without this man, [840]
we'll have hunted down this bow in vain.
The crown of victory belongs to him—
the god instructed us to lead him back.
We'll bring disgrace and shame upon ourselves
boasting of what we did, when the result
was incomplete and when we lied, as well.

CHORUS

But the god will see to that, my boy.
And when you answer me again 1120
you must whisper to me, lad,
speak softly when you talk.
In sickness all men's slumber
is not real sleep—it has keen eyes.
I think you should use the utmost care,
doing everything within your power,
and take that bow—a major prize. [850]
Get it without alerting him.
If you hold to what you intend for him—
and you know clearly what I mean— 1130
then there are surely going to be
some desperate problems facing us,
which a shrewd man could well foresee.¹
Now, lad, a fair wind blows you on your course,
this man's eyes are closed, his weapon's gone,
and he's stretched out in a dark sleep—
and in this heat a man sleeps soundly.
He can't control his hands or feet— [860]
like someone lying with Hades.

¹ . . . *well foresee*: The Chorus is advising Neoptolemus to take the bow and leave and thus abandon what he is presently intending (to take Philoctetes on board his ship). The trouble they are talking about is what might happen on board once Philoctetes learns that he is going to Troy rather than back home. For them the easiest course seems to be to take the bow and abandon Philoctetes.

So think if what you've talked about
is practical. Consider that. My boy,
as far as I can grasp what's happening,
the finest action is the one
where there's nothing to fear. 1140

PHILOCTETES

Keep quiet, I tell you. Don't lose your wits.
He's opening his eyes—raising his head.

[Philoctetes wakes up and struggles to stand and look around him]

PHILOCTETES

Ah, to sleep and then to see the daylight
and friendly people watching out for me,
a sight beyond my fondest hopes! My boy,
I never would have thought you'd do this— 1150
remain here with such sympathy and wait [870]
to help me until my fit was over.

Those fine generals, the sons of Atreus,
you can be sure, would not have done that,
not so readily. But your nature, lad,
is good—you've got a noble ancestry.
So you bore all these troubles easily,
the cries of pain and the appalling stench.
And now it looks as if I can forget
this illness and rest awhile. So, my boy, 1160
lift me up. Help me to my feet, lad.

When I recover from this dizziness, [880]
we'll go to the ship, sail without delay.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm glad to see you're still alive, breathing
without that pain. What I was expecting
was something else—in your endless suffering
your symptoms made you look as if you'd died.
Now you should get up. Or, if you prefer,
these men will carry you. It's no trouble,
since you and I agree what we're to do. 1170

abandons his own nature and then acts
against his character, everything is bad.

PHILOCTETES

But you, at least, by helping a good man
have not been doing or saying anything
your father wouldn't have done.

1190

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'll be dishonoured—
that's the thought that keeps tormenting me.

PHILOCTETES

No, not because of what you're doing now.
But the way you're talking has me worried.

NEOPTOLEMUS

O Zeus, what do I do? Will I be disgraced
twice over—hiding what I should not hide
and forfeiting my honour with my words?

PHILOCTETES

Unless I've judged this situation badly,
this man's intending to betray me—
he'll leave me here and sail away.

[910]

1200

NEOPTOLEMUS

No!
I won't abandon you. I'll take you with me,
but you'll really find the trip distressing.
All this time that's what's been troubling me.

PHILOCTETES

What do you mean, my boy? I don't understand.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I won't hide a thing. You must sail to Troy,
back to the Achaeans and the army
led by the sons of Atreus.

PHILOCTETES

O no!

What are you saying?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't start wailing,
not until you learn what it's about.

1210

PHILOCTETES

What's there to learn? What are you doing with me?

NEOPTOLEMUS

First, I'm saving you from this wretched place.
And then I'm going with you to plunder Troy.

[920]

PHILOCTETES

Is this what you really mean to do?

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's a powerful necessity at work,
controlling these events. Keep your temper
when you hear about them.

PHILOCTETES

I'm done for . . .
betrayed . . . this is appalling! You stranger,
why have you done this to me? My bow—
give it back to me back right now!

NEOPTOLEMUS

I can't do that.
Both my duty and my own self-interest
compel me to obey those in command.

1220

PHILOCTETES

You destructive fire . . . you total monster . . .
you hateful masterpiece of fearful treachery—
what you've done to me, how you've betrayed me!
Aren't you ashamed to look at me, a man
who was your suppliant, who begged your mercy?
You wretch! When you take away my bow,

[930]

you deprive me of my life. Hand it back.
I'm begging you. Please, my lad, return it. 1230
By your fathers' gods, don't take away my life!

[Neoptolemus remains silent and cannot look at Philoctetes]

This is atrocious! He's not speaking to me.
He won't even look me in the eye,
as if he'll never give me back my bow.
O you bays and headlands, you mountain beasts,
who've been part of my life, you jagged rocks,
to you I call—there's no one else to hear me.
So to you, my customary companions,
I cry out what this boy has done to me, [940]
Achilles' son, who made me a promise 1240
he'd take me home and who now leads me off
to Troy. With his right hand he pledged his word,
then took my bow and keeps it for himself,
the sacred bow of Hercules, Zeus' son,
which he wants to show off to the Argives.
He's taking me by force, as if I were
some mighty warrior—he doesn't realize
he's destroying a corpse, a smoky shadow,
no more than a mere ghost. If I were strong, 1250
he'd not have captured me—even as it is,
with me in this condition, he'd not prevail
except by trickery. It's my harsh fate.
My hopes have been betrayed. What should I do?
Give back the bow. Return to who you are, [950]
to your true character. What do you say?
You're silent, and I'm a wretched nothing!
I'll go back once again to you, my rock
with your two entrances, but unarmed now,
without a way to get my nourishment.
And in this cave I'll waste away alone, 1260
unable to bring down with my arrows
birds on the wing or beasts that roam the hills.
Instead I'll die a miserable death.

Now I'm a feast for those I used to feed on,
the prey of those I hunted down before.
I'll pay a full reprisal with my life,
my dismal life, for those lives I took,
thanks to a man who looked as if he had [960]
no sense of evil. May you perish, too!
But no, not quite yet, not before I see 1270
if you'll change your mind again. If not,
then I hope you die a miserable death!

CHORUS

What shall we do? It's up to you, my king,
whether we sail off now or else comply
with what he's asking.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Pity for this man,
a dreadful pity, has come over me,
and not for the first time. No. I've felt it
for a while.

PHILOCTETES

By the gods, my boy,
have mercy on me. Don't give people cause
to criticize you for deceiving me. 1280

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, not that! What am I going to do?
I wish I'd never sailed away from Scyros— [970]
what's going on here is just too painful.

PHILOCTETES

You're not an evil man, but it seems to me
you came here after learning shameful things
from wicked men. Leave bad deeds to others,
those fit to act that way, and sail from here.
But first give me back my weapon.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You men,

what shall we do?

[Enter Odysseus with a small escort of armed sailors. Philoctetes does see him immediately]

ODYSSEUS

What are you doing,
you traitor? Come back here. Give me that bow. 1290

PHILOCTETES

Who's that? Do I hear Odysseus' voice?

ODYSSEUS *[stepping forward]*

Yes, it's Odysseus. Now you understand
the way things are. I'm here. See for yourself.

PHILOCTETES

Alas, I've been betrayed. I'm being destroyed.
So he's the one who really caught me out
and stole my weapons.

ODYSSEUS

That right. It's was me 980
and no one else. I'll acknowledge that.

PHILOCTETES

Give me the bow, boy. Hand it over.

ODYSSEUS

He won't do it, even if he wants to.
No. You've got to come along with me. 1300
If not, these men will take you off by force.

PHILOCTETES

Of all evil men, you're the wickedest—
and boldest, too. They'll take me in by force?

ODYSSEUS

Yes, unless you come of your own free will.

PHILOCTETES

O Lemnos and you all-powerful flames

kindled by Hephaestus, can you bear this—
that this man will force me away from you?

ODYSSEUS

I tell you it's Zeus who rules this country.
Yes, Zeus. And all this is ordained by Zeus.
I am his servant.

[990]

PHILOCTETES

You despicable man,
you just invent the things you wish to say,
and by making claims about the gods,
you turn them into liars.

1310

ODYSSEUS

No, I don't.
They speak the truth. We have to go.

PHILOCTETES

I won't.

ODYSSEUS

But I say you will. You have to obey.

PHILOCTETES

This is so shameful—it's clear enough
my father conceived in me a slave
and no free man.

ODYSSEUS

You're wrong. He made a man
to be just like the finest warriors
with whom you're going to capture Troy by force
and then destroy it.

1320

PHILOCTETES

I'll never do it,
not even if I have to undergo
every kind of torment, not while I stand
with steep island cliffs below me.

[1000]

ODYSSEUS

What will you do?

PHILOCTETES

I'll throw myself directly from this cliff
and smash my head in on the rocks down there.

ODYSSEUS [*to his attendants*]

Grab him, you two! Don't let him do that!

[The two sailors rush up and grab Philoctetes by his arms]

PHILOCTETES

O my arms, what suffering you must bear
because you lack that bow you cherish so!
Now you've become a tied-up captive beast, 1330
thanks to this man. And you, who cannot think
a healthy thought that suits a man who's free,
you've sneaked up and snagged me once again,
using this young lad whom I didn't know
to be your screen. Though he's too good for you,
he's someone worthy of my company—
he only thought of following his orders, 1010
and he's already showing his remorse
for mistakes he's made and what I've suffered.
Your vicious spirit, always peering out 1340
from secret hiding places, trained him well
to be adept in acting wickedly,
though that was not his nature or his wish.
And now, you wretch, you mean to tie me up
and take me from the very shore where once
you left me by myself—without a friend,
without a city—for all living men
nothing but a corpse. Ah, I hope you die!
I've often prayed that death would come for you.
But gods have granted nothing sweet to me, 1350 1020
so you remain alive and keep on laughing,
while I am suffering pain and living on
with so much affliction, a laughing stock

for you and those two sons of Atreus,
 those commanders you serve in doing this,
 although you only sailed away with them
 once you'd been forced under their yoke by tricks
 and by compulsion. But I sailed with them
 of my own free will, bringing seven ships.¹
 A complete disaster! They threw me out, 1360
 off the ship, like someone with no honour.
 You say they did it; they say it was you.
 So why are you now taking me away?
 Why am I going with you? What's the reason?
 I'm nothing, and, so far as you're concerned, [1030]
 for a long time I've been dead. How is it,
 you creature whom the gods despise, that now
 you don't view me as a stinking cripple?
 If I sail with you, how will you then
 make holy sacrifices any more? 1370
 Or pour libations? That was your excuse
 for throwing me ashore back then. I hope
 you die a disgusting death! And you will,
 for the evil things you've done to hurt me,
 if the gods have any sense of justice.
 I know they are concerned about these things—
 you never would've sailed on such a trip,
 all for the sake of such a wretched man,
 unless some god-sent spur was pricking you
 to come and get me. O land of my fathers 1380 [1040]
 and you gods who gaze down on what men do,
 if you pity me, bring on your vengeance,
 and, after all these years, pay them all back.
 My life deserves your pity. If I could see
 them killed, I'd think I was no longer sick.

¹ . . . *taking seven ships*: Philoctetes is contrasting his willingness to go along on the expedition to Troy with Odysseus' reluctance to join in. When the messenger came to enlist his support, Odysseus pretended to be mad, ploughing with an ox and an ass yoked together. The messenger placed Odysseus' infant son in front of the plough. Odysseus stopped before he could injure his son, thus revealing that his madness was a pretense.

CHORUS

What the stranger said was harsh, Odysseus—
his troubles have not eased his bitterness.

ODYSSEUS

I could go on and answer him at length,
if I had time. There's only one thing now
I'll say to him. I'm the kind of man 1390
who adapts himself to each occasion.
So, faced with the judgment by good fair men, [1050]
you'd find no one more pious than myself.
By nature I'm a man who needs to win
in everything—however, not with you.
So now I'll happily defer to you.
Let him go. There's no longer any need
for you to hold him. Let him remain here.
We have Teucer with us, a skilled archer.¹
So am I, and I believe it's possible 1400
for me to use this bow no worse than you—
my hand can aim it just as well as yours.
So why do we need you? Enjoy yourself [1060]
strolling here on Lemnos. We'll be on our way.
Your prize may quickly bring me honours
which should belong to you.

PHILOCTETES

No, not that!
You're going to parade among the Argives
dressed up in weapons which belong to me?

ODYSSEUS

Don't argue with me any more. I'm going.

PHILOCTETES

Son of Achilles, am I going to hear 1410

¹ . . . a *skilled archer*. Teucer, an important minor character in Homer's *Iliad*, is one of the finest archers in the Greek forces. Archery is not normally a skill associated with the most important warriors, other than Odysseus (in the *Odyssey*).

your voice say anything to me? Are you
about to leave without another word?

ODYSSEUS [*to Neoptolemus*]

Move on. Don't look at him. You may well be
a noble man, but don't ruin our good luck.

PHILOCTETES [*to the Chorus*]

And you, my guests, will you leave me like this
and not pity me? [1070]

CHORUS

The boy commands our ship.
What he says to you—that's what we say, too.

NEOPTOLEMUS [*to the Chorus*]

Odysseus will say I am too sensitive—
but you stay here, if that's all right with him,
until the sailors have prepared the ship
and we have offered prayers up to the gods. 1420
Philoctetes may quickly change his mind
and soon think better of us. But we two
are leaving now. When we call for you,
make sure you set off from here at once. [1080]

[*Neoptolemus and Odysseus leave*]

PHILOCTETES [*addressing his cave*]

You cavern in this hollow rock,
always freezing cold or else too hot,
it seems true, then, in my misery
it's never been my fate to leave you,
and so you'll also watch me die. 1430
Alas, for me! Yes, for me!
Sad cave full of those painful cries
wrung from me in my agony,
what will each day bring me now?
Where will I find my nourishment
or any hope of getting food? [1090]
Wild pigeons will pass overhead,

flying on through the piercing winds—
I can no longer shoot them down.

CHORUS

You've brought this on yourself, 1440
you ill-fated man—your bad luck
arises from no other source,
nor from a man with greater strength.
You could have been more sensible.
But no—you preferred a worse fate
when you could have picked one better. [1100]

PHILOCTETES

Then I'm a miserable man,
truly miserable, beaten down
by hardships I've been through.
So from now on I'll live and die, 1450
a suffering man, with no one else.
Alas, what agony!
I can no longer bring my food
back to where I live, no longer
can I hold my feathered weapons
in my strong hands. A crafty mind
tricked me with sly, deceiving lies.
How I wish I might see the man
who devised this scheme condemned
to bear my pain for just as long! 1460

CHORUS

This is your fate set by the gods.
You've not been tricked by hands of mine.
So aim your dreadful fatal curse 1120
at other men. What most concerns me
is that you don't reject our friendship.

PHILOCTETES

Alas for me! I see him now—
sitting beside the salt white ocean shore,
laughing at me, as he waves the bow

which fed me in my wretched life,
which no one else had ever held. 1470

O my lovely bow, a friend
wrenched from these loving hands,
if you had power to understand, [1130]
you'd feel pity as you looked at me,
for Hercules' friend no more
will from now on be using you.

Another man will handle you,
a man of much deceit. You'll see
his shameless tricks, his hateful face,
that enemy whom I despise, 1480
whose plans have injured me so much,
products of his disgraceful skill.

O Zeus!

CHORUS

A man should say what's right and useful, [1140]
and, as he does, his tongue should never speak
malicious hurtful insults. Odysseus
was made the single representative
for many men, and, at their command,
has brought his friends a common benefit.

PHILOCTETES

You feathered birds, you flocks of bright-eyed beasts
who graze up on the hillside slopes, 1490
no longer will you spring from me
and run away from your own dens. [1150]

My hands no longer grip those shafts
which gave me power before,
and now my plight is desperate.
You're free to roam around at will,
with nothing more to make you fear.
It's now time to take blood for blood,
to take your time and gorge yourself
on my contaminated flesh. 1500
I'll give up this life soon enough.

Where can I find my nourishment?
Who can feed himself on winds [1160]
once he no longer has those things
which the life-giving earth supplies?

CHORUS

If you feel you can respect
a stranger who comes up to you
with all good will, then, by the gods,
approach the man more closely.
But know this—keep it well in mind— 1510
it's up to you to evade that fate.
To nourish it with your own flesh
is pitiful, and there's no way
you can endure the countless pains
that live inside your body.

PHILOCTETES

You remind me one more time again
of that old agonizing thought, [1170]
though you are nicer than those men
who visited this place before.
Why have you destroyed me? 1520
What have you done to me?

CHORUS

What do you mean?

PHILOCTETES

You hoped to take me off to Troy,
a land which I despise.

CHORUS

Yes.

I think that would be best.

PHILOCTETES

Then go away. Leave me at once.

CHORUS

That's all right with me—in fact,
I like the order you just gave.
I'll do it willingly. Let's go.
Let's be off, every sailor
to his station on the ship.

1530 [1180]

[The Chorus turns and starts moving off]

PHILOCTETES

No, don't go! I'm begging you,
in the name of Zeus, the god
who hears men's curses.

CHORUS

Calm down.

PHILOCTETES

O strangers, by the gods, stay here.

CHORUS

Why are you calling?

PHILOCTETES

Aaaaiiii . . . aaaaiiii . . .

That demon's killing me . . . savage god . . .
my foot . . . this foot of mine . . .
how shall I deal with you
in what remains to me of life?
O friends, return to me again.
Come back!

1540

[1190]

CHORUS

What should we do?
Do you have something else in mind
that alters what you said before?

PHILOCTETES

You should not grow so indignant
when someone in a storm of pain
says things that make no sense.

CHORUS

Then, you unhappy man, come with us,
as we are asking you.

PHILOCTETES

Never! Never!

That you can be sure of! No, not even
if the lord of blazing lightning comes
ready to blast me with his fiery thunder. 1550
Damn Troy and all those warriors there,
before the city, who dared throw away
this poor lame foot of mine. But, friends, [1200]
please grant me one request I have.

CHORUS

What request is that?

PHILOCTETES

Give me a sword,
if you've got one there, or an axe—
any weapon will do.

CHORUS

What are you going to do?
Something drastic?

PHILOCTETES

Hack away my flesh
and cut these bones apart, all of them. 1560
To die, yes, my mind now thinks on death.

CHORUS

But why do that? [1210]

PHILOCTETES

To find my father.

CHORUS

Where does he live?

PHILOCTETES

He's in Hades.

He can't be still living in the daylight.

O my city, city of my fathers,
how I wish I could see you now—

I brought myself such misery
when I left your sacred river,
to help Danaans, my enemies.

1570

I'm nothing any more, nothing.

[Philoctetes exits into his cave, leaving the Chorus alone on stage]

CHORUS

I'd have left you here some time ago
back to my ship, if I'd not observed
Odysseus coming here, bringing with him
Achilles' son. They're getting close to us.

[1220]

[Enter Neoptolemus and Odysseus. Neoptolemus holds Philoctetes' bow and arrows]

ODYSSEUS

Why are you coming back along this path
at such a rapid pace?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I was wrong before.

I have to fix all the mistakes I made.

ODYSSEUS

You sound odd. What mistakes are those?

NEOPTOLEMUS

When I obeyed you and all the army.

1580

ODYSSEUS

What error did you make that shamed you so?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I used disgraceful lies and sly deceit
to catch a man.

ODYSSEUS

What sort of man? Oh, oh.
Are you thinking up some foolhardy scheme?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, nothing rash. But with Poetas' son . . . [1230]

ODYSSEUS [*interrupting*]

What are you going to do? A certain fear
has just occurred to me . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

. . . whose bow I took . . .
give it back.

ODYSSEUS

By Zeus, what are you saying?
You don't intend to hand it back to him?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes. I got it in a shameful manner,
and it's not right for me to keep it. 1590

ODYSSEUS

By the gods, are you saying this to mock me?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Only if it's mockery to speak the truth.

ODYSSEUS

Son of Achilles, what are you saying?
What do you mean?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Do I really need
to say the same thing two or three times over?

ODYSSEUS

I didn't want to hear it even once.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, you must clearly understand it now— [1240]

you've heard all I have to say.

ODYSSEUS

There are those
who will prevent you carrying that out.

1600

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are you saying? Who will prevent me?

ODYSSEUS

The whole Achaean army—including me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You were born wise, but there's no wisdom now
in what you say.

ODYSSEUS

But these words of yours
and what you're going to do are most unwise.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But if they're right, then they're more powerful
than wisdom.

ODYSSEUS

How can it be right and just,
to give back what you won thanks to my plan?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I made a mistake which cost me my honour—
I must try to get it back.

ODYSSEUS

If you do try,
aren't you afraid of the Achaean troops?

[1250]

1610

NEOPTOLEMUS

With justice at my side, I do not fear
the danger you describe.

ODYSSEUS

[Your justice—

my hand will make that justice bend to me.]¹

NEOPTOLEMUS

Even so, I won't obey those arms of yours.
I won't do what you ask.

ODYSSEUS

Well, then, our fight
is not against the Trojans but with you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If that's what it has to be, so be it.

ODYSSEUS

Do you see my right hand resting on my sword?

NEOPTOLEMUS

You'll see me doing the same. I won't hesitate.

1620

ODYSSEUS

All right, I'll leave you for now. But I'll go
and tell the entire army what's going on.
And they will punish you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Now you're reasonable.
If you keep up this frame of mind in future,
perhaps you'll not wander into trouble.

[1260]

*[Odysseus moves away, as if leaving for the ship, but conceals himself
and observes what now happens]*

NEOPTOLEMUS *[calling up to the cave]*

You there, son of Poëas . . . I'm calling you.
Philoctetes . . . come out. Leave that rock
you call your home.

PHILOCTETES *[from inside the cave]*

Now who's standing there

¹This short speech of Odysseus is a conjecture based on Jebb's commentary to supply a line which is apparently missing from the manuscript.

making an unruly noise outside the cave?
Why are you calling me? What do you want?

1630

[Philoctetes partly emerges from the cave and sees Neoptolemus]

O no! This is a wretched business.
Are you here to bring me some new trouble
on top of all the others?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't despair.

Listen to the news I bring.

PHILOCTETES

I'm afraid.

Fine words brought me ruin once before,
when I trusted what you said.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But now

is there no way I can apologize?

[1270]

PHILOCTETES

You used words like that when you stole my bow—
you won my confidence, but secretly
you worked for my destruction.

1640

NEOPTOLEMUS

But now I'm not like that. I wish to hear
whether you want to stay on living here,
enduring these conditions, or sail with us.

PHILOCTETES

Stop there. Don't speak any more. What you say
will all be wasted.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You're sure of that.

PHILOCTETES

Yes, I am—more sure than any words can say.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I wish my words could have persuaded you.
But if there's nothing I can say to help,
then I'll stop.

PHILOCTETES

Everything you say is useless. [1280]
You'll never win my confidence, not now 1650
you've taken away my livelihood, robbed me
and with a trick. Then you come over here
to give me your advice, you disgraceful son
of such a noble father. May you all die—
the sons of Atreus first, then Laertes' son,
then you.

NEOPTOLEMUS [*holding out the bow and arrows*]

Stop making all those curses,
and take these weapons from my hand.

PHILOCTETES

What do you mean? Am I being tricked again?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No. I swear by the sacred majesty of Zeus.

PHILOCTETES

Such welcome words, if what you say is true. 1660 [1290]

NEOPTOLEMUS

My actions will show that. Put out your hand
and take back your weapons.

[*As Neoptolemus hands the bow to Philoctetes, Odysseus re-emerges
from his hiding place and moves forward*]

ODYSSEUS

No!
In the name of the sons of Atreus
and the whole army, I'm telling you no,
as gods are my witnesses!

PHILOCTETES

My lad,
who was that speaking? Was it Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS [*moving forward*]

Yes. It's me. Now you can see up close
the man who'll take you off to Troy by force,
whether Achilles' son wants that or not.

PHILOCTETES [*putting an arrow to his bow string*]

That won't bring you any joy, if this arrow
flies straight, directly to its mark. 1670

[*Odysseus moves away to hide again. Neoptolemus grabs Philoctetes to stop him shooting his arrow*]

NEOPTOLEMUS

By the gods, don't shoot that arrow off. [1300]

PHILOCTETES

In the name of the gods, dear lad, let go.

NEOPTOLEMUS [*continuing to restrain Philoctetes*]

No, I won't.

PHILOCTETES

Alas! Why did you spoil
my chance to use this bow of mine to kill
that enemy I hate?

NEOPTOLEMUS

That would have been bad
for both of us, you and me.

PHILOCTETES

You should realize
the army's leaders, lying spokesmen for the Greeks,
though bold in speech, are cowards in a fight.

NEOPTOLEMUS

That may be true. But now you have the bow,
you have no reason to be angry with me 1680

or complain about my conduct.

PHILOCTETES

I agree.

[1310]

My lad, you've shown the family lineage
you sprang from. Your father was not Sisyphus.
No, you come from Achilles, who, in his life,
had the finest reputation of them all,
just as he now has among the dead.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm pleased me to hear you praise my father
and me, as well. But pay attention now
to what I'd like from you. Men must endure
those fortunes given to them by the gods.
But when they insist on injuring themselves,
the way you're doing now, then it's not right
to pity or excuse them. You've become
a savage man, rejecting all advice.

1690

[1320]

If someone who's a friend of yours speaks up
and says you're doing wrong, you hate the man.
You call him your enemy, a traitor.

But still, I'll speak to you, invoking Zeus,
who punishes the men who break their oaths.

1700

Keep these words in mind—write them on your heart—
You've been suffering from this infection
as fate sent from the gods, because you went
too close to Chryse's secret sentinel,
the snake which keeps watch where she lives and guards
her sacred precinct open to the sky.

Know this, too—you will never find an end
to this distressful agony of yours,

[1330]

not while the sun still rises in the east
and then sets in the west, until you come,
of your own free will, to the Trojan plain,
and there, among us, meet Asclepius' sons,
find relief from this disease, and with help
from me and from that bow be known to all

1710

as the man who smashed the towers of Troy.¹
 I'll tell you how I come to know these things.
 We captured a Trojan called Helenus,
 an excellent prophet, who clearly states
 these things must happen and, in addition,
 that all Troy must be seized this coming summer. 1720 [1340]
 If his words prove false, he'll offer himself,
 quite willingly, for slaughter. And so now,
 since you know all this, you should be willing
 to concede. It's one more fine benefit.
 You'll be judged the most exceptional man
 among the Greeks—first, for coming there
 to hands which healed you, then, in addition,
 for capturing Troy, source of so much grief.
 You'll win the very highest fame there is.

PHILOCTETES

O hateful life, why keep me here above, 1730
 gazing at sunlight? Why not release me,
 send me down to Hades? What shall I do? [1350]
 Alas! How can I distrust what this man says?
 He's giving me advice as a good friend.
 So, then, do I concede? If I do yield,
 how can I, given my miserable fate,
 appear in public view? Who do I talk to?
 You eyes of mine who've witnessed everything
 I've had to go through, how could you bear it,
 to see me socializing with those men, 1740
 the sons of Atreus, who ruined me?
 Or with Laertes all-destroying son?
 It's not just the pain of what I've been through
 that gnaws at me—I seem to see ahead
 all the things I'll have to suffer from them
 from now on. Once a man's mind has become [1360]

¹ . . . *Asclepius' sons*: Asclepius was the Greek hero (or god) associated with medicine. In the *Iliad*, his sons are the most important healers in the Greek forces at Troy.

the mother of evil acts, it trains him
to do wrong in everything that follows.
And in this matter I'm surprised at you.
You must never go back to Troy yourself 1750
and should prevent me going there. Those men
did you an injury by taking away
your father's weapons, when, in that contest
for his arms, they judged heart-broken Ajax
inferior to Odysseus. After that,
will you fight as their ally and force me
to do so, too? Do not do it, my son,
but take me home, as you have sworn to do.
Then you should keep yourself on Scyros,
and leave those bad men to be destroyed 1760
in their own nasty way. If you do that, [1370]
you'll get double gratitude from me,
and from my father, too. And you won't seem
because of how you helped those evil men
to have an inbred nature just like theirs.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What you say is reasonable. Nonetheless,
I'd like you to rely upon the gods
and my own words and sail away from here
with me, your friend.

PHILOCTETES

You mean I should set off
with this wretched foot to the Trojan plain 1770
and that abominable son of Atreus?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No. You should go to those who'll end the pain
in that pus-filled foot of yours—they'll save you
from your sickness.

PHILOCTETES

The advice you're giving 1380
is frightening me. What are you saying?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I recognize what's best for you and me.

PHILOCTETES

When you say that, you don't feel any shame
before the gods?

NEOPTOLEMUS

How can a man feel shame
when he's helping out a friend of his?

PHILOCTETES

Are you talking about some benefit
for the sons of Atreus or for me?

1780

NEOPTOLEMUS

For you, of course. I'm your friend. What I say
is spoken in friendship.

PHILOCTETES

How can that be true?
You want to hand me to my enemies.

NEOPTOLEMUS

My dear man, in such troubles you must learn
not to be so stubborn.

PHILOCTETES

You'll ruin me
with these words of yours. I know that.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, I won't. But you don't understand—
that's what I'm saying.

PHILOCTETES

Don't I understand
how those sons of Atreus threw me aside?

1790 [1390]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes, they cast you off, but you should see
if they will rescue you again.

PHILOCTETES

Never—
not if I must agree to go to Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What can I do then, if what I say
will not convince you? The easiest thing
for me is to stop talking, and then you
can go on living as you're doing now,
without being rescued.

PHILOCTETES

Let me keep suffering
whatever I must suffer. But those things
you swore to me, with your right hand in mine— 1800
to take me home—do that for me, my son,
and don't hold back or keep reminding me [1400]
about Troy any more. I've had enough
of howling lamentations here.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right,
if that's what you really want, let's leave.

PHILOCTETES

Ah, such noble words!

[Philoctetes starts to move down from his cave]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Plant your feet firmly.

PHILOCTETES

I will—as firmly as my strength allows.

NEOPTOLEMUS

How will I escape being blamed for this
by the Achaeans?

PHILOCTETES

Forget about them.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What if they destroy my country?

PHILOCTETES

I'll be there . . .

1810

NEOPTOLEMUS [*interrupting*]

What assistance will you give?

PHILOCTETES

. . . with these arrows
which come from Hercules . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are you saying?

PHILOCTETES

I'll stop them coming in.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Then let's leave,
once you've made your farewells to this island.

[*Hercules appears above the stage*]¹

HERCULES

Not yet, son of Poëas, not until you've heard
the words that I shall utter. Know this—
you're listening to the voice of Hercules
and you're gazing on his face. For your sake
I have left the throne of heaven and come
to announce to you the purposes of Zeus
and to stop the journey you're proposing.
So pay attention now to what I say.
First, I will tell you of my own exploits,
for by struggling with so many labours
and by seeing my work through to the end,

[1410]

1820

¹ . . . *above the stage*. This sudden appearance of a divine figure near the end of the play (the *deus ex machina*) may have had Hercules lowered from above or he may have appeared on a platform above the stage.

I won immortal glory for myself, [1420]
 as you can see. As for you, you must know
 it is your destiny that, from these troubles,
 you make your life something men celebrate.
 With this man you'll reach the Trojan city, 1830
 where, first, your savage illness will be cured,
 then you'll be chosen as the finest man
 from all the warriors, and with my bow,
 will cut short the life of Paris, the man
 who is the cause of all this wickedness.
 You will ransack Troy and from the army
 carry off the prize for utmost bravery,
 and take it home with you to Oeta,
 to your native mountains, to the delight [1430]
 of your father, Poeas. Whatever prizes 1840
 you get from the army, select from them
 an offering for my bow and carry it
 to my funeral pyre. Son of Achilles,
 this advice I'm giving is for you, as well.
 You are not strong enough to capture Troy
 without this man, and he's not strong enough
 without you there. Like a pair of lions
 stalking prey on common ground, you two must
 protect each other's life. To cure your illness,
 I'll send Asclepius to Troy, which is doomed 1850
 to fall a second time thanks to my arrows.¹
 But remember this—when you waste that land, [1440]
 show reverence to the gods, for Father Zeus
 thinks of all other things as less than that.
 And when men perish, piety does not—
 whether they' re alive or dead, it does not die.

PHILOCTETES

O that voice I have longed to hear, my friend

¹ . . . *to my arrows*: Hercules himself had in earlier times attacked the king of Troy, Laomedon, and captured the city.

who stands revealed to me after so long!
I will not disobey what you have said.

NEOPTOLEMUS

And I, too, give my consent as well.

1860

HERCULES

Then don't spend a long time waiting here.
There's a stern wind to urge you onward.
The time is right to sail.

[1450]

PHILOCTETES

All right, then,
let me salute this land as I depart.
Farewell, you shelter that shared my vigil,
and farewell, you nymphs of streams and meadows,
you pounding headlands beaten by the sea,
where in the inner spaces of my cave
the blasts from south wind often soaked my head,
where many times Mount Hermaea would echo
the cries I shouted in my storms of pain.
But now, you Lycian streams and waters,
I am leaving you, going away at last,
beyond all hopes I ever entertained.
Farewell, you sea-circled land of Lemnos,
send me away content on a fair voyage,
to the place ordained by mighty Fate,
by the opinions of my friends, and by the god
who subdues all and has brought all this about.

1870 [1460]

CHORUS

Let's all leave in a group, once we've prayed
to the ocean nymphs, so they will come
and guide us safely on our journey home.

1880

[1470]

[They all move off together]

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>.

Richer Resources Publications has published a number of Johnston translations as paperback books, including the following:

Aeschylus, *Oresteia*

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Euripides, *Medea*

Homer, *Iliad* (complete and abridged editions)

Homer, *Odyssey* (complete and abridged editions)

Kant, *Universal History and Nature of the Heavens*

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*

Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*

Sophocles, *Antigone*

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

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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.

