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Myth to Medicine: What *Philoctetes* Teaches Us About Empathetic Care

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Abstract
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Introduction

Sophocles's *Philoctetes* presents a compelling narrative that mirrors contemporary challenges in medicine. The play's namesake Philoctetes suffers from a wound to his foot but also emotional isolation reflecting the neglect faced by many modern patients particularly those with chronic illness or terminal conditions. This thesis examines the intersection between ancient Greek thought and the ethical dilemmas faced by caregivers through an examination of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*.

Methods

This study employs a literary analysis of *Philoctetes* and focuses on key interactions between Philoctetes, Neoptolemus and Odysseus. A historical framework of ancient Greek medical traditions is used including Hippocratic thought and the role of the *Asclepiadae*. Lastly, modern parallels are drawn through an interdisciplinary review of bioethical literature and qualitative research on physician experience.

Results

Philoctetes's abandonment serves as a case study for suffering and medical isolation. Neoptolemus's moral transformation highlights the ethical conflict between duty to the individual or to the institution, a challenge faced by many healthcare workers. Additionally, Heracles's divine intervention underscores the ancient belief in fate contrasting with notions of patient autonomy.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Sophocles's *Philoctetes* offers timeless insight into the ethical perspective of caregiving. The thesis examines this piece of ancient literature through the lens of medical humanities to underscore the need for a greater integration of empathy driven and dynamic medical education. It addresses important topics of physician burnout and clinical efficiency to offer insight into humanistic values in medicine.

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Introduction:

Sophocles's *Philoctetes* is an exploration of moral conflict, suffering and the perils of a person in pain. Written in the late fifth century BCE, the play presents an ancient tragedy of the eponymous character, cast away on the island of Lemnos on route to Troy. Philoctetes was once a great fighter, but after suffering a near fatal snake bite he is left by his shipmates as they continued their journey to Troy. His suffering extends beyond the physical pain and is exacerbated by the betrayal of his abandonment of his comrades. The bow of Heracles remains with him as his source for food and survival; he is unaware that the bow is also a necessary component for the Greeks in the Trojan War.

This thesis explores the intersection of Classics and medicine through a literary analysis of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*. It will specifically examine the physical and emotional suffering of Philoctetes. His snakebite and subsequent abandonment by his fellow Greeks symbolize not only neglect of his physical pain but also failure to address his deeper emotional suffering. The indifference shown by Odysseus, Neoptolemus and his Greek allies serves as a powerful parallel to contemporary medical practices which result in terminally ill patients experiencing feelings of isolation and neglect similar to those of Philoctetes. This thesis will explore how the interactions between Philoctetes and other characters reflect healing in antiquity and stress the need for empathy in healthcare. It encourages a more humane and compassionate approach to patient care.

The method of examination will be systematic review of each portion of the play. It will begin with a brief introduction to Greek medicine. Subsequent chapters will examine portions of

the play and their relevance for modern medicine: chapter 1 (lines 1-400 of the play), chapter 2 (lines 700-1100) chapter 3 (lines 1300-1500) and finally will end with chapter 4 discussing the role of the chorus. In each chapter, the significant moments between Neoptolemus, Odysseus, Philoctetes and the chorus will be discussed and related to practices within both Hippocratic and modern medicine.

Introduction and Overview of Ancient Greek and Italian Medicine:

This thesis was born out of ‘The Romans’, which was an Oxford Emory travel course, taught by Dr. Bayerle, that traveled to Italy to interview healthcare professionals abroad on their experiences during Covid-19. The course combined essential classical texts and asked students to view them through the lens of the concept of duty to humanity in the context of responding to trauma. The thesis was also aided by a sidecar course, ‘Ancient Medicine’, taught by Dr. Pratt which gave me essential insight into Hippocratic medicine and the ethical groundwork it laid for modern medicine.

Readers should view Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* through the framework of Ancient Greek medical tradition. In Greece, the 5th century BCE marked an important era in medicine as figures like Hippocrates came to prominence. Hippocrates wrote his treatises near the end of Sophocles’s long life. Hippocrates moved away from supernatural explanations for disease, advocating instead for naturalistic and rational perspectives (Elendu, 2024, p. 2). The Hippocratic Corpus is a collection of over 60 texts that detail observations on diseases and treatments. The collection includes the Hippocratic Oath which is foundational to modern medical ethics, and Hippocrates's emphasis on observation and diagnosing based on symptoms which was groundbreaking for the time period.

Physicians like Galen expanded on Greek medical practices by focusing on anatomical studies and pharmacology. His dissections and experiments led to significant advancements in understanding human anatomy and physiology, and his writings became medical authorities for centuries (Elendu, 2024, p. 7). This medicine also integrated Greek knowledge with practical techniques suited for the battlefield, such as advanced surgical tools and techniques.

Archaeological discoveries from ancient sites reveal sophisticated surgical tools and indicate the existence of hospitals, reflecting an organized approach to healthcare delivery. The sophisticated nature of the Greek medical system and the empirical methodology of approaching disease suggest that Philoctetes could have been treated if he had been treated by a Greek physician.

Sophocles offers insight into Greek views on suffering and empathy through his character Philoctetes. In the play *Philoctetes*, the hero's isolation on the island and his physical pain parallel contemporary medical understandings of chronic illness and the psychological impact of isolation. This portrayal resonates with the Greek approach to medicine, where the interconnectedness of physical and emotional suffering was acknowledged (Kleisiaris 2014 p. 1). By portraying Philoctetes's plight so vividly, Sophocles presents an early exploration of themes central to patient care and the ethical obligations of caregivers. The perspectives on medicine and the treatment of Philoctetes in this play offer a broader question. How does society respond to those who are suffering when they are no longer deemed useful?

Modern Italian Healthcare Workers and the Covid-19 Pandemic:

The response of healthcare workers to the COVID-19 crisis embodied a deep commitment to the ideals of Hippocratic medicine. The Hippocratic Oath emphasizes the responsibility of physicians to prioritize the well-being of their patients and to uphold ethical

standards regardless of circumstances. This ethos mirrors the Hippocratic ideal of a physician as someone who puts others needs before their own. The World Medical Association's revised version of the Hippocratic Oath in 1948 includes a section that states, "remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug" (Lasagna 1). The oath states that medicine is more than science and must be treated as such in practice through the behavior of the physician.

Italian doctors during COVID-19 often faced tragic ethical decisions such as rationing limited oxygen. These decisions required them to balance empathy with a practical sense of duty as they had to allocate care to those most likely to survive. The stories of doctors reflect a profound commitment to their calling. Italian doctors exemplified Hippocratic values and demonstrated that the ancient ideals of ethical care remain foundational to the practice of medicine even in a modern pandemic. The commitment to serve at great personal cost reinforced a standard of care that binds the healers of today to the ideals of those who came centuries before.

A 2022 qualitative study of Italian nurses showed the immense pressure the pandemic put on Italian healthcare workers, particularly nurses who were often at the forefront of patient care. Italian nurses faced challenges such as working beyond their shifts and dealing with heavy emotional burdens and professional stress (Zanini 2022 p. 795). They often worked in isolation, unable to go home to their families out of fear of spreading infection. One nurse commented "Caring for a person passes through empathy and contact, but here there is no contact. Then you think of miming to show you are close to the patient and transmit a sense of safety and reassurance through non-verbal communication" (Zanini 2022 p. 798). The nurses acted as

physical and emotional caretakers, remaining committed to their duty of caring for patients in the patient's time of need. Similarly, another 2021 study looked at a similar population of Italian nurses as the source for patient comfort (Fontanini 2021 p. 238). Fontanini says, "Nurses are felt to be the unique human contact for each patient and encumbered by the difficulty of alleviating suffering and loneliness" (Fontanini 2021 p. 242). Nurses filled the role that would have normally been the burden of friends or family during COVID-19. They took on this extra responsibility while simultaneously facing shortage of supplies and labor leading to burnout in the field.

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted feelings of isolation faced by many patients and created a striking parallel to the isolation experienced by Philoctetes on the island of Lemnos. Much like Philoctetes, COVID-19 patients were often separated from their families and support systems and confined to isolated spaces with limited contact with the outside world. In this environment, their caregivers became not only their lifelines for medical support but also their primary companions. Italian healthcare professionals reported the emotional burden of being a patient's only connection in their final moments, offering comfort when family members could not be present (Castaldo 2022 p.1). This isolation intensified the responsibility of healthcare providers who were often the sole source of hope and human connection for their patients. Much like Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes* who empathized with the hero's suffering and provided companionship, Italian healthcare professionals stepped into a role that transcended medical care, becoming confidants and sources of solace.

CHAPTER 1

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* opens by exposing the audience to the physical and emotional torment of the title character. Abandoned ten years before on the desolate island of Lemnos due to a wound inflicted by a serpent, Philoctetes has been left to fend for himself, isolated from all contact with human society. His suffering, vividly portrayed by Sophocles, goes beyond mere physical pain. It is compounded by the emotional agony of abandonment and betrayal. Philoctetes is not only a victim of a painful injury but also of his comrades' strategic pragmatism, represented in the play by Odysseus.

This chapter will explore in the first four hundred lines of the play, how Sophocles introduces Philoctetes as an isolated figure, juxtaposed against Odysseus's dedication to the Greek army. Modern sufferers similarly face the psychological burden not only of physical pain but also of the detachment of those entrusted with their care.

Odysseus's Calculated Pragmatism:

Odysseus and Neoptolemus sail to Lemnos to retrieve the bow of Heracles from Philoctetes who has been deserted on Lemnos. Odysseus views Philoctetes not as a fellow human deserving empathy, but as a means to an end: an obstacle to be overcome for the greater good of the Greek army. His manipulation of Neoptolemus is the clearest example of his emotional detachment. Odysseus's disregard for Philoctetes's suffering is not born out of malice but of a calculated desire to achieve his military goals and loyalty to the Greeks. It exemplifies a different type of morality that shows dedication to the Greeks and the war effort.

Neoptolemus starts the interaction by showing empathy for Philoctetes, not wanting to deceive the injured man. Odysseus's mindset is perfectly encapsulated in his words to Neoptolemus:

Son of a noble father, I too when I was young had a tongue that/ was inactive but an arm that was active; when I come to put it/ to the proof I see that it is the tongue, not actions, that rules in all/ things for mortals. (S, *Ph.* 96-99).

Here, Odysseus acknowledges Neoptolemus's inherent empathy and desire to help Philoctetes but warns him against allowing it to interfere with their mission. He desires Neoptolemus to have an "active tongue" or to persuade Philoctetes through deception to give him the bow. This tension reflects a broader dilemma found in caregiving contexts, where emotional detachment is sometimes seen as necessary to achieve an end, even if it means overlooking the human suffering in front of you. Often in medicine, particularly in primary care, reaching a maximum number of appointments is key, fostering an environment of missing patient indications (Kampourelli, 2022, p.568).

As in the modern medical context, Odysseus's character prioritizes efficiency and the completion of the mission above the emotional well-being of Philoctetes. His loyalty to the Greeks and dedication to the war effort represents a type of morality distinct from Neoptolemus. Odysseus introduces the idea that emotional detachment may be a necessary evil to achieve the proposed goal.

Odysseus's pragmatism became particularly stark when Neoptolemus questions Odysseus saying, "Do you not think it disgraceful to tell lies?" (S, *Ph.* 108). Odysseus responds saying "Not if the lie brings us salvation!" (S, *Ph.* 109). Odysseus's response reveals a utilitarian

perspective where ends justify means. His approach is fundamentally strategic, considering only the success of the Greek army and dismissing the moral cost of deception. Odysseus lacks concern for how these actions will impact Philoctetes's trust and emotional state speaks to a larger tension in both ancient and modern contexts: the conflict between tactical efficiency and moral empathy. Odysseus's ability to persuade Neoptolemus showcases the power of rationalizing morally questionable actions for a perceived greater good. Neoptolemus reluctantly agrees saying, "It would be worth trying to get it [the bow], if that is the case" (*S, Ph.* 116). This speech marks a shift from moral hesitation to acceptance of Odysseus's logic. Neoptolemus's change in stance represents the struggle of all individuals in such situation, particularly those who have not been in decision-making roles. Neoptolemus starts with a sense of empathy and compassion but feels pressured to suppress those instincts for a 'greater' strategic goal.

In clinical settings, this may manifest in healthcare professionals feeling compelled to adopt practices that align more with efficiency or institutional policy than with empathetic patient care. Studies have shown that medical students in clinical settings experience an increase in lack of empathy through their education (Kampourelli, 2022, p. 564). This is largely due to a surplus of work that often leads to physical and emotional student burnout. This may in turn lead healthcare professionals to opt for efficiency over empathy. Kampourelli goes on to say, "young doctors, in particular, have not been prepared to confront suffering and handle it accordingly" (Kampourelli, 2022, p. 564). As physicians carry the emotional burden of many different patients, doctors should be adequately trained to handle these situations, so it does not affect patient care.

Dr. Ruth Parker is a co-author of "Sophocles's Philoctetes and Moral Injury in the COVID-19 pandemic". In an interview, she highlights the importance of maintaining empathy as

healthcare is often driven by financial incentives that may not align with patient-centered care (Parker). Dr. Parker expressed concern that profit margins sometimes take precedence and that some patients suffer the consequences of a revenue-driven model. Equal access to healthcare in the US is not guaranteed, and studies of population health document that care is not equal across all socioeconomic strata. The health of our nation is reflected by the health of all segments of our population, and if there is not equal access to care for all and systems in place to provide equitable care, we will continue to have disparities in health.

In the play, Neoptolemus's assertion, "Let it be! I will do it, casting off all shame!" (S, *Ph.* 120) signifies his surrender to Odysseus's worldview, revealing how a young, impressionable individual can be swayed to disregard personal values in favor of strategic reasoning. This moment is critical, as it represents Neoptolemus's lack of empathy and signals a willingness to prioritize tactical success. However, we continue to see Neoptolemus struggle with this decision as he starts his encounter with Philoctetes later in the play. It suggests that in ancient caregiving contexts, external pressures, authority figures, and perceived duties could profoundly shape one's approach to care, even at the expense of the compassion that sufferers like Philoctetes desperately need.

Neoptolemus' Transformation:

Neoptolemus opposes Odysseus's pragmatism and hesitates to trick the desolate hero Philoctetes. The hero is faced with a moral dilemma: should he fulfill his duty to the Greek army by deceiving Philoctetes or respond to the sufferer's cries for compassion? Neoptolemus is portrayed as an honorable character and empathetic figure and finds himself in a difficult position. He struggles between two types of morality, empathy toward the suffering patient

versus loyalty to the Greek army. Initially he agrees to Odysseus's plan to trick Philoctetes as he believes it to be a necessary evil for the greater good of the Greeks. As he converses with Odysseus Neoptolemus agrees to retrieve the bow and Philoctetes saying,

"None of these things is a surprise to me. For it was by the will of /the gods, if I have any understanding, that those sufferings came/ upon him from cruel Chryse, and his present troubles without/ companions must be the work of the gods, so that he cannot direct /against Troy his irresistible weapons until the time has arrived when it is fated to be/ conquered by them." (S, *Ph.* 192-200).

However, the suffering he witnesses profoundly affects him, as Philoctetes's pain, both physical and emotional, is not something Neoptolemus can easily ignore (Kampourelli, 2022, p. 568). As Neoptolemus observes Philoctetes's condition, he is increasingly struck by the depths of the wounded man's suffering. He sees not just physical pain, but an all-encompassing anguish exacerbated by years of solitude and neglect (Schwartz 2015 p.1). Schwartz and Shpiro elaborate on Philoctetes's wound, drawing parallels to conditions that embody relentless, festering pain and isolation. They note that Philoctetes's wound, described as "a black flux of blood and matter," underscores the unhealed trauma both physically and socially, making his isolation a defining element of his suffering. Witnessing this, Neoptolemus begins to struggle with his own role in perpetuating Philoctetes's torment.

Kampourelli who highlights that empathy arises in moments when one cannot distance themselves from another's pain (Kampourelli, 2022, p 569). Philoctetes's suffering is no longer an abstract obligation but a tangible reality that challenges his initial loyalty to Odysseus's plan. Kampourelli suggests that Neoptolemus's response to Philoctetes mirrors the growth of empathy

in caregivers. They engage directly with their patients' suffering and maintain emotional connection. Neoptolemus's internal conflict balances loyalty to a cause with the call to relieve another's suffering.

Sophocles uses Neoptolemus's growing compassion as a way to critique Odysseus's utilitarian logic and to argue for a more holistic approach to human suffering. Neoptolemus's shift toward empathy is significant in the context of ancient Greek values which often prioritized honor and duty. His willingness to stand by Philoctetes even when it means questioning the orders of his superior and potentially compromising the Greek cause reflects a moral growth and transformation that is central to the play's exploration of ethical behavior.

The Isolation of Philoctetes:

Philoctetes's isolation is symbolized through his physical detachment from the Greek army, but more importantly, through the emotional distance maintained by those who abandoned him. Sophocles presents the audience with the pitiful state of Philoctetes, who has spent ten long years in pain and solitude, living in the harsh environment of Lemnos. Philoctetes's transformation due to his suffering is not only physical but emotional, as he himself notes.

Do not shrink from me in fear and be repelled at my wild /state, but take pity on an unhappy man, alone, afflicted like this /without a companion or a friend, and speak, if indeed you have/ come as friends! (S, *Ph.* 225-228).

His plea underscores the toll that his prolonged isolation has taken on his humanity. This transformation into something "wild" mirrors the psychological effects of long-term

abandonment and emotional neglect. Under these conditions, a sufferer begins to lose their connection to others and, in turn, to their sense of self. The 2020 pandemic studies showed that isolation was significantly associated with higher mortality rates (Barnes, 2022, p.1). In particular, severe loneliness, moderate loneliness and limited social network was higher in participants who died compared to those who survived. Philoctetes's wound which refuses to heal, becomes a symbol of his isolation and the emotional scars left by his abandonment.

After experiencing the effects of the loneliness and the toll it took on Philoctetes's, we can see Philoctetes's fear of being left again. He says, "I implore you as a suppliant, do / not leave me alone like this, isolated amid such troubles as you see / and all others that you have heard I live among!" (S, *Ph.* 470-473). This appeal comes from the trauma of his original abandonment and reflects his mistrust of others. Philoctetes seeks not only physical assistance but emotional connection. He hopes Neoptolemus will offer him some form of companionship that can alleviate his intense suffering. Philoctetes's plea how abandonment has stripped him of his dignity and hope which leaves him desperate for human contact and support.

Philoctetes continues to expand on his isolation and acts shocked when he learns that Neoptolemus has not heard his tragic story. When Philoctetes asks, "Then have you never heard my name or the story of my misfortunes, which have been my torment?" (S, *Ph.* 251-252), his shock highlights how disconnected he feels from society, both physically and in memory. His disbelief that Neoptolemus has not heard of his plight intensifies his sense of betrayal and abandonment. For Philoctetes, being forgotten or unknown compounds the agony of his physical wound as it signifies a broader erasure of his experience. This moment reveals how deeply the abandonment by his comrades has affected him as it has rendered his suffering invisible. It has

turned him into a figure whose pain is ignored by those who once knew him. Philoctetes dramatically recounts his tragic story:

“What tears do you / imagine I shed, what sorrows I lamented? I who could see that all / the ships with which I had sailed were departed, and there was no man in the place, no / one to support me?” (S, *Ph.* 276-280).

His emotional turmoil is evident and emphasizes the depth of his suffering and the sense of hopelessness that consumes him as he faced his condition entirely alone. The memory of this abandonment remains raw in Philoctetes’s mind and shapes his perception of human relationships and trust. Philoctetes’s isolation is further emphasized in his description of his time on *Lemnos*: “So one period of time after another went by for me, and I had to provide for myself alone under this poor roof.” (S, *Ph.* 285-286). The challenging nature of his environment and the passing of time intensify his suffering. This forces him to become self-reliant out of necessity. Philoctetes’s isolation has forced him to survive on his own, deepening his distrust of those who once were his comrades.

Finally, Philoctetes’s exclamation, “Ten miserable years now I’m rotting away, feeding this disease. It can’t get enough of me!” (S, *Ph.* 351-353) captures the consuming nature of his physical affliction. The language of “rotting” suggests a slow, decaying process, emphasizing the chronic and worsening state of his wound. The disease is depicted as a living force that “feeds” on him, underscoring the extent to which his suffering has taken over his body and life. These ten years of agony have defined Philoctetes’s existence, leaving him trapped in a state of despair with no end in sight, heightening the tragedy of his abandonment and the cruelty of his unnecessary suffering.

To put into context the severity of the ailment, Johnson speculates on the nature of the disease that Philoctetes's suffered from. He postulates that it may have been a case of chronic osteomyelitis (Johnson, 2003, p.1). Osteomyelitis is a bacterial infection that can arise from a snake bite and grows to form an abscess. Philoctetes describes his disease as 'coming and going' which correlates with the physiology of osteomyelitis since, the abscesses fail to drain, causes pressure and episodes of immense pain and fever for the patient. Greek physicians would have called it *psiloma* (*ψιλωμα οστεον* translating to *bare bone*) and it would have been treatable (Johnson, 2003, p.1). This is a modern representation that compares the pain in allopathic standards, giving insight into the level of pain Philoctetes experienced for years.

Plato's *Symposium* is an ancient source where the severity of a snake bite is described. Alcibiades in the *Symposium* compares the pain of Socrates's words to the pain of a snake bite. He retorts that the pain is so severe only those who have experienced it themselves would be able to empathize. He says "the feeling you have when bitten by a snake has got hold of me. For they say, I think, that someone who has suffered this is unwilling to say what it was like except to those who have been bitten, as they would be the only ones who would understand and excuse him if he brought himself to do and say anything because of the pain" (Plato, *Symposium* 217E). He describes a snake bite as extremely painful, putting into perspective the agony that Philoctetes went through with no aid on the island. This also gives us insight into the isolation and mental state that Philoctetes experienced while alone on the island of Lemnos.

Modern parallels:

The comparison between Philoctetes's isolation and the experiences of modern patients reveals a shared and timeless suffering that transcends centuries. Both ancient and modern sufferers endure the pain of their physical afflictions and also the emotional toll of neglect from those who should care for them. Sophocles captures the raw emotion of abandonment, a feeling that resonates deeply with patients in modern clinical settings, who often describe their experiences in similar terms.

Figure 1 in the appendix shows a lekythos (5th century BCE) currently displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It depicts Philoctetes alone on the island of Lemnos bent over with his left heel wrapped in a bandage. Next to him we can see Hercules's bow and arrows (Johnson, 2003, p.1). This lekythos serves as a physical depiction of Philoctetes's suffering. The isolation of the island reflects the Philoctetes's suffering and isolation. A 2022 article describes the concept of moral injury as a resulting emotion stemming from trauma.

“This term, originally used to explain the feelings of guilt, shame, and righteous anger resulting from trauma experienced by US soldiers who felt betrayed by their leaders in combat, has recently been applied to the experiences of health-care workers who know the right thing to do but lack the autonomy, latitude, or authority to do it” (Bayerle, 2022, p. 1).

Philoctetes loses his own autonomy and experiences this phenomenon as he hopes that someone will step in to remedy his situation.

Sophocles presents Philoctetes's suffering in a visceral and emotional manner. In doing this, Sophocles forces the audience to confront the ethical and moral implications of abandonment. Odysseus's detachment from Philoctetes's pain mirrors the detachment in modern caregiving. Both of these examples serve as a reminder that suffering is a physical experience and also one that is intertwined with emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Philoctetes's suffering, as seen in Schwartz and Shpiro's examination, resonates with the experience of many modern patients who endure chronic conditions (Schwartz 2015 p.1). His wound, a source of unrelenting pain and visible distress, mirrors how long-term afflictions can leave individuals feeling isolated and neglected. Schwartz and Shpiro observe that Sophocles captures this depth of suffering, noting that Philoctetes's experience, "a black flux of blood and matter," not only reflects physical agony but also the emotional toll of abandonment. This narrative serves as a compelling reminder for clinicians to consider the full scope of patient suffering, underscoring the importance of empathy in alleviating not just physical symptoms, but also the profound emotional impacts of isolation and neglect .

Schwartz and Shpiro highlight that Philoctetes's plight serves as a universal reminder to clinicians of the importance of viewing patients beyond their physical symptoms. Chronic conditions, particularly those that visibly mark or disrupt daily life, often carry a stigma that isolates the afflicted from their communities (Schwartz 2015 p.1). By understanding this layered suffering, modern practitioners are reminded that healing involves more than just physical treatment. It includes addressing the emotional wounds that many chronically ill patients experience. A holistic view of care acknowledges both physical and emotional dimensions of illness and underscores the ethical responsibility to engage with patients compassionately. This offers not only medical relief but also empathetic support in the face of their suffering.

Kampourelli takes this further, arguing that literature like *Philoctetes* holds significant value in medical education for fostering empathy (Kampourelli, 2022, p. 571). They examine how Neoptolemus's emotional journey in the play mirrors the inner conflict of caregivers who struggle to balance detachment with compassionate engagement. Neoptolemus initially distances himself, but he is he is compelled to connect with him emotionally as he witnesses Philoctetes's pain first hand. For Kampourelli, this transformation models the empathy that healthcare providers can develop through reflective engagement with patient narratives. Clinicians can cultivate a richer understanding of their patients' experiences and enhance their ability to provide empathetic care by immersing themselves in stories that depict profound suffering.

Conclusion:

This chapter looks at Sophocles introduces the audience to the characters of Philoctetes, Neoptolemus and Odysseus. It shows the contrast between Philoctetes's suffering and Odysseus's cold pragmatism. It also shows a broader exploration of empathy and emotional detachment in caregiving.

CHAPTER 2

Lines 700-1100 in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* bring to the forefront the interactions between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. This chapter explores the developing relationship between the two characters. It also highlights Neoptolemus's continued struggle with conflicting demands of loyalty and empathy. The symbolism of Heracles' bow plays a central role in this dynamic as it is an object of great power and a symbol of Philoctetes's suffering and eventual redemption.

Neoptolemus is tasked with the mission of deceiving Philoctetes to retrieve the bow of Heracles which is essential for the Greeks to win the Trojan War. Neoptolemus's initial resolve is shaken by the profound suffering of the abandoned warrior. This chapter will analyze how Neoptolemus's compassionate care for Philoctetes and the symbolic weight of Heracles' bow illuminate key themes of empathy under an ethical lens.

Detachment from the Suffering Patient:

The coldness displayed by Odysseus finds a striking parallel in modern clinical settings where patients often report feelings of emotional neglect from their caregivers. In clinical literature there are numerous accounts of patients suffering not only from their physical ailments but from the emotional detachment of those tasked with caring for them. This lack of empathy is reflected in *Philoctetes* in cases where Odysseus embodies the clinical detachment.

When Neoptolemus witnesses Philoctetes's suffering firsthand he reacts with empathy and concern. Neoptolemus's compassionate offer, "Ah, unlucky one! Unlucky you are found to be in every kind of trouble! / Do you wish me to take hold of you and hold you?" (S, *Ph.* 759-

761), demonstrates his willingness to physically and emotionally support Philoctetes.

Neoptolemus's genuine offer to help Philoctetes contrasts with the indifference that marked Philoctetes's past interactions with his fellow Greeks. In this moment in the play, Neoptolemus does more than offer aid: he acknowledges Philoctetes's humanity. This is a necessary recognition that Philoctetes has long been denied. Philoctetes is deeply moved by Neoptolemus's empathy and responds with a desperate plea for companionship: "But take courage, my son! This sickness of mine returns fiercely / and swiftly departs; but I implore you, do not leave me here / alone!" (S, *Ph.* 807-809). These words are not just a request for physical assistance but a cry for emotional connection. Philoctetes's pain is not limited to his physical suffering as his years of isolation have left him starved for human empathy and care. Philoctetes's plea underscores the vital importance of emotional support in healing. This is also a sentiment echoed in modern healthcare where patients who feel abandoned by their caregivers often report worsened symptoms and slower recovery times.

Philoctetes worries that his appearance may dissuade those who come to his aid. Philoctetes's plea, "Don't be afraid and flinch away," highlights his fear of being rejected once again, as he has been by his fellow Greeks. It is not just Philoctetes's physical condition that has been neglected, but his emotional well-being as well and Neoptolemus's presence represents the first sign of hope for him. Kampourelli mentions the phenomenon of detachment to the suffering patient saying,

'Questions arise regarding how empathy is involved in cases in which there is a conflict between values, such as when the "medical culture of efficiency and detachment" may become more important than care' (Kampourelli, 2022, p.568).

Kampourelli's words emphasize how intertwined emotional care is with physical recovery. This is a concept increasingly supported by modern medical studies that show emotional connection and compassionate care are crucial to the healing process.

Sophocles critiques the utilitarian approach embodied by Odysseus who views Philoctetes merely as a tool for winning the war. Neoptolemus's growing empathy and decision to offer care reflect a more holistic understanding of suffering. His actions align with modern ideals of compassionate care in medicine in which emotional support is recognized as an essential aspect of healing. This conflict between Odysseus's cold logic and Neoptolemus's emotional response upon seeing Philoctetes prompts the audience to reconsider the role of empathy in alleviating suffering. This is applicable both in the context of the play and in modern clinical practice.

Detachment in Modern Medicine:

To better understand how these theories apply to real world medical practice I conducted two interviews with Dr. Ruth Parker and Dr. Lucas Hernandez. Both discussed the complexity of medicine. Dr. Parker acknowledges that physician burnout exists, and that emotional detachment can sometimes serve as a mechanism against that, but ultimately argues that medicine cannot be practiced robotically and that physicians have a professional duty to humanity (Parker). She stated "The practice of medicine should not occur without emotional attachment. Physicians today have a professional obligation and a duty to serve humanity; patient welfare and commitment to the patient are part of the job" (Parker). She introduced the idea that artificial intelligence and new technologies should be harnessed for the benefits they bring, but ultimately

human connection, such as ‘caring’ are irreplaceable. Empathy is essential in medicine and sometimes those who struggle the most with interpersonal connection lack it. Traditional medical education relies heavily on standardized testing for licensing, and critical dimensions of professionalism such as caring for patients and tangible expression of values such as the primacy of patient welfare are not captured in such tests.

Physician trainees may be proficient at standardized testing, but some have a less well-developed sense of their professional duty and their own values that can anchor them in the actual practice of medicine (Parker). The emotional, moral, and ethical dilemmas that can be a part of the care for individual patients as well as populations of patients require sound judgement that reflects knowing one’s values and how they ultimately impact one’s practice of a healing profession. The pandemic provided a lens into how physicians responded on both personal and professional levels. As most physicians now work for ‘healthcare systems’, the pandemic likewise offered a lens into how ‘systems’ respond when stressed. The role and importance of healthcare leadership was particularly highlighted during the pandemic, and many physicians found themselves struggling to understand how to respond on a personal level as they looked to the leadership of their healthcare system to see how the ‘system’ responded.

Dr. Parker emphatically rejected the notion that emotional detachment in medicine is necessary to achieve efficiency; she advocated instead for the opinion that empathy is essential in every patient interaction (Parker). She says that as a physician there is a professional obligation to have an emotional attachment to the welfare of your patient. Dr. Parker herself says she was drawn to medicine due to the integral need for empathy which was a value she saw in herself.

Dr. Lucas Hernandez echoed these same principles (Hernandez). In speaking on emotional detachment in medical, he said that emotional attachment to the patient is necessary,

but there is a balance to be struck on emotional displays in the workplace. He said, “Emotional detachment isn’t necessary, but emotional control is. In medicine, patients need to feel heard, understood, and cared for. A professional behavior combined with genuine empathy builds trust and improves patient outcomes” (Hernandez). He went on to say “The challenge is finding the balance, being present and compassionate without letting emotions cloud judgment. When speaking to families of critically ill patients, controlled emotions help convey difficult news effectively while still offering warmth and support” (Hernandez). This balance is integral to ensure an optimal interaction for the patient.

He offered a story of a time he felt that emotional regulation was necessary when speaking to a patient saying “I once cared for a critically ill patient who was unable to communicate. Her mother, deeply distressed and emotional, was struggling to cope with the situation. As I spoke with her, I empathized with her fear and concern which allowed me to comfort and reassure her. In turn, this helped the patient, who, despite his condition, was visibly affected by his mother’s distress. By easing her worries, I was able to create a calmer environment, ultimately benefiting both the patient and his family” (Hernandez). These anecdotes serve as medical perspectives into the need for proper empathy and emotion when interacting with patients but emphasize that the emotion presented must be professional and in line with the needs of the patient as well.

Heracles’s Bow:

The bow of Heracles is more than a physical object; it stands as a symbol within Sophocles' play, embodying Philoctetes's power and identity. The bow was gifted by Heracles

and enables Philoctetes to defend himself and hunt for survival acting an extension of his existence. As Philoctetes himself exclaims, “By taking my bow you have deprived me of my / life! Give it back, I beg you, give it back, I beseech you, my son! By / the gods of your fathers, do not take away my life!” (S, *Ph.* 930-933). This quote captures how the bow holds not just practical importance but is bound up with Philoctetes’s sense of self-worth and agency.

The bow's significance is shown in the tense exchanges between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. Philoctetes's suspicion of Neoptolemus's motives reveals his fear of losing the weapon that has sustained him through years of isolation. . He laments saying “Having sworn to take me home, he is / taking me to Troy; and having given his right hand as pledge, he / has taken and is keeping my sacred bow of Heracles the son of / Zeus;” (S, *Ph.* 941-943). The bow is both his salvation and his curse, serving as a reminder that he is seen as valuable for the power the bow bestows rather than for his own humanity.

The climax of this dynamic comes when Neoptolemus undergoes a transformation even though he initially sought to take the bow as a means to secure victory. Realizing the depth of his wrongdoing, Neoptolemus decides to return the bow as he understands that it is not just a tool for warfare but a symbol deeply connected to Philoctetes's dignity. This shift in Neoptolemus’ character is captured when he confesses, “As for me, a strange pity for this man has fallen upon me, not now for the first time, but since long ago” (S, *Ph.* 965-966). Neoptolemus extends an acknowledgment of Philoctetes’s right to make his own decisions and offers a gesture of respect that transcends his initial deception. Thus, the bow becomes more than just a weapon; it evolves into a symbol of trust and highlights the power of moral integrity over mere physical strength. In this light, the bow represents not just the literal power to survive and fight but also the ethical

power to choose right over wrong This ultimately reflects a deeper humanistic message within the play.

Philoctetes's Refusal to Go to Troy: A Struggle for Autonomy:

Philoctetes's refusal to go to Troy is rooted in distrust of the Greek leaders who abandoned him as well as a desire to retain control over his own fate. Philoctetes shows reluctance to help the Greek allies who previously abandoned him. His wound serves as a reminder of this betrayal and fuels his resolve to submit to the demands of those who only seek his assistance for their own gain. The emotional responses of Philoctetes to his situation are deeply tied to his sense of honor and autonomy. He resents the idea of being used as a pawn in the Greek's military strategy and views any attempt to persuade him to go to Troy as an affront to his dignity. When Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes, "I shall hide nothing from you! You must sail to Troy, to the / Achaeans and the expedition of the sons of Atreus." (S, *Ph* 915-916), Philoctetes responds, "I am lost, poor man! I am betrayed! What have you done to me, / stranger? Give back my bow at once!" (S, *Ph* 923-924).

Philoctetes's steadfast refusal underscores the play's theme of complex interplays between individual suffering and communal expectations. Neoptolemus's interactions with Philoctetes shift toward trying to understand and respect his autonomy rather than force him to comply. This highlights the theme of compassionate care and the importance of honoring the choices of those who suffer.

Philoctetes laments his earlier choice to sail to Troy in a pivotal moment in the play which reveals the depth of his betrayal. Philoctetes says, "Yet you sailed with them after being kidnapped and compelled, and I, the unfortunate one, had sailed of my own free will with seven

ships before they, as you say, but as they say you, threw me out, dishonoured” (S, *Ph* 1026-1029).

He regrets that he chose to sail with his comrades as he had to pool his own resources. Philoctetes expresses personal regret but also highlights the complex nature of loyalty in the context of the Trojan War. Philoctetes emphasizes the magnitude of his own betrayal by contrasting Neoptolemus’s coerced participation with his own voluntary commitment. He did not follow orders or act out of obligation. Rather, he willingly brought resources to the Greek cause only to be abandoned when his injury made him a burden.

Characters of Ethical Complexity:

Neoptolemus is central to the play's moral conflict as he displays youthful honor and later ethical growth. He is portrayed as a dutiful warrior who is eager to prove himself and fulfill the mission given to him by Odysseus. This tension is evident when Odysseus notices Neoptolemus’s hesitation and says, “O Zeus, what are you about to say? Surely you do not mean to give it back?” (S, *Ph*. 1233), to which Neoptolemus replies, “Yes, because I acquired it shamefully and not justly!” (S, *Ph*. 1234).

Neoptolemus's pushback reflects a growing sense of empathy and a struggle to reconcile his goals with his ethos. Neoptolemus hesitates to follow through with his original plan of deception, and his decision to return the bow to Philoctetes marks a significant turning point.

Neoptolemus evolves to one who prioritizes the well-being of another human being over the strategic demands of war. The shift in Neoptolemus’s attitude is crucial in understanding the ethical complexities that Sophocles embeds in his characters. It also demonstrates that true honor

does not come from blind obedience or victory but from a recognition of humanity in others.

This illustrates the play's broader message about the importance of empathy and the moral dilemmas that arise when different types of morality conflict.

CHAPTER 3

Philoctetes, in the exodus of the play (lines 1300-1500), long abandoned by his comrades, after years of suffering, and newly reequipped with the bow of Heracles, finds himself at a crossroads: should he go with Neoptolemus to Troy or not? Neoptolemus, after his initial reluctant participation in Odysseus's deceitful plan, regains some of his independence as he tries to convince Philoctetes to go to Troy willingly for the treatment of his injury as well as for the greater good of the Greek army. The tension reaches a peak as Odysseus reenters the narrative and Philoctetes is forced to reach a resolution between upholding his virtues and seeking personal justice for his pain. The narrative highlights the broader struggle to adhere to divine will, as Philoctetes's fate "to be healed" becomes apparent.

Defining morality and honor:

Philoctetes, the master archer, after regaining possession of the bow of Heracles and seeing Odysseus, attempts to kill him. The bow which had originally been his tool for survival becomes instead an instrument of vengeance. However, Neoptolemus, loyal to both parties, stops him, prompting Philoctetes to say "Alas! Why did you prevent me from killing a hated enemy with my bow?" (S, *Ph.* 1303). Neoptolemus responds "But that would not be honourable for me or for you" (S, *Ph.* 1304). This act of diplomacy reflects Neoptolemus's evolving character as he transitions from submission to Odysseus to independent moral agency. Neoptolemus's words also highlight morality and honor which appeals to Philoctetes, whose arguments thus far have revolved around highlighting the Greeks who left him on the island of Lemnos as without virtue. Philoctetes in this manner must balance vengeance and honor and step away from actions rooted

in personal anguish as he risks compromising higher ideals of morality that underpin Greek honor.

Neoptolemus responds rationally in response to a possibly violent situation where Philoctetes tries to kill Odysseus, underscoring that true honor does not lie in yielding to anger but in adhering to restraint and relying on divine justice. Neoptolemus also serves as a moral counterweight to Philoctetes's restraint, representing the path to redemption and the greater ideals that define heroism.

Pursuit of Glory:

In a lengthy speech from lines 1326 to 1347, Neoptolemus tries to convince Philoctetes to yield by attempting to position his pain and aligning it within the greater narrative, emphasizing the pursuit of glory and adherence to divine will. He starts by explaining that Philoctetes's sickness was caused by the gods. This points to a larger theme that suffering in Greek tragedy is sometimes the result of divine mandate and human agency is subordinate to godly will. He mentions the snake bite was inflicted at Chryse's sanctuary. This occurred as Philoctetes trespassed in the sanctuary and was accordantly punished with the snake bite.

You acquired this painful sickness through an/ event caused by the gods, when you came near to the guardian of/ Chryse, who protects the roofless sanctuary, the snake that keeps/ watch unseen. And know that you will never have respite from/ grievous sickness, so long as the sun rises in one quarter and sets/ again in another, before you come of your own will to the land of/ Troy, and meeting the sons of Asclepius that are with us you are

/relieved of this malady, and with this bow and with me you are/ revealed as the conqueror of the towers. I will tell you how I know/ that this is so! There is a man with us who was taken prisoner from/ Troy, Helenus, the noble prophet, who tells us beyond doubt that/ this is bound to happen; and in addition, that it is fated that Troy/ be entirely taken during the present summer; and if he is found to/ be telling lies, he gives us permission to kill him. Then since you/ know this, give your willing consent! It is a glorious addition to be/ reckoned the noblest of all the Greeks, and first to come to healing/ hands, and second to take Troy, the cause of so much mourning,/ and win the highest fame! (S, *Ph.*1326-1347)

Here, Neoptolemus suggests that Philoctetes's recovery is contingent on his willingness to travel to Troy and accept divine intervention. He argues that there is a two-fold benefit to Philoctetes's going to Troy: that he will be healed by the sons of Asclepius and second that he will achieve glory by being part of the Greek victory. The interplay between divine control and human agency reaches a point as Neoptolemus sees this as part of the larger prophecy that the Greeks will win the Trojan War. In contrast, Philoctetes knows this decision is a personal choice and continues to vouch for his personal agency in the matter.

Neoptolemus talks about Helenus, a Trojan prophet, to corroborate his argument, as the power of a prophet holds immense weight in determining divine will. He goes further to say if the prophet is found to be telling lies, he will die, lending more credibility to the prophecy. He uses the prophet as a disinterested party to convince Philoctetes that it is truly the will of the gods that he must travel to Troy with them. There have been other indications of godly intervention in

stating Philoctetes's fate as earlier in the narrative Odysseus says, "It is Zeus, let me tell you, Zeus, the ruler of this land, Zeus who has decided this; and I execute his will!" (S, *Ph.* 989-990).

Neoptolemus appeals to Philoctetes's sense of honor and ambition for glory as he says that he could be 'the noblest of all the Greeks' and win the 'highest fame'. He emphasizes that Philoctetes's suffering has a greater purpose being the collective triumph of the Trojan War. Neoptolemus reframes the situation to say that suffering was in service to the gods and now Philoctetes's legacy will benefit from his sacrifice.

Fate driven healing poses a large contrast to modern medicine in that modern medicine focuses on scientific treatment rejecting the ideal that healing is preordained. In contemporary medicine a patient with chronic wounds such as Philoctetes's would have a variety of different treatment options ranging from antibiotics to physical therapy.

Moral Corruption in the Greeks:

In response to Neoptolemus's arguments, Philoctetes gives a long speech from lines 1348 to 1372 that show Philoctetes's mental image as he pleads for Neoptolemus to act with integrity while accepting that Neoptolemus may ultimately be acting in his best interest. Having endured many years of suffering at the hands of the Greeks and Odysseus, he is torn between traveling to Troy and seeking aid for his pain or clinging to his principles and rejecting an alliance with those he considers morally corrupt. In his monologue he says:

O hateful life, why do you still keep me alive above the ground,/ and have not let me depart to Hades? Alas, what am I to do? How/ am I to disbelieve the words of this man, who gave me advice for/ my own good? But am I to give in? Then how can I come into/ men's sight, unhappy one, after doing this? Who will speak to me?/ How can you, eyes that have witnessed all that has taken place/ around me, put up with this, my being with the sons/ of Atreus, who were my ruin? How can I be with the accursed son of/ Laertius? It is not the pain of the past that stings me, but the/ sufferings still in store for me at their hands that I seem to foresee;/ for when men's mind has once become the mother of evil deeds, it/ begets yet more evil. And I wonder at this in you; for you ought/ not to go to Troy yourself, and you ought to keep me away from it./ These men insulted you when they robbed you of your father's/ treasure; after that will you go and fight on their side, and compel/ me to do the same? Never, my son! But as you swore to do, take/ me home, and remain yourself in Skyros and allow these miserable men to perish miserably./ In this way you will win double gratitude/ from me, and double gratitude from my father; and you will not/ through helping evildoers seem to have a nature such as theirs. (S, *Ph.* 1348-1372)

Philoctetes's reluctance to enter back into civilization is apparent in this section as he questions how the Greeks will react to his return. He worries about conversations upon his return evidenced by his words at line 1353, "Who will speak to me". He worries that future suffering at the hands of the armies' leaders is still in wait for him upon his arrival in Troy and questions how he can coexist with those who wronged him in the past. He recognizes the Greek army as 'evildoers' and 'miserable men' and truly does not want to assist the Greeks in the war effort. In this way, he sees his view as morally righteous and the Greeks who abandoned him as less virtuous. The most evil of the Greeks to Philoctetes is Odysseus who he describes as the

‘accursed son of Laertius’ who is the most to blame for his plight as it was ultimately his decision to leave Philoctetes on Lemnos.

This passage also highlights the Greek principle of *xenia* as Philoctetes promises Neoptolemus double gratitude from both him and his father if Neoptolemus honors his word and travels instead to take Philoctetes home to Skyros. This aims to add to the idea of honorable Greek men who exemplify values such as hospitality and honoring one’s word.

He recognizes that Neoptolemus is in part acting in his favor as he says he ‘gave me advice for my own good’ but still questions if going to Troy will be truly beneficial for him. He wrestles with whether to trust Neoptolemus who has shown him compassion or to stick to his perception of moral righteousness. He appeals to the morality he sees in Neoptolemus by mentioning an insult to Achilles, Neoptolemus’s father. Due to paternal loyalty in Greek culture, Philoctetes thought this would morally sway Neoptolemus as the Greeks had wronged both of them. His trust of Neoptolemus and his distaste for Odysseus create a moral question of whether he should go, allowing some uncertainty in his decision that was not present before. This internal debate leads him to struggle to reconcile his situation with hope of justice and redemption, but also fear that his suffering may continue.

The Sons of Asclepius:

Neoptolemus references the sons of Asclepius present within the ranks of the Greeks in Troy as they will be able to relieve Philoctetes of his suffering. The sons of Asclepius hold immense relevance as exemplars of medical practice and as semi-divine beings. Their father Asclepius is the god of healing and has numerous temples dedicated to him across the Greek world. These temples offer sanctuary to the sick, serve as medical centers and places of spiritual supplication. The presence of the sons of Asclepius in Sophocles's plays as well as in Homeric epics show reverence for medicine as a sacred discipline. In addition, Sophocles was credited with bringing the worship of Asclepius to Athens following the plague of 529 BCE. Medicine in this context is shown as a blend of human skill and spiritual gift of the ancient world. The inclusion of these characters reinforces the theme that suffering and healing are subject to divine will as seen in the fated snake bite at Chryse's sanctuary.

Homer describes the older son of Asclepius, Machaon, commonly regarded as the father of surgery, as leading a battalion, and his actions parallel an accomplished physician. He derives his skills from both his divine father Asclepius and the centaur healer Cheiron which helped to establish him as a pioneer in surgery particularly on the battlefield. On one occasion when King Menelaus is injured by an arrow, Machaon uses his surgical skills to remove the arrow, aspirate the wound, and applies herbal salves to promote healing and antisepsis (Filippou 5).

“The godlike man came and stood in their midst, and immediately drew out the arrow from the clasped belt; and as it was drawn out the sharp barbs were broken backwards. And he loosed the flashing belt and the kilt beneath and the apron that the coppersmiths had fashioned. But when he saw the wound where the bitter arrow had entered, he sucked out the blood, and with sure

knowledge spread on it soothing herbs, which once Cheiron had given to his father with kindly intent.” (*Iliad* 4.212-219)

The care is given by a semi-divine being, the son of a god, and the gifts are given by Cheiron making this a divine healing . This furthers the previously mentioned notion that both suffering and healing in the Greek world are dictated by divine forces. After Philoctetes is healed and he and Neoptolemus enter the war, their fates are still closely intertwined with the lives of the sons of Asclepius. Ancient historians hypothesize that Machaon was killed by a warrior Eurypylos, son of Telephus, who was then killed by Neoptolemus. Later, in Proclus’s recollection of the lost epic the Little Iliad, Machaon would assist in healing Philoctetes from his snake bite and subsequent sepsis (Livius 1).

The Final Disagreement:

The final discourse between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes captures resounding tension as Philoctetes refuses to go to Troy. Neoptolemus after continual attempts to convince Philoctetes grows frustrated and begins to relinquish his efforts. He says “What am I to do if nothing I can say will persuade you? It is time for me to stop talking, and for you to go on living, as you are living, without deliverance” (S, *Ph.* 1393-1394). Neoptolemus sees traveling to Troy as an escape from Philoctetes’s suffering and grows resigned that Philoctetes chooses against solving his pain. This introduces a moral dilemma between respecting Philoctetes’s autonomy and Neoptolemus’s own view on the subject as well as his mission imposed by the Greeks and Odysseus to retrieve Philoctetes.

Neoptolemus remains steadfast that Philoctetes's fate is to go to Troy and aid the Greeks in their victory; however, Philoctetes sees his fate as set in his suffering on Lemnos. He states "Allow me to suffer what it is my fate to suffer! But do for me what you swore, clasping my right hand, that you would do: escort me home! And do not delay or make further mention of Troy; for me, enough words have been spoken" (S, *Ph.* 1397-1401). Philoctetes's view, clouded by past betrayal, is that he will never be healed; he focuses instead on holding grudges against the men who abandoned him and set on his suffering. Philoctetes struggles for a sense of control and reclaims it through making his decision even within the confines of his suffering. He sees fate as inescapable but wrongly identifies his fate as a resignation to suffering. Neoptolemus as a third party to his suffering can see how Philoctetes's story is part of a larger divine plan.

This last disagreement highlights Neoptolemus's youthful idealism and contrasts it with Philoctetes's hardened acceptance. It also sets the stage for the intervention of Heracles who reconciles these opposing views on the fate of Philoctetes by framing Philoctetes's suffering as a necessary precursor to glory. Heracles's divine intervention serves as the play's ultimate resolution transforming Philoctetes's experience of abandonment and pain into a path towards heroism. By invoking his own experiences, Heracles convinces Philoctetes's of the necessity of obedience to the gods. The interplay of divine will and human agency is central to the resolution that Philoctetes agrees to go to Troy and embrace a path that grants him healing rather than vengeance.

Noncompliance and Ethical Questions around Patient Autonomy:

Philoctetes's refusal to travel to Troy despite the promise of healing resembles modern patients' noncompliance. Noncompliance is a phenomenon where patients refuse recommended

medical treatment due to past negative experiences with healthcare, cultural beliefs, or misinformation. Similarly, Philoctetes refuses to go to Troy due to his deep distrust of the Greek leaders, particularly Odysseus. Like Neoptolemus, healthcare providers often struggle with the ethical dilemma of how far they should push or encourage their patient to seek treatment. At heart, the question lies at whether the patient's autonomy or medical maximizing is most important when it comes to patient care.

Philoctetes has good reason to distrust the Greeks as they left him on the island of Lemnos without aid, making him resistant to their supposed help now. Similarly, the American public has been given reasons to distrust the US healthcare system due to instances of historical medical neglect or unethical experimentation. An important example of this is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The study set in, Macon County, Alabama surveyed the effects of untreated syphilis by recruiting 399 African American male patients with late-latent syphilis under the guise of enrolling in a government health care program (Paul 1). The men in the study were not informed they had syphilis and were denied treatment even after the discovery of penicillin as an effective cure in 1947. This study had layers of ethical violations including the lack of informed consent as the participants were not informed of the study's purpose and their role in it. They were deceived into participating as researchers claimed they were providing free healthcare. The researchers took advantage of participants within specific socioeconomic and racial groups creating a large distrust of the medical system within African American populations. The result was devastating as many died from the disease and passed it onto loved ones and children through congenital syphilis. The United States has experienced other examples of unethical healthcare practices including forced sterilizations in the twentieth century and many other instances of discrimination within the medical system (Reilly 1).

There are also ethical questions around voluntary refusal of care that don't necessarily stem from a distrust of the healthcare system. These examples may include those who do not participate in blood transfusions due to religious beliefs or terminally ill patients who opt into do-not resuscitate orders. These are respected choices upheld in the name of patient autonomy, but they work against the idea that the doctor must do everything in their power to extend the life of the patient. In these situations, it is not the physician's role to convince the patient to partake in the medical treatment, but rather to give advice and guide the patient in picking the best option for them. Because of this, we might consider that Neoptolemus should have been more reserved in his persuasion towards Philoctetes.

Heracles's Divine Intervention:

Heracles's speech serves as a powerful conclusion to the play that delivers the will of the gods. He redefines Philoctetes's fate; he must go to Troy to be healed and help the Greeks win the Trojan War. Heracles draws a unique line from suffering to glory, saying that to attain glory and the ultimate favor of the gods one must go through a period of suffering. "Not yet, before you have listened to my words, son of Poeas; and/ say that your ears hear and your eyes view the form of Heracles. / For your sake I have come, leaving my home in heaven, to tell you/ of the plans of Zeus, and to restrain you from the voyage on which/ you are embarking. Do you listen to my words!" (S, *Ph.* 1409-1414). Heracles commands Philoctetes to "listen to my words" and view his form emphasizing the divine nature of his authority. The invocation of his full form emphasizes the immovable power of divine will. "And first I will tell you of my fortunes, of how many labours I/ endured to go through to win eternal glory, as you can see. For you/ too, know it for sure, destiny is the same, after these sufferings to/ make your life glorious" (S, *Ph.* 1415-

1418). Heracles's story reflects the path from suffering to glory as he went through many hardships before being immortalized in glory renowned for his extraordinary strength. Heracles was born as the son of Zeus and Alceme and was therefore a target of Hera's anger from a young age. He descended into madness which caused him to kill his wife Megara and their children. This set the scene for the undertaking of the twelve labors in which he cleaned the Augean Stables, capturing the Golden Hind and killing the Nemean Lion. These labors secured both his legacy and immortality. His life mimics the pathway from endurance and suffering to glory and immortality.

You shall go with this man to the city of/ Troy and first be cured of your grim sickness. And you shall be/ judged first of the army in valour, by means of my bow depriving/ of life Paris,/ who was the cause of these troubles, and taking Troy, and bringing/ the spoils to your abode, after receiving the greatest prize of the/ army, for your father Poetas to the topmost plain of Oeta, your/ native place. The spoils you receive from this expedition you must/ bring to my pyre as a memorial of my bow.

He pushes Philoctetes not to be burdened with his suffering any longer but to see it as a route to glory, learning from suffering. Philoctetes's compliance would not be an act of a submission but rather a self-made decision to achieve glory and be healed by the physicians at Troy. In a more contemporary framework, patients are seen as agents of their healing; however, Heracles's narrative shows a world where external forces dictate outcomes of healing and suffering, showing a contrast from modern values of autonomy and self-determination. A central aspect of the speech promises healing through the intervention of Asclepius. He emphasizes the

need to follow the preordained fate of going to Troy as a way to show reverence to the gods as respect for the gods is seen as one of the ultimate virtues to ensure an individual's success.

Heracles as the intervening figure also holds significance as the symbolic importance of the bow of Heracles through the play. The bow gifted to Philoctetes through his time on the island served as his means of survival but also a symbol of divine favor. The bow serves as a means for Philoctetes to maintain his heroic identity as it ties him strongly to a divine figure. The bow itself is a symbol of moral responsibility and, while it gives Heracles the power to survive, it also binds him to divine decree. Heracles's appearance reaffirms this connection. When he urges Philoctetes to travel to Troy to use the bow as a means to achieve glory and fulfill his destiny, it elevates the bow's status to a sacred tool of fate. This serves as the ultimate motivation to submit to the larger cosmic order and sets Philoctetes on the path of honor and alignment with the Greek army despite his prior interactions with his comrades.

“And to you I give the/ same counsel, son of Achilles; for you have not the strength to/
conquer the land of Troy without him, neither has he without you;/ but guard each other
like two companion lions! And I will send/ Asclepius to Ilium to put an end to your
disease. For it is fated to/ be taken once again by the aid of my bow. But remember when/
you conquer the land to show reverence to the gods; for all things/ come after this in the
mind of Zeus my father. For reverence for/ the gods does not die along with mortals;
whether they live or die,/ it never perishes. “(S, *Ph.* 1409-1444)

The speech marks a final resolve in the two men's tortured relationship as they must lean on each other to reach each of their goals. Heracles tells them to “guard each other like two companion lions” emphasizing that they need each other to achieve these divine objectives.

Throughout the play, Neoptolemus fruitlessly urges Philoctetes to come to Troy with him, and in the finale of the play after the intervention of Heracles, Philoctetes agrees. He says, “O you who have brought to me a voice I longed for, you who have appeared at last, I will not disobey your orders!” (S, *Ph.* 1445-1447). Moved by Heracles’s monologue and out of reverence to the gods, Philoctetes through his own agency accepts the true fate of the gods.

CHAPTER 4

The Role of the Chorus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*:

In *Philoctetes*, the chorus is made up of Neoptolemus's ship crew; this collective serves as a crucial intermediary force between the main characters and reflects the audience's role in the unfolding drama. They act as the loyal crew of Neoptolemus, often agreeing with his arguments; however, they also express deep sympathy for Philoctetes and struggle with many of the moral dilemmas presented by their leader. The relationship between the crew and Neoptolemus feels hierarchal though informal as they call him both "my lord" and "son". Despite their allegiance to Neoptolemus, they help expand on the ethical dimensions of the play.

The chorus act as loyal followers of Neoptolemus for the majority of the play as evidenced by their recognition of his authority and shared stance on different arguments. The parodos in traditional Greek tragedy is the moment when the chorus first emerges. At line 150 the parodos occurs as the chorus sings: "The care that you assign me has long been in my thoughts, my lord, that my eye should ever be vigilant for what you most need" (S, *Ph.* 150-152). In this excerpt they call him 'my lord' and offer their assistance to Neoptolemus, suggesting that their role is to support him. They also mention that he has taken good care of them in the past, mirroring other heroes that display heroism. The reader questions if the chorus has personal agency as they express opinions and thoughts through the play, but they ultimately defer to Neoptolemus's authority. Later in the play, when deliberating the decision to go to Troy, Philoctetes asks the chorus for their opinion, and they reaffirm their loyalty to Neoptolemus by saying: "This boy is our captain; what he says to you, we also say to you." (S, *Ph.* 1072-1073).

Pity for Philoctetes:

In lines 169-176, the chorus shows their immense pity for Philoctetes and his situation.

They emerge as a voice of empathy in response to Philoctetes's plight:

“I pity him, in that with none among mortals to care for him and with no companion he can look on, miserable, always alone, he suffers from a cruel sickness and is bewildered by each need as it arises. How, how does the unhappy man hold out? O contrivances of the gods! O unhappy race of mortals to whom life is unkind!” (S, *Ph.* 169-176)

This lamentation shows profound sympathy for Philoctetes's suffering. They recognize his adversity and often refer to Philoctetes as the ‘sufferer’ in their speech. The chorus is not simply an observing group but rather they emotionally invest in Philoctetes's torment. They do not directly oppose Neoptolemus but subtly push back on the deception taking place. Their concern for him escalates as they observe more of his agony saying “He describes the ship in her inhospitable anchorage. His cry is fearsome!” (S, *Ph.* 218-219). The description of the ship as an “inhospitable anchorage” acknowledges the animosity he has towards the Greeks. This interesting comparison draws the audience to see that the ship that could be Philoctetes's salvation could be also a source of cruelty.

Moral Dilemma and Emotional Burnout:

As the situation unfolds, the chorus comes out in support of Philoctetes's original request to sail back to his home and leave aspirations of Troy behind. The chorus directly pleads with Neoptolemus to take pity on Philoctetes saying,

“Take pity on him, my lord! He has spoken of the ordeal of many troubles, hard to bear; may such attend none of my friends! And if you hate the odious sons of Atreus, my lord, I would make their evil actions a great benefit for him, and would convey him home, where he longs to go, upon the well-appointed swift ship, escaping the righteous anger of the gods.” (S, *Ph.* 507-518)

They start a dialogue with Neoptolemus based on his sense of justice and humanity. They acknowledge the injustice that Philoctetes has suffered and propose to fulfill his desire to be taken back to his home. They insinuate that helping Philoctetes in this way would be an honorable act of granting the sufferer his wish rather than an act of treachery.

Neoptolemus responds with a cautionary warning and responds: “Take care that for all the indulgence you show now you do not appear a different person when you have had enough of contact with the sickness!” (S, *Ph.* 519-521). His words have a very interesting medical implication. Neoptolemus says that once the crew members have heard enough of Philoctetes’s cries, their empathy will turn to disdain. In modern medical context, this notion may be associated with emotional burnout where doctors may begin to show cynicism towards patients and decreased sense of empathy (Reith 1).

The chorus rejects any implication that they will fall prey to this type of emotional burnout saying “By no means! You will never be able to level this reproach at me with justice.” (S, *Ph.* 522-523). In response, Neoptolemus says “Well, it is shameful for me to seem to the stranger less ready than you are to work to serve his need. If you are agreeable, let us sail, let him set off in haste; the ship will carry him and will not refuse! Only may the gods convey us safely out of this land to wherever we may desire to sail!” (S, *Ph.* 524-529). Seeing the chorus’s willingness

to help Philoctetes, Neoptolemus considers the chorus's request and deliberates allowing the ship to sail Philoctetes home. While this is not the ultimate action, this insight allows us to see Neoptolemus in a more cynical position that may have occurred due to overexposure to Philoctetes's pain where he was not affected emotionally to the same degree as he may have been before by Philoctetes's displays of pain. But, with the chorus's reminder of Philoctetes's humanity, Neoptolemus softens.

The Chorus and Fate:

Towards the play's resolution, the chorus acknowledge the divine will at play saying "This is fate sent by the gods; it was not treachery to which I lent a hand that came upon you; direct the hatred of your baneful curse at others! For I am concerned that you shall not reject my friendship." (S, *Ph.* 1118-1121). They agree that Philoctetes's injury is a result of a gods and to not inflict anger from his predicament onto others. This quote also shows a shift as the chorus grows angry with Philoctetes, letting go of some of the empathy they once held for Philoctetes's position. This is in line with Neoptolemus's prediction of their outlook as he previously said, "do not appear a different person when you have had enough".

They offer Philoctetes a final appeal saying: "I beg you, if you have any regard for your friend, draw near to him; he draws near in all loyalty to you. Come, know it, know it well! It is in your power to escape this deadly fate." (S, *Ph.* 1163-1168). As Philoctetes says as well, ultimately Neoptolemus is working in his best interest. The chorus pleads with Philoctetes to consider this argument and submit to Neoptolemus.

Conclusion:

The chorus plays an interesting role and works to shape the audience's outlook on the situation. They struggle between empathy, frustration, and the burnout associated with dealing with Philoctetes as they see a different path for him than he sees for himself. However, unlike the audience, they are able to play an active role in the play by reacting, pleading with and challenging certain characters. Their moral struggle mirrors the audience's and through this they are able to influence the play's ethical landscape. Throughout the play they remain loyal to Neoptolemus as his crew, but frequently make their opinion known, particularly on the topic of human suffering and the nature of moral choice.

Appendix:



Figure 1: von Bothmer, Dietrich. 1957. "Greek Vases from the Hearst Collection." *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 15(7): pp. 166, 179.

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