

# SOPHOCLES PHILOCTETES

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Note that in the text below the line numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text, and the line numbers without brackets refer to the English text. The footnotes and stage directions have been added by the translator.

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Sir Richard Jebb's Commentary on *Philoctetes*.

## BACKGROUND NOTE

Philoctetes was one of the warrior leaders who set off with 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.

Sophocles's *Philoctetes* was first performed during the Festival of Dionysus in Athens in 409 BC, where it won first prize.

## PHILOCTETES

### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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

NEOPTOLEMUS: young son of the great Greek hero Achilles.

PHILOCTETES: Greek warrior abandoned on Lemnos.

SAILOR: attendant on Neoptolemus.

CHORUS: sailors from Neoptolemus's ship<sup>1</sup>.

MERCHANT TRADER: a sailor spy, posing as a Merchant.

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

The Greek forces fighting at Troy are normally called the Argives or the Achaeans, as in Homer.

*[Scene: on the deserted island of Lemnos, just outside Philoctetes's cave. The opening to the cave is onstage, above the level of the orchestra. Enter into the orchestra ODYSSEUS and NEOPTOLEMUS with a SAILOR attending on Neoptolemus.]*

ODYSSEUS

So here we are on the shores of Lemnos,  
a lonely place—well off the beaten track,  
surrounded by the sea. No one lives here.

This was this place, Neoptolemus,  
son of Achilles, bravest and best  
of all the Greeks, where, many years ago,  
I left Philoctetes, son of Poeas,  
a man from Malis. I abandoned him,  
acting on orders from our two commanders.<sup>2</sup>

His foot was dripping with infectious sores,  
painful ulcers. He kept screaming all the time.

10

His strange, wild howling rang throughout the camp.

[10]

He cried so much we could not pray in peace  
or make libations and burnt sacrifice.

But what's the point in talking of that now?

This is no time to tell lengthy stories,  
for if he learns I'm here, then my whole scheme,  
the one I think will catch him quickly, fails.

Look, your job is to carry out the tasks  
we still have left to do—to find a rock

20

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<sup>1</sup>In the text below the speaking label CHORUS designates all speeches spoken by the Chorus collectively, the Chorus Leader, individual member of the Chorus, and special sub-groups of the entire Chorus. In any production of the play, the director would have to determine the speaker(s) for each speech.

<sup>2</sup>The two commanders of the Argive expedition to Troy were the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus.

PHILOCTETES

somewhere round here which has two openings,  
so shaped that when it's cool there are two seats  
facing the sun, and when it's hot, the breeze  
wafts sleep in through the chamber tunnel.  
To the left below it you might glimpse [20]  
a water spring, if it's still functioning.  
Climb up the rock. 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 sets out searching, 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 talked about.

ODYSSEUS

Above you?  
Or below? I don'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 lives here. 40

ODYSSEUS

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

PHILOCTETES

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

What you describe must be the things he owns.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

*[NEOPTOLEMUS inspects the rags.]*

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

ODYSSEUS

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

*[NEOPTOLEMUS comes back down and whispers to his ATTENDANT, who then leaves.]*

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are your orders?

ODYSSEUS

With Philoctetes—  
when you speak to him, tell him a story.

You have to trick him, lead his mind astray.  
 When he asks 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.<sup>1</sup>  
 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.<sup>2</sup>  
 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.<sup>3</sup> In fact,  
 you weren't a member of that first contingent.  
 But I was, and I can't deny the fact.  
 If he sees me while he still has his bow, 90  
 I'm lost, and you, as my companion,  
 will share my fate. That's why we need to plan—  
 we need some scheme so you can find a way  
 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

<sup>1</sup> When Achilles, the finest warrior among the Greeks, was killed, his weapons were awarded to Odysseus.

<sup>2</sup> Dardanus, a son of Zeus, was the legendary founder of Troy.

<sup>3</sup> Many Greek warrior leaders had made an oath to assist whichever one of them was lucky enough to marry Helen, daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta, if he ever needed their help. When Paris of Troy abducted Helen, her husband, Menelaus, called upon the Achaean leaders to honour their promise by joining an expedition to attack Troy. Odysseus was very reluctant to join the expedition and had to be tricked into going.

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 am not eager to be called disloyal.  
Still, my lord, I would much prefer to fail  
in something honorable, than to win out  
with treachery.

ODYSSEUS

You noble father's son,  
when I was young, I had a quiet tongue, as well.  
I let my active hands speak up for me.  
But now I've gone out into adult life  
and faced 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?

PHILOCTETES

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, 130  
you use some trick to grab him.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

No—not if the lies will save us all.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But how can anyone control his face 110  
when he dares speak such lies?

ODYSSEUS

When what you do  
brings benefits, you should not hesitate.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

So I'm not the one  
who'll take that city, as you told me? 140

ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

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<sup>1</sup>The Achaean forces had learned by prophecy that they needed Neoptolemus and the bow of Philoctetes to capture Troy.

## PHILOCTETES

## 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

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

## ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

## ODYSSEUS

All 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,  
when he tells you some fancy tale, you listen,  
taking from it anything that helps you.  
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's crew.]

CHORUS

My lord, tell me what I must conceal  
and what to 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's 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 you the sign. Try to help me.  
 Provide whatever aid I may require.

CHORUS

My lord, this help you talk about 150  
 has for a long time been my chief concern,  
 always to keep my eyes alert  
 above all to what's best for you.  
 Tell me some details of this man,  
 the kind of shelter where he lives,  
 and where he might be now.  
 There are things I ought to know, 190  
 in case he comes at me somewhere  
 when I'm not ready for him.  
 Where has he disappeared?  
 Is he at home in there,  
 in that cave, or here outside?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Here's his dwelling with two entrances,  
 a den carved in the rock. [160]

CHORUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

I think that's clear.  
 He's dragging his foot along some place nearby,  
 looking for things to eat. I've heard it said 200  
 that that's the way he usually lives.

In his sad state it takes what strength he has  
to shoot his feathered arrows at his prey,  
and no one ever ventures close enough  
to help him cure his sick condition.

CHORUS

Well, I pity him for that—  
with no human to look after him, [170]  
and no companion's face to see,  
he lives a miserable life,  
alone, always alone, 210  
infected with a cruel disease,  
confused about what he should do  
to cope with every pressing need.  
How does he bear a fate so grim?  
It is 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.  
The gods are planning that Philoctetes  
will not 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.<sup>1</sup>

240 [200]

CHORUS

My lad, be quiet.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why, what's the matter?

CHORUS

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 far away, is hard to miss.  
The cries are just too clear. Now, my lad,  
you should listen . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

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.  
In either case, 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

260 [220]

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<sup>1</sup>*Chryse* 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.

PHILOCTETES

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  
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.  
If you come as friends, speak up. Answer me.  
It's only right we talk to one another.

270

[230]

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 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—  
Achilles' son. Now you know everything.

[240]

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  
when our first expedition sailed for Troy.

290

PHILOCTETES

NEOPTOLEMUS

Did you take part in that great enterprise?

PHILOCTETES

My boy, you mean you don't know who I am,  
you have no clue who you are 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 is 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, deserted here,  
while I was suffering this cruel disease.<sup>1</sup>  
I was bitten by a savage deadly snake.  
Our fleet had sailed from Chryse by the sea. [270]  
It landed here. Then, my boy, they left me  
with this infection as my sole companion.  
Yes, they left me here alone. Once they saw 320  
my storms of pain had passed and I was sleeping,  
they were so happy to abandon me

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<sup>1</sup>Cephallenia was an island in Odysseus's kingdom, but the name is often applied to his territory generally (and his soldiers are commonly called the Cephallenians).

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 ache  
 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  
 So men 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 Poeas, 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's brutality as well.

PHILOCTETES

What's that? You mean you, too, have complaints  
 against those cursed 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.<sup>1</sup>

PHILOCTETES

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

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<sup>1</sup>Menelaus is king of Sparta, and Agamemnon is king of Mycenae. Neoptolemus was born and raised on the island of Scyros.

PHILOCTETES

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.

PHILOCTETES

You're right.

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

They came to get me  
in a fancy, decorated ship—Phoenix,  
who raised my father, and lord Odysseus.  
They said—I don't know if it's true or not—  
that since my father had been killed,  
destiny decreed that no one except me  
could seize those towers in Troy. Well, my friend,  
once they'd said that, they gave me little time  
before we left. We sailed there at top speed,  
mainly because I had a great desire  
to see my father's corpse before the burial,  
since I'd never seen him. In addition,  
what they said to me was truly wonderful—  
if I went back with them, I'd capture Troy.  
Well, we rowed and had a favorable wind,  
so on my voyage by the second day

410

[350]

420



we had reached Sigeum, that bitter place.<sup>1</sup>  
 Then, when I disembarked, all the army  
 at once came crowding round to welcome me,  
 swearing they could see the dead Achilles  
 alive again. But he just lay there dead.  
 In my grief I wept for him. Soon after that, [360]  
 I went to Atreus' sons, as friends of mine,  
 or so I thought, to claim my father's arms 430  
 and all the rest of what belonged to him.  
 They gave me the most shameless of replies—  
 "Seed of Achilles, you may take away  
 all your father's things except his weapons.  
 Another man is master of them now,  
 Laertes' son, Odysseus." I jumped up—  
 my anger was immediate and intense—  
 tears were in my eyes. Full of bitterness,  
 I yelled at them, "You miserable men,  
 have you two dared award my weapons 440  
 to another man rather than to me [370]  
 without even keeping me informed?"  
 Then Odysseus spoke up—it so happened  
 he was there nearby—"Yes, boy, they did.  
 And rightly, too, because I rescued them.  
 I was there to save their master's body."  
 In my rage I began to heap on him  
 every insult I could think of, all at once.  
 If he meant to steal those weapons from me,  
 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,

<sup>1</sup>Sigeum was a prominent coastal location northwest of Troy.

all I have to tell. If there's anyone  
 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, rich in gold,  
 most dread and sacred mother,  
 over there I called on you,  
 in Troy, when sons of Atreus  
 heaped all their insults on this man,  
 while they were handing over  
 his father's armour to Odysseus,  
 paying highest honours to that man—  
 such awe-inspiring things.  
 Hail, blessed goddess, as you sit 480 [400]  
 on your splendid decorated throne,  
 where carved-out lions slaughter bulls.<sup>1</sup>

## PHILOCTETES

You've sailed here carrying your grief,  
 pain like my own, a certain 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. 490  
 No, what you have said does not surprise me, [410]  
 though I do wonder how great Ajax,  
 if he was there, could bear to witness it.

## NEOPTOLEMUS

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

---

<sup>1</sup>Pactolus was a river in Asia Minor celebrated for its rich deposits of gold. The detail about lions slaughtering bulls seems to suggest (according to Jebb) that the goddess is riding on lions or that her throne is a chariot drawn by lions.

PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

What's that you say? Did death get Ajax, too?<sup>1</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 did not want to hear they'd died.  
God knows what we should look for in this world,  
when such men perish and Odysseus lives,  
and at a time when we should hear the news  
that he was dead instead of those two men. [430]

---

<sup>1</sup>Ajax, king of Salamis, was the most redoubtable warrior in the Greek forces after Achilles. He vied with Odysseus over the arms Achilles. When the Greeks awarded the weapons to Odysseus, Ajax went berserk and killed himself.

<sup>2</sup>Sisyphus, the founder of Corinth, was famous for his devious ways. According to one story very popular among Odysseus's enemies, he was the father of Odysseus and sold his mother to Laertes while Odysseus was still in the womb. Diomedes, a warrior leader in the Greek forces, was a close comrade of Odysseus.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES

Now, for the gods' sake, what of Patroclus?  
On that occasion where was he? Tell me.  
Your father loved him more than anyone.

NEOPTOLEMUS

He had also died. I can tell you why  
in one brief saying—given the choice,  
war takes no evil men. It always wants  
to seize the good ones.

PHILOCTETES

There I agree with you.  
With that in mind, let me ask you this—  
what about that worthless man who was so glib,  
so daring with his tongue and yet so smart? 530 [440]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Surely that can only mean Odysseus?

PHILOCTETES

No, I don't mean him. There was a man there  
called Thersites, who never was content  
to speak up only once, although no one  
ever granted him the right to speak at all.<sup>1</sup>  
Do you know if that fellow's still alive?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I haven't seen him. But from what I've heard  
the man still lives.

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]

---

<sup>1</sup>Thersites is the only common soldier given an important dramatic role in Homer's *Iliad*—in Book Two he challenges Agamemnon with a series of very rude insults.

PHILOCTETES

down to their deaths. How can I sort that out?  
How can I praise the gods? When I give thanks  
for how the world's divinely organized,  
I find the gods themselves disgraceful.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES

My lad, are you setting off already?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes. Our opportunities are telling us  
to wait close to our ship for a good wind  
and not move 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 unimportant. 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 commend  
good acts, and so if you turn down this plea,

what people say about you won't be good.  
 But my boy, if you do help, you'll win 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 on my knees  
 in front of you, although I'm weak and ill, 590  
 a cripple. Don't leave me all 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 asked,  
 thinking my affairs a trivial thing,  
 hurried to complete their voyage home.  
 But now in you I've come across a man [500]  
 who can carry 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,  
 in case he is destroyed 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 ever 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  
 That's easy. But later, when you've had your fill [520]  
 of that disease of his by living with it,  
 you may no longer stand by what you've said.

CHORUS

That will not 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 right to you, let's put to sea.  
 The man should start his trip without delay.  
 Our ship will take him. We will not refuse. 730  
 May the gods grant we safely leave this land  
 and sail from here wherever we may choose.

PHILOCTETES

What a glorious day! O you sweet man, [530]  
 and you dear sailors, I wish there was a way  
 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.]*

PHILOCTETES

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 may 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 after you.

---

<sup>1</sup>Peparethus was an island in the western Aegean sea.



PHILOCTETES

NEOPTOLEMUS

To take me back by force,  
or to persuade me to return with them?

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 hold him back?

780

MERCHANT

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

[570]

NEOPTOLEMUS

What kind of person 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.

---

<sup>1</sup>Tydeus's son is a reference to the famous Greek warrior Diomedes, a frequent companion of Odysseus on various adventures.

MERCHANT

Then question me no more. Get out of here. 790  
Sail from this place as quickly as you can.

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 says, he must speak openly,  
to me, to you, and to the crew, as well.

MERCHANT

Seed of Achilles, don't make the army  
angry at me for saying what I should not,  
since I get many benefits from them  
as payback for the services I give, 800  
the sorts of things a poor man carries out.

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 comradeship with me,  
so when you speak, you must not hide from us  
anything you heard.

MERCHANT

Think of what you're doing.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I have been thinking of that for some time.

MERCHANT

I'll hold you responsible. . . . [590]

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right. Speak up.

MERCHANT

Then I'll explain it to you. That man there— 810  
he's the one the two of them are chasing,  
those men I spoke of, cruel Odysseus

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 than his comrade Diomedes.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

MERCHANT

That's something you have probably not heard,  
 so I'll explain it all. There was a prophet—  
 his name was Helenus—of noble birth,  
 a son of Priam.<sup>1</sup> One night Odysseus,  
 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,  
 he made this prophecy concerning Troy—  
 they'd never smash its mighty citadel  
 unless they could persuade Philoctetes,  
 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 then he said if he did not succeed,  
 anyone who wished should cut his head off.

---

<sup>1</sup>Priam was the king of Troy.

PHILOCTETES

Now, boy, you've heard it all, and I'd advise [620]  
that you and anyone you care about  
act now without delay.

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.<sup>1</sup>

MERCHANT

I don't know about all that.  
But I'm going back to my own ship. I pray 860  
that somehow god brings you the best of help.

*[Exit Merchant.]*

PHILOCTETES

My boy, don't you think it is 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! [630]  
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  
will say anything and attempt them all. 870  
So now I know he's sailing to this place.  
Come, my lad we should get going from here,  
so there's a wider stretch of sea between us  
and Odysseus' ship. Let's go. Well-timed haste  
brings sleep and rest after the work is done.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

---

<sup>1</sup>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).

PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

But the moment one is fleeing trouble  
is always the best time to put to sea.

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 on plundering and theft  
and using force.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, if that's what you think,  
then 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 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.  
This weapon in my hands is not a substitute.

PHILOCTETES

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, [660]  
but I want that only if it's lawful.  
If not, you should forget I ever asked.

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 910  
is yours to hold and then give back to me,  
the one who gave it to you. You can claim,  
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.<sup>1</sup> [670]

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES

I'll go in there with you. 920  
My sick condition craves your company.

*[Philoctetes and Neoptolemus enter the cave together.]*

---

<sup>1</sup>The virtuous act Philoctetes is referring to is lighting the funeral pyre for Hercules. For that favour Hercules bequeathed the bow and arrows to Philoctetes.

## CHORUS

Though I never saw it happen,  
 I have heard the distant rumour  
 how a man once stole into  
 the marriage bed of Zeus—and then  
 how the mighty son of Cronos  
 lashed him to a whirling wheel.<sup>1</sup>

But from all I've heard and seen

[680]

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,  
 he was abandoned here to die.  
 Amazement seizes me to think  
 how, as he listened by himself  
 to breakers crashing on the shore,  
 he somehow kept a hold on life,  
 which brought him so much pain.

930

940

[690]

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 cried out against the plague  
 that ate his flesh and made him bleed,  
 no one to gather healing leaves  
 when he succumbed to an attack,  
 to take them from the fertile earth  
 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

950

[700]

---

<sup>1</sup>The whirling wheel is a reference to Ixion, the first mortal charged with murder. Zeus pardoned his crime. But then Ixion attempted to seduce Zeus's wife Hera in her own bed. Zeus had Ixion tied onto a wheel of fire in Hades.

his all-consuming agonies  
eventually would subside. 960

And he could not collect his food  
by taking what the earth provides  
or any other nourishment  
for 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  
without the joy of succouring wine,  
but always for the past ten years  
he's 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,  
and moved up to the gods, ablaze  
in his own father's sacred fire.<sup>1</sup>

*[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 desire. [730]  
Why are you so silent? There's no need for that.  
Have you been paralyzed?

PHILOCTETES

Aaiiii . . . aaiii.

---

<sup>1</sup>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 and, because of his amazing exploits, he was taken up into heaven as a god.



PHILOCTETES

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's wrong?

PHILOCTETES

It's nothing serious, my boy.

990

Just keep going.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Are you in agony  
from that disease which always bothers you?

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 . . .  
Aaaiiiiii! . . . Aaaaaaiiiiii!!! . . . Aaaaaaiiiiii!!!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's troubling you now? Why not speak up?  
Why don't you tell me? It's obvious enough  
you're in some kind of pain.

[740]

PHILOCTETES

I'm done for, my boy.  
I can't conceal this dreadful thing from you . . .  
Aaiiii . . . It goes right through me . . . shooting pains.  
It's horrible . . . I'm in such agony!  
I'm being destroyed, my lad, eaten up . . .  
O my god . . . 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!

1000

[750]

NEOPTOLEMUS

What new pain makes you scream so suddenly?  
Why groan and cry like this?

PHILOCTETES

You know, my son.

1010

PHILOCTETES

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 should I do?

PHILOCTETES

Don't grow afraid and just give up on me.  
The disease attacks me only now and then,  
perhaps when it has finished roaming elsewhere.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Alas, you've had such a tormented life,  
poor man, it seems you've truly suffered  
every kind of trouble. What do you want?  
Can I help you up? Do you need my hand?

1020

[760]

PHILOCTETES

No. Don't do that. But take this bow for me—  
you just asked if I would let you hold it.  
Make sure you guard it well. Keep it safe,  
until this present fit from my disease  
gets less intense. Once the pain relents,  
I'll be overcome with sleep—it won't leave  
before that time, so let me rest in peace.  
If those two men get here while I'm asleep,  
don't give them the bow—no, by the gods,  
I tell you don't—not of your own free will,  
or without wanting to, or through a trick—

1030

[770]

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.<sup>1</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

Gods grant us both success—

a prosperous quick trip to any place [780]  
we come to in our ship 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. Aiiiii . . . aaaiii . . .  
it's really bad . . . this accursed foot . . . 1050  
it keeps tormenting me . . . creeping up my limb . . .  
it's almost here . . . aaaii, 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 through your chest! It's hard for me . . .  
Aaaiii . . . it strikes again! You two commanders—  
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 boy,

---

<sup>1</sup>This is a reference to Hercules, who also suffered a great deal in life and had an agonizing death. Philoctetes is reminding Neoptolemus that whoever owns the bow seems to get punished by the gods who are jealous of any man possessing such a weapon.

PHILOCTETES

my child, my welcome friend, take me away,  
and burn me in that famous Lemnian fire. [800]  
I thought it right to do that service once  
for Zeus's son—and in return I got  
those weapons you are holding for me now.<sup>1</sup>  
What 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 a long time now disturbed me.

PHILOCTETES

Don't worry about that, my lad. Cheer up.  
These fits are nasty but they pass off soon.  
So I beg you not to leave me here alone.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES

You will not 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.

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's no need. It would be against the law 1080  
for me to go without you.

PHILOCTETES

Give me your hand—  
a pledge of trust.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I will stay. Here's my pledge.

---

<sup>1</sup>Lemnian fire, Jebb notes, seems to be a reference to a volcanic mountain called Mosuchlos on the east coast of Lemnos, near Philoctetes's 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's bow.

PHILOCTETES

*[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—in 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 anymore.

[820]

*[PHILOCTETES collapses prone on the ground.]*

NEOPTOLEMUS

I think sleep will overcome 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.

My son, think about where you are right now  
and how you sort out where we go from here.  
Do you not 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. 1110

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]  
Take 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 prudent man could well foresee.<sup>1</sup>  
 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,  
 like someone lying with Hades.  
 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.

[860]

1140

NEOPTOLEMUS

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—  
 remain here with such sympathy and wait  
 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,  
 lift me up. Help me to my feet, lad.  
 When I recover from this dizziness,  
 we'll go to the ship and sail without delay.

1150

[870]

1160

[880]

---

<sup>1</sup>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.

## PHILOCTETES

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

PHILOCTETES

Thanks, my lad. Why not help me up yourself, as you were going to? Leave the men alone, so they don't get upset by the foul smell before they have to. It will be hard enough for them to be on board the ship with me.

[890]

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right, then. I'll take hold of you. Stand up.

PHILOCTETES

Don't worry. I'll do what I always do  
to get up on my feet.

[PHILOCTETES struggles with great difficulty to stand up. NEOPTOLEMUS watches him.]

NEOPTOLEMUS

This is dreadful—  
what am I supposed to do at this point?

PHILOCTETES

What is it, lad? Those words sound out of place.

1180

NEOPTOLEMUS

I don't know how I need to frame my words . . .  
It's so confusing . . .

PHILOCTETES

You're confused?  
No, no, my boy, don't say such things.

NEOPTOLEMUS

The position I'm in . . . it makes me feel like that.

PHILOCTETES

The disgust you feel about my sickness—

[900]



surely that feeling has not persuaded you  
not to take me on your ship?

NEOPTOLEMUS

When a man  
abandons his own nature and then acts  
against his character, all things are dreadful.

PHILOCTETES

But you, at least, by helping a good man  
have not been doing or saying anything  
your father wouldn't have done.<sup>1</sup> 1190

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'll be dishonored—  
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, [910]  
this man's intending to betray me—  
he'll leave me here and sail away. 1200

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES

What do you mean, my boy? I do not understand.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I won't conceal a thing. You must sail to Troy,

---

<sup>1</sup>Neoptolemus's father is, of course, Achilles, who establishes for him and others a standard of excellence in heroic conduct.

PHILOCTETES

back to the Achaeans and the army  
led by those 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 awful place.  
And then I'm going with you to plunder Troy.

[920]

PHILOCTETES

And that is what you really mean to do?

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's a powerful necessity at work  
controlling these events. Keep your temper  
when you hear the story.

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 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 deprive me of my bow,  
you take away my life. So hand it back.

[930]

I'm begging you. Please, my lad, return it. 1230  
 By your fathers' gods, don't rob me of 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's son,  
 which he desires 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,  
 he'd not have captured me—even as it is, 1250  
 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 whose 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

PHILOCTETES

if you will change your mind again. If not,  
I hope you die a truly wretched 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 it's not something new. No. I've felt it  
for a long time now.

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!  
What's going on here is just too painful.

[970]

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 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's voice?

ODYSSEUS [*stepping forward*]

Yes, it is Odysseus. Now you can grasp  
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 will 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 are the nastiest—  
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  
lit by Hephaestus, can you endure this—  
that this man will compel me now to leave?

ODYSSEUS

I tell you it's Zeus who rules this country.  
Yes, Zeus. And this has been ordained by Zeus. [990]  
I am his servant.

PHILOCTETES

You despicable man, 1310  
you just invent the things you wish to say,  
and by making claims about the gods,  
you turn them into liars.

PHILOCTETES

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 all 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 these steep island rocks below me. [1000]

ODYSSEUS

What will you do?

PHILOCTETES

I'll throw myself directly from this cliff  
and smash my head in on the stone 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,  
thanks to this man. And you, who cannot think  
a healthy thought that suits a man who's free, 1330

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 with deceit,  
 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 agony, a laughing stock  
 for you and those two sons of Atreus,  
 those generals 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.<sup>1</sup>  
 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 do not view me as a stinking cripple?  
 If I sail with you, how will you then  
 make holy sacrifices anymore? 1370

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<sup>1</sup>Philoctetes is contrasting his willingness to go along on the expedition to Troy with Odysseus's 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's infant son in front of the plough. Odysseus stopped before he could injure his son, thus revealing that his madness was a pretense.

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 have 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,  
 you gods who gaze on what we mortals do,  
 if you pity me, bring on your vengeance,  
 and, after these long years, pay them all back.  
 My life deserves your pity. If I could see  
 them killed, I'd think I was no longer sick.

1380 [1040]

## 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  
 who adapts himself to each occasion.  
 So, faced with being judged by good fair men,  
 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.<sup>1</sup>  
 So am I, and I believe it's possible  
 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  
 strolling here on Lemnos. We'll be on our way.  
 Your prize may quickly bring me honours  
 which should belong to you.

1390

[1050]

1400

[1060]

<sup>1</sup>Teucer, a 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*).



PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

No, not that!

You are going to march among the Argives  
equipped with weapons which belong to me?

ODYSSEUS

Don't argue with me anymore. I'm going.

PHILOCTETES

Son of Achilles, am I going to hear  
your voice say anything to me? Are you  
about to leave without another word? 1410

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 feel pity? [1070]

CHORUS

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

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 depart 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.  
In my illness, then, it does seem true,  
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 so full of painful cries

PHILOCTETES

wrung from me in my agony,  
what will each day bring to me now?  
Where will I find my nourishment [1090]  
or any hope of getting food?  
Wild pigeons will cross overhead,  
and fly on past through piercing winds—  
I can no longer shoot them down.

CHORUS

You've brought this on yourself, 1440  
ill-fated man—your grievous luck  
arises from no other source,  
nor from a man with greater strength.  
You could have been more sensible.  
But no—you'd rather have a grimmer fate  
when you might have chosen 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, for all my pain!  
I can no longer bring my food  
to where I dwell, no longer  
can I hold my feathered weapons  
in my strong hands. A crafty mind  
has tricked me with deceiving lies.  
I wish that I might see the man  
who planned 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 if you now cease to be my friend.

PHILOCTETES

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

PHILOCTETES

which fed me in my wretched life,  
which no one else had ever held. 1470  
O my lovely bow, my friend,  
wrenched from these loving hands,  
if you had power to understand, [1130]  
you'd feel such pity as you looked at me,  
for Hercules's 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,  
the effects 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 slurs. 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.  
And now you should take blood for blood,  
yes, take your time and gorge yourself  
on my contaminated flesh. 1500  
My life I'll give up soon enough.  
Where can I find my nourishment?  
For who can feed himself on winds [1160]  
once he no longer has those things  
which earth, who gives us life, provides?

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—and keep it well in mind—  
 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 within your body.

1510

PHILOCTETES

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

[1170]

1520

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

Well, 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—and every sailor move  
 to his own station onboard ship.

1530 [1180]

*[The CHORUS turns and starts moving off.]*

PHILOCTETES

No, don't go. I'm begging you,

PHILOCTETES

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 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.

Damn Troy and all those warriors there,

before the city, who dared throw away

this poor lame foot of mine. But, friends,

please grant me one request I have.

1550

[1200]

PHILOCTETES

CHORUS

What request is that?

PHILOCTETES

Give me a sword,  
if you have one there, or else an axe—  
any weapon will do.

CHORUS

What is your plan?  
Some drastic act?

PHILOCTETES

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

CHORUS

But why do that? [1210]

PHILOCTETES

To find my father.

CHORUS

Where does he live?

PHILOCTETES

He is in Hades.  
He cannot still be living in the light.  
O my city, city of my fathers,  
how I wish that I could see you now—  
I brought myself such misery  
the day I left your sacred river,  
to help Danaans, my enemies.  
I'm nothing anymore, nothing. 1570

*[PHILOCTETES exits into his cave, leaving the CHORUS alone on stage.]*

CHORUS

I'd have left you here some time ago  
and gone back to my ship, if I'd not seen  
Odysseus coming and bringing with him  
Achilles' son. They're getting close to us. [1220]

PHILOCTETES

*[Enter NEOPTOLEMUS and ODYSSEUS. NEOPTOLEMUS is still carrying Philoctetes's 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 those mistakes I made.

ODYSSEUS

You sound odd. What mistakes are those?

NEOPTOLEMUS

When I obeyed you and the entire 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? Hang on—  
Are you devising some foolhardy scheme?

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS *[interrupting]*

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

. . . whose bow I took . . .  
I'll return it.

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

PHILOCTETES

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 did not want to hear it even once.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, you must clearly understand it now— [1240]  
for 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 try to stop 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 plan to do are most imprudent.

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 and lost my honour—  
I must try to get it back.

ODYSSEUS

If you do try, [1250]  
aren't you afraid of the Achaean troops? 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.]<sup>1</sup>

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, for now I'll leave you. But I'll go  
and tell the army what is happening here.  
And they will punish you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Now you're reasonable.  
If you keep up this frame of mind in future,  
perhaps you will not stumble into trouble. [1260]

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

PHILOCTETES

*[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 Poeas . . . I'm calling you.  
Philoctetes . . . Come out. Leave that rock  
you call your home.

PHILOCTETES *[from inside the cave]*

Now who's standing there  
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 disaster 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 and 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 learn  
whether you want to stay on living here,  
enduring these conditions, or sail with us.

PHILOCTETES

Stop there. Do not speak any more. Your words  
will all be wasted.

PHILOCTETES

NEOPTOLEMUS

You are quite 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 will 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 shameless son  
of such a noble father. May you all die—  
the sons of Atreus first, then Laertes' son,  
then you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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 your weapons back.

*[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

PHILOCTETES

and the whole army, I'm telling you no,  
as gods are witnesses for me!

PHILOCTETES

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

ODYSSEUS [*moving forward*]

Yes. It is 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 mean disaster  
for both of us, for you and me.

PHILOCTETES

You should know  
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  
or complain about my conduct. 1680

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 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.  
 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.  
 Keep these words in mind. Write them on your heart.  
 You've been suffering from this affliction  
 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,  
 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  
 as the man who smashed the towers of Troy.<sup>1</sup>  
 I'll tell you how I come to know these things.  
 We took a Trojan man called Helenus,  
 an excellent prophet, who clearly states  
 these things must happen and, in addition,

1690

[1320]

1700

[1330]

1710

<sup>1</sup>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.

predicts we will seize Troy this coming summer. 1720 [1340]  
 If his words prove false, he'll offer himself,  
 quite willingly, for slaughter. And so, now  
 you understand these things, you should be willing  
 to concede. It's one more splendid honour.  
 You'll be judged the most exceptional man  
 among the Greeks—first, for coming there  
 to hands which healed you, then, more than that,  
 for capturing Troy, the 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 the light? 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 relent? If I do yield,  
 how can I, given my unhappy 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?

*[Philoctetes addresses Neoptolemus directly.]*

It's not the pain of what I have endured  
 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]  
 the mother of evil acts, it trains him  
 to deceive in everything that follows.  
 And in this matter I'm surprised at you.  
 You must never return 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.

## PHILOCTETES

Then you should keep yourself on Scyros and leave those evil men to be destroyed in their own cruel way. If you do that, you'll get double gratitude from me and from my father, too. And you won't seem because of how you helped those wicked men to have an inbred nature just like theirs.

1760 [1370]

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 disgusting foot to the Trojan plain  
and that abominable son of Atreus?

1770

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  
is frightening me. What are you saying?

[1380]

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 me or for the sons of Atreus?

1780

PHILOCTETES

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 say no more, 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—  
to take me home—do that for me, my son,  
and don't hold back or keep reminding me

1800

[1400]



PHILOCTETES

about Troy any more. I've had enough  
of howling lamentations here.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right,  
if that's what you truly 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 those men.

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 depart,  
once you have bid your island home farewell.

[*HERCULES appears above the stage.*]<sup>1</sup>

HERCULES

Not yet, son of Poeas, not until you've heard  
the words that I shall utter. Know this— [1410]  
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 1820  
and to stop the journey you're proposing.  
So pay attention now to what I say.  
First, I will inform you of my exploits,  
for by struggling with so many labours  
and by seeing my work through to the end,  
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 honour.  
With this man you will 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,  
in your native mountains, to the great joy [1430]  
of Poeas, your father. 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

---

<sup>1</sup>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. Hercules was a mortal son of Zeus, but after his death he was made a god.

PHILOCTETES

stalking prey on common ground, the two of you  
must guard each other's life. To cure your illness,  
I'll send Asclepius to Troy, which is doomed  
to fall a second time thanks to my arrows.<sup>1</sup> 1850  
But remember this—when you lay 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  
who stands revealed to me after so long!  
I will not disobey what you have said.

NEOPTOLEMUS

And I, too, will consent to this, as well. 1860

HERCULES

Then do not spend a long time waiting here.  
A stern wind will blow to urge you onward. [1450]  
The time is right to sail.

PHILOCTETES

All right, then,  
let me salute this land as I depart.  
Farewell, you cave 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 den  
the blasts from South Wind often soaked my head,  
where Mount Hermaea often echoed 1870 [1460]  
the cries I screamed out 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-encircled land of Lemnos,  
send me away content on a fair voyage,  
to the place ordained by mighty Fate,  
by opinions of my friends, and by the god  
who conquers all and has brought this about.

---

<sup>1</sup>Hercules himself had in earlier times attacked the king of Troy, Laomedon, and captured the city.

PHILOCTETES

CHORUS

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

1880 [1470]

*[They all move off together.]*