

Theater of War: A Guide for the General Reader

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Theater of War, by Bryan Doerries, is the central text for USNA's Brady Series for Leadership through the Humanities for the 2009-10 academic year. Doerries has translated two ancient Greek tragedies that address a number of surprisingly contemporary ethical issues related to warfare and military affairs in general. Staged readings of this text have drawn interest from civilian and military audiences alike. Most people encountering these plays probably have little exposure to the ancient Greek theatre, aside from perhaps a quick introduction to *Oedipus Rex* in high school. (If you, the reader, are anything like me, that was probably one of the worst classes you ever slept through.) A contemporary reader might well ask what point there is in using plays that are over two thousand years old to discuss contemporary military affairs. Other may be put off by their unfamiliarity with the formal structure of Greek tragedies and the background of the stories that *Theater of War* tells. This reader's guide attempts to offer such readers enough background to make *Theater of War* a richer reading and theatrical experience.

1. The development and function of Athenian theatre

When we refer to "Greek" theatre, what we really mean is theatre produced in Athens in the fifth century B.C., the century during which Athens rose and fell as a major regional power. While records exist for plays being produced elsewhere in Greece, the plays that we still have are Athenian. Greek tragedies have their roots in choral songs called dithyrambs, which were sung in honor of the Greek god Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. According to theatrical lore, in 550 BC a performer named Thespis stepped away from the chorus and delivered the first lines

spoken by an individual actor in the Greek theatre. By 534 BC, plays had been incorporated by the Athenian ruler, Pisistratos, into a civic and religious festival known as the City Dionysia, which was held every year in the spring. These festivities were originally held in the area of Athens known as the Agora, a public square that also served as a trade center. Around 500 BC, they were moved to theatre dedicated to Dionysus that was located on the hillside leading up to the Acropolis, the city center of Athens. The acropolis, in addition to being the original walled city of Athens, was also the symbolic center of the city, containing a multitude of major shrines and temples to the Greek gods. The City Dionysia was both a civic and a religious festival, a chance for Athenians to reflect on what they were supposed to be as individuals and, more importantly, as members of a *polis*, or city state. Because these festivals would also regularly be attended by guests from neighboring cities and countries, they also represented a chance for Athenians to show themselves to the world as they wanted to be seen.

The image the Athenians presented to the world looks both familiar and unfamiliar from our perspective. While the Athenians' democratic system of government makes it easy for contemporary American readers to see them as "our" political ancestors, the strict limitations of citizenship to property-owning males and the slave system that supported the Athenian economy may call up other historical comparisons that we might wish to avoid. War, however, remains a historical constant between the experience of ancient Athens and the contemporary United States. The early part of the century witnessed two major Athenian victories over the Persian Empire: the land battle at Marathon in 490 BC and the naval victory at Salamis in 480 BC. In the wake of these victories the Athenians overpowered the rest of Greece and continued pushing the Persians out of the region during the course of the century. Longstanding tensions between Athens and its rival, Sparta, however, flared up into the Peloponnesian War, which lasted from

431 to 404 BC and ended Athenian dominance in the region. When Athenians went to the theatre, they saw a world depicted in which war was a frequent fact of life. The Persians had captured Athens and burned the Acropolis while their fleet was being defeated at Salamis in 480 BC. The first extant play of the Athenian theatre, *The Persians* of Aeschylus, centers on the Persian emperor Xerxes learning the outcome of the naval battle. Meanwhile plays from very late in the century, such as the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles (one of the plays in *Theater of War*), suggest the toll that the Peloponnesian War was taking on the population of Athens. *Theater of War* pairs two plays by the poet Sophocles, *Ajax* (450 BC) and *Philoctetes* (409 BC), each of which pay tribute to the challenges—physical, ethical, psychological, and intellectual—that warfare and military life pose both then and now.

2. The basic elements of a Greek tragedy

In Athens, tragedies were written for competition at the Dionysia. Citizens who aspired to be poets applied to the *archon*, the public official tapped to be in charge of the festival, and the spectators would witness the work of three different playwrights over the course of three days. (Each playwright's production would be sponsored by a *choregos*, a wealthy citizen who supplied funding for costumes and masks for all of the actors, as well as expenses for training the chorus.) Each playwright was charged with composing a trilogy of tragedies and also a fourth play called a *satyr*, a rough comedy based on a mythological episode. (Satyrs, mythological creatures who were half man and half horse, were noted for their desire for wine and women.) The tragedies draw on the existing body of Greek literature for their stories, although the playwright was not absolutely bound by what others had done before them in telling the story. It is a commonplace to say that the audiences for Athenian tragedies “knew the myths” that they

were going to watch, but often these stories existed in different versions already or were adapted by the playwright, so treatments could vary widely. Much the same thing continues to happen today, especially in the mythological realm of superhero narratives. Someone who thought that the goofy, brightly colored *Batman* television series from the 1960's was the only version of the Batman story in existence would have a hard time understanding the apocalyptic vision of *The Dark Knight*, and vice versa.

As noted earlier, tragedies seem to have begun with a single actor interacting with a chorus of twelve to fifteen people. The playwright Aeschylus is credited by the philosopher Aristotle (who was writing in the next century) with adding a second actor to scenes, and his younger competitor Sophocles is credited with adding a third actor. (Aeschylus also used a third actor in his later work.) The characters played by individual actors in tragedies are generally of noble birth, while the chorus generally represents characters from lower strata of society. In the case of Sophocles' *Ajax*, for instance, the chorus is composed of men under Ajax's command.

The social standing of the protagonist (the central character in the plot's action) is critical to the structure of a Greek tragedy. In the fourth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle's work on the philosophy and history of art in the classical world, he describes the nature of the action in a tragedy as "admirable" and possessing "magnitude". The same could be said for the characters who must carry out these action of the tragedy. While it is not necessary for every protagonist in a tragedy to be a king or queen, they must hold a prominent place in their society. Tragic plots incorporate a decline from higher to lower status, or from good to bad fortune, for the protagonist, though sometimes this decline has already happened when the play begins. In *Philoctetes*, Sophocles' protagonist will have a happy ending; his misfortune has already occurred by the time the play begins.

The idea of a “tragic fall,” while important, is not the only factor that determines the nature of a tragedy. (In his collection of narrative poems, *The Canterbury Tales*, the medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer mocks the importance of the tragic fall by inventing a monk who thinks he is narrating a tragedy by just reciting a catalogue of great men who were brought low by fate.) Another key component in ancient tragedies is the protagonist’s *hamartia*, which can be translated either as “tragic flaw” or “tragic error,” which leads to the downfall of the protagonist. The *hamartia* may simply be a bad decision, or it may be an action bound up with a flaw in the character. Those who choose to translate the word as “flaw” often criticize the moral standing of the protagonist as they analyze the text; the most common character flaw discussed by such readers is *hubris*, an overbearing pride and arrogance that indicates the character does not know their proper place in the order of the universe, and which generally results in punishment. Tragedies may also feature *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. *Anagnorisis*, meaning “recognition,” indicates the point at which the protagonist recognizes their error. *Peripeteia*, meaning “reversal,” indicates that the plot appears to be moving in one direction but then changes course: Ajax vows to make peace with the Greek generals, for instance, but then chooses a very different course of action. These factors all contribute to a final essential element of a tragedy: *katharsis*. The term suggests an outpouring of pity and terror from the spectators in response to the spectacle being witnessed onstage, and while it is not the only pleasure that tragedy is meant to provide, it remains integral to our understanding of Greek tragedies that even flawed protagonists should be able to arouse powerful sympathetic feelings in the audience. In the case of Ajax and Philoctetes, the protagonists in *Theater of War*, that point is particularly important.

3. The Structure of the Theater and of a Tragedy

The Theater of Dionysus on the Acropolis was excavated from a hillside and featured amphitheatre seating; behind the stage was a temple to Dionysus. Spectators would look down onto a flat, round area known as the *orchestra*, or “dancing place,” where the chorus could dance and interact with the actors. An altar and a small raised platform, both known as the *thymele*, stood in the center of the orchestra. The orchestra could be reached on either side by means of walkways leading in from the sides. Above the orchestra was a platform stage featuring a wooden structure known as a *skene*, which derives from the Greek word for “tent”. The *skene* could be built to represent a house, a palace, or even a tent or a cave. If actors were called upon to play multiple roles in the tragedy it provided a convenient place for them to change their costumes and masks. Because the Athenians as a rule preferred not to show horrific violence onstage, it could also serve as a place for characters to go offstage and meet their violent deaths. The Athenians also developed special devices for the theatre. An *ekkyklema*, a rolling platform, could be kept inside the *skene* and rolled to the front of the stage, usually to display corpses. A crane called a *mekkane* could be used to raise and lower characters onto the stage, especially if they were meant to represent gods. The phrase *deus ex machina*, or “a god from the machine,” indicates an ending where a god arrives on the crane in a harness and solves a seemingly unsolvable human problem by divine decree. Such interactions between the gods and men were not surprising in the Athenian theatre.

Just as the theatre for which these plays were written for a theatre had a specific physical structure, the tragedies themselves followed a particular form. The play would open with a speech or a segment of interaction between individual actors, known as the *prologue*. At the conclusion of the prologue, the chorus would enter the orchestra, singing the *parodos*, or opening ode (poem). The action of the play would consist of *episodes*, in which characters interact with

each other and with the orchestra, and *stasima*, odes in which the chorus comments on the action of the play. After the completion of the final *stasimon*, the chorus would recite the *exodos*, or closing ode, and depart the orchestra. The choral odes tend to be a major stumbling block for our appreciation of Greek tragedy as modern readers. As you read, try to remember that these poems were meant to be sung and accompanied by music and dancing. These words, and the moral sentiments that they often convey, are essential to the religious component of the plays, and their recitation is important to the ritual of the performance.

4. Sophocles

The author of the two plays Bryan Doerries has translated for *Theater of War* is Sophocles, widely regarded as the greatest of the Athenian tragedians. Sophocles' life spans almost the entire fifth century BC. He was born near Athens in 496 BC, six years before the battle of Marathon, and died in 406 BC, two years before Athens surrendered to end the Peloponnesian War. The tragic poets were as a rule active in the affairs of Athens. The playwright Aeschylus fought at Marathon and Salamis, for instance. Sophocles, too young to fight at Salamis, was selected to lead the public performance of a paean (celebratory hymn) to the gods in thanks for the victory at Salamis. He became a close friend of the great Athenian leader Pericles and eventually became a member of the *strategoï*, a council of high-ranking executives in charge of overseeing the military affairs of Athens. In 413 BC, when he was in his eighties, Sophocles was appointed to a council charged with formulating a response to the disastrous results of the Athenian expedition against Sicily as part of the Peloponnesian War. Sophocles also played an important part in introducing the cult of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing, to Athens in 420 BC.

Sophocles is reported to have written over one hundred and twenty plays, of which only seven survive. He is also reported to have taken first prize at the Dionysia twenty-four times. Sophocles had a strong reputation among his contemporaries for piety, which can make his plays all the more difficult to understand for modern readers. The Greeks, as anyone who has read even a little classical mythology knows, believed that their gods took an active hand in human affairs. Sophocles' younger rival Euripides often used the stage as a means of critiquing Athenian society, and the gods in Euripides' plays can seem like cruel forces destroying human lives for the sheer pleasure of spilling the blood of lesser creatures. Sophocles' gods can seem all the more terrifying because the playwright seems to believe that they are just. This tension between cruelty and apparent justice will be quite apparent from the very opening of *Theater of War* as the goddess Athena takes her revenge on the great warrior Ajax.

5. The Epic Background

The two Sophoclean plays in *Theater of War* were written forty years apart, but they share common sources in Homer's *Iliad* and other, lost texts of the epic tradition that tell the story of the Trojan War and its aftermath. *The Iliad* begins at an advanced stage of the Trojan War, after the greatest of the Greek warriors, Achilles, has withdrawn from the field of battle over an affront to his honor. In the epic tradition women captured by armies typically become sexual slaves to their conquerors, and when the Greeks force Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus and the Greek high commander, to give up his "war bride" because the gods command it, Agamemnon subsequently seizes Briseis, a Trojan woman awarded to Achilles as a prize for valor by the army. When Achilles' best friend, Patroclus, rushes into battle wearing Achilles' armor, he is killed by Hector, the Trojan champion. Achilles flies into a murderous rage and,

newly adorned in a set of armor and weapons fashioned for him by the god Hephaestus, slays Hector in battle. As other poems record, Achilles is subsequently killed by the Trojan prince Paris and the god Apollo. Two of the Greeks, Ajax and Odysseus, rescue his body and armor, and a vote is held among the Greek commanders to determine which of the two men will be awarded the arms as a trophy. Odysseus wins, despite Ajax's superior reputation for valor. The arms of Achilles will have a role to play in both of the plays in *Theater of War*.

6. *Ajax*

Ajax, the first play in *Theater of War*, begins in the aftermath of the Greek generals' decision to award the honored prize of Achilles' arms to Odysseus rather than Ajax. The Greek army at Troy did not operate under the tight chain of command used by modern militaries; each warrior had signed on for the exhibition of their own free will and brought their own troops with them. Achilles' earlier withdrawal from the fight after being dishonored by Agamemnon, while detrimental to the Greeks, was within his rights. The case of Ajax tests the conflict between the rights of the individual and his society to an extreme that exceeds that of Achilles. As the play begins, the audience learns from the discussion between Odysseus and Athena that Ajax has sought to murder the Greek commanders, as well as his rival Odysseus.

Odysseus, who provides a crucial connection between the two plays of *Theater of War*, is one of the most complicated characters in all of literature. In Homer's epics he is renowned not only for his courage and prowess in battle, but also for his remarkable skill as a speaker and a diplomat. He is spoken of as a man of "twists and turns" in the first book of *The Odyssey*, a reminder of his cunning and his remarkable skill at improvising his way out of difficult circumstances. His skill with words, however, also renders him potentially untrustworthy. He is

literature's greatest trickster and escape artist, but he is also literature's most famous liar, and Sophocles' portrayal of him as somewhat cowardly in the *Ajax* contrasts him with Ajax's honesty. Athena is not only the patron goddess of Odysseus, but also of the city of Athens. She is a goddess of war, of public health, of all the useful arts, and of wisdom. She is also one of the Greek gods most likely to punish humans for their *hubris*, as evidenced by her dreadful punishment of Ajax for his assertions that human heroism can prevail without divine aid.

Odysseus, like his patron Athena, is known for his wisdom as well as his guile. Ajax, as he is depicted in Homer, is known chiefly for valor rather than for his wisdom, so Sophocles' decision to make Ajax an intelligent man as well as a fierce combatant is a change in his character. As the first scene of the play makes clear, Ajax is a bulwark of the Greek army, second only to the dead Achilles, who was a demigod, the child of a divine mother and a human father. Ajax is most commonly associated with his huge and nearly impenetrable shield; by the process of metonymy the object becomes a metaphor for his brave defense of the Greek army. Ajax's homeland of Salamis, it should be noted, was an Athenian territory, so in honoring Ajax Athenians were honoring someone they considered to be an ancestor. Before the battle of Salamis the Greeks prayed to Ajax along with the gods for aid in defeating the Persians, for instance, and one of the ten tribes into which Athenian citizens organized themselves was named after Ajax. The *hamartia* of excessive wrath that he displays in the episode of the cattle massacre, then, is all the more shocking given the nobility usually associated with his character.

The presence of Teucer, Ajax's half-brother, produces a contrasting pair of sets of brothers in the play, with Ajax and Teucer on one side and Agamemnon and Menelaus, the chief generals, on the other. Teucer is the child of their father's exploits in the first sack of Troy under the command of the Greek hero Heracles (Hercules). Telamon took Teucer's mother, the Trojan

princess Hesione, as a war bride. As a result, Teucer is related to the rulers of the city of Troy against whom he is fighting—although his only loyalties seem to be to Ajax and to their father.

Agamemnon and Menelaus have their own complicated heritage. Both are the sons of Atreus, a man cursed by the gods for having murdered his brother Thyestes' sons and served them to their father at dinner after discovering that Thyestes had been committing adultery with his wife. Atreus' sons seem carry the curse upon them. Menelaus marries the beautiful Helen, the cause of the Trojan War, although at the conclusion of the war he and Helen will return home safely. Agamemnon will be murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, Helen's sister, when he returns home from Troy. In Homer the brothers are, like all the Greek warriors, heroic—certainly more heroic than Sophocles portrays them. It is worth considering that at the end of the play they are not only aggrieved by Ajax's attempt to murder them, but also faced with the difficulty of maintaining order within their forces. The pride and desire for revenge they display are, in many ways, mirror images of Ajax's own actions.

Rounding out the cast is Tecmessa, Ajax's war bride, and their child Eurysaces. Tecmessa is the daughter of the king of Phrygia, an ally of the Trojans. Ajax kills her father but, captivated by her beauty, takes her as his war bride. Tecmessa's presence provides a greater sense of the human impact that the war has on people other than the men on the field. For readers who, like the psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, author of *Achilles in Vietnam*, see similarities between Ajax and modern soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Tecmessa's presence also serves as a reminder that the damage that war does to some veterans does not stop when they leave the battlefield. During the play, when Ajax, whose name is *Aias* in Greek, punningly compares his name to a cry of pain (*Ai* in Greek), Tecmessa's distress over his condition is a reminder that the suffering implied by his name is not exclusively his.

The result of Ajax's initial suffering, his failed assault on the Greek commanders, is a particularly affecting moment. Madness, to a Greek audience, could readily have been the result of a god's anger, a moment when a divine influence overcomes the human spirit and controls the body like a puppet. In the case of Ajax's madness, the possession is not total. Athena merely clouds Ajax's vision, leading him into the delusional belief that he has overcome his enemies when he is, in fact, merely butchering cattle and oxen. Ajax is tricked twice, of course, because Athena also shields Odysseus from Ajax's vision. (This is a common occurrence in Greek literature: Athena frequently hides or disguises Odysseus in *The Odyssey*.) Oxen and cattle were commonly used in sacrifices to the gods, and also in funeral rituals. An Athenian audience could hardly fail to recall that sacrifices of such animals would have recently occurred at the Temple to Dionysus located behind the theater. Indeed, the revelation of Ajax, probably on an *ekkyklema*, offers the possibility that the actor portraying Ajax was wheeled out surrounded by a heap of sacrificial carcasses from the temple, a truly gruesome spectacle. The image of the fierce warrior slaughtering these cattle suggests a perversion of the rite known as the hecatomb, the slaughter of one hundred cattle sometimes dedicated to a god, including Athena. Ajax thus seems to be perversely honoring the goddess for allowing the vengeance that she has, in fact, denied him. His intended slaughter of the Greek commanders and Odysseus, moreover, recalls the vengeance that Achilles took on the Trojans after the death of Patroclus. In addition to sacrificing the usual animals as part of the commemoration of his friend, Achilles slaughter a dozen Trojan warriors in what can only be described as a ritual revenge killing.

The lifting of Ajax's madness leads to one of the more brutal moments of *anagnorisis* in the Greek tragic canon. His wrathful decision to attack the army, while not treasonous in a modern sense, is an instance of uncontrolled anger that costs him the good will of the other

Greeks. Any loss of honor he has suffered from the potentially fixed contest over the arms of Achilles has only been made worse by his desire for revenge. The uncontrolled lapse into madness adds to the warrior's sense of shame and dishonor, and the exertion of violence on docile, brute beasts rather than real enemies only completes Ajax's shaming. The night attack on the Greeks and the slaughter of the animals contrast with the two noble moments cited by Teucer in defending Ajax's memory: the hero's bold defense of the endangered Greek ships from a Trojan assault and his ritualized single combat against Hector, which resulted in an exchange of gifts that ultimately proved a misfortune to both men.

Ajax's suicide as a response to his dishonor is troubling since he has just vowed to reconcile himself to both the army and the god before venturing off alone to kill himself. Does he intend to kill himself the entire time after he emerges from his tent, or does he only decide it later? Does he kill himself of his own volition, or is it another act of madness as part of Athena's revenge? These questions are open to debate, but perhaps ultimately unresolvable. Given the revelation that Athena's displeasure with Ajax stems from his displays of *hubris*, it is perhaps no surprise that this bold man who shuns the help of the gods themselves in battle should choose death to the act of humbling himself before the political enemies he tried to kill—not to mention the goddess who has reduced him to this state of torment. His use of Hector's sword, both the emblem of his greatest triumph and a reminder of the honor he last lost before the walls of Troy, effectively reduces his death to a sacrifice that is both noble and as pointless as the grotesque slaughter of the cattle. It is ironic that at the moment of his self-destruction with this sword, Ajax bequeaths to Eurysaces his powerful shield, the same one that sheltered his brother Teucer in battle and symbolized his powerful defense of the Greek army. As both Teucer and Tecmessa make clear, of course, his loss will leave all those who depend upon him defenseless.

While the lengthy ending of the play following Ajax's suicide may not hold the attention of the modern reader with the intensity of the play's opening or Ajax's suicide, the conclusion of the play remains important to its structure. The right to control a hero's corpse and the potential mistreatment of the remains is a major concern in a number of Greek texts, including Sophocles' play *Antigone*. Teucer's arguments with Menelaus and Agamemnon also raise serious issues about the nature of military command and the potential conflicts between human and divine law. Moreover, given the enormity of Ajax's misdeeds, these extended arguments are dramatically necessary to recuperate a hero that the city of Athens had claimed as one of its own. Odysseus' decision to support the burial of the body also recuperates his character, proving that he is not entirely without honor and gratitude. It also provides a reconciliation for the two heroes that Homer did not afford: when Odysseus is forced to visit Hades in *The Odyssey*, he encounters the ghost of Ajax, but Ajax turns away and refuses to speak to him. In *Theater of War*, of course, this recuperation of Odysseus only prepares the way for more twists and turns in his character in the second play, *Philoctetes*

7. *Philoctetes*

Sophocles wrote *Philoctetes* near the end of his life, during a period after the Peloponnesian War had begun to go badly for Athens. The sense of crisis that surrounds the mission undertaken by the characters of Odysseus and Neoptolemus in this play, which takes place near what will finally be the end of the Trojan War, could potentially be viewed as a comment on the state of contemporary Athens. When early in the Sophoclean script Odysseus invokes Athena in hopes that she will aid his cause, he prays to her in two of her well-known forms: as the goddess of *nike*, or victory, and as the patron goddess of Athens. Temples to

Athena in both of these forms stood in the Acropolis, as the audience would surely have known. Odysseus makes clear during the play that his only goal in any scenario is “victory,” regardless of the moral cost, but as he is not an Athenian his invocation of Athena as the patron goddess of Athens seems to have more to do with the world of the audience than the world onstage.

Strictly within the realm of the play Odysseus and Neoptolemus have found themselves on a mission that was frequently chronicled by the Greek tragedians: the return of the outcast Philoctetes to the Greek army. Philoctetes’ story was treated not only by Sophocles, but also by Aeschylus and by Euripides. (Only Sophocles’ play is extant, unfortunately.) Philoctetes’ story begins, as does the story of Ajax, with the award of a prize for honor, in this case at the death of Heracles. Heracles at the end of his life is given a robe laced with a caustic poison, and once he is stricken by the poison he builds his own funeral pyre, which only Philoctetes (or in some accounts his father) is willing to light for the great hero. As a reward, Philoctetes is awarded the bow of Heracles, which as the play states repeatedly never misses its mark. This divine gift is matched, sadly, by a curse in the form of Philoctetes’ injured foot, about which several conflicting explanations exist in Greek myth. In the version of the story used by Sophocles, Philoctetes volunteered to act as a guide for the Greeks when they stopped en route to Troy on the island of Chryse to sacrifice to the local deity. He was bitten by the sacred serpent that guarded the shrine, and his wound became so severe that the smell and sight of his foot became abhorrent to the rest of the army, and his cries of pain grew so loud and terrible that the army was no longer able to conduct sacrificial rituals. Given the importance of such rites to Greek piety and the importance of the favor of the gods to victory against Troy, the army chose to strand Philoctetes on the island of Lemnos.

Lemnos was an important site in Greek mythology as it was the purported site of the forge of Hephaestus, the god of metal-working and especially of arms-making. (This location seems doubly appropriate given the divine power of Philoctetes' bow and its importance to the impending Greek victory at Troy.) Sophocles makes an interesting choice in his adaptation of the myth in his characterization of Lemnos as a desolate, unoccupied island. Lemnos was, in fact, occupied, as any contemporary viewer would have known. Sophocles seems to have put Philoctetes on a desert island to emphasize the tremendous isolation and barrenness of his life as an outcast.

The experience of isolation has clearly taken a terrible toll on Philoctetes. It is obvious in part based on the dreadful loneliness exhibited when he first encounters the chorus of sailors and Neoptolemus that he is starved for the sound of his own language, which he hears only when ships accidentally find themselves moored at Lemnos. In his having been wronged, his terrible sense of isolation, and his homicidal grudge against Odysseus, Philoctetes somewhat resembles Ajax. Philoctetes, however, is perhaps a more sympathetic figure of traumatic experience than Ajax: the wrong he has suffered at the hands of his countrymen is obvious, since without his magical bow his stranding on Lemnos would have been a death sentence. He has, however, become an even more savage figure than Ajax in some ways; the world of mankind has dwindled to a population of one for Philoctetes. He becomes the representative figure of man separated from the civilizing bonds of the *polis*, reduced to a savage state of nature where he knows only the physical pain of his wound and the psychological pain of his wrongs at the hands of the Greeks. Even when he is offered the prophecy of being cured of his wound by returning to Troy, albeit by representatives of an army he no longer trusts, Philoctetes cannot imagine living down the shame of seeing the men who stranded him on the island again. Moreover, in his own mind

his life is over. He describes himself as “a wisp of smoke, / a human shell, / a decomposing corpse” (112), a being whose present and future are defined for him solely by his past betrayal and the lingering wound of his foot, which he repeatedly implores his visitors to chop off.

Even though Philoctetes appears to be a broken man divorced from human society, he has one virtue left: his unswerving honesty. Even if he is mistaken, he never hides his thoughts and opinions for any sort of gain in the play. (What, indeed, could he hope to gain by doing so?) This point is of particular interest because it also seems to set him apart from all the other Greeks in the play, who dissemble to greater or lesser extents in their attempts to get him to rejoin the army. Such behavior is hardly a surprise from Odysseus, who is even willing to have Neoptolemus heap the most terrible insults upon his honor, so long as it retrieves the bow and the man who wields it. The chorus of sailors never reveals the true nature of their mission to Philoctetes, and the use of a sailor disguised as a merchant to assist Neoptolemus’ gambit is a trick very much worthy of Odysseus’ reputation for subterfuge. Sophocles, then, sets up a clear dichotomy in the play between Odysseus, who is concerned only with *nike* (victory), and Philoctetes, who has retained his honesty but lost much of his humanity. To balance out these two worldviews, Sophocles inserts the figure of Neoptolemus.¹

Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, was too young to join the expedition for Troy when his father left. He was recruited to join the war by a diplomatic deputation from the Greek army led by Odysseus and Phoenix, Achilles’ former tutor, who is also mentioned in *Philoctetes*. In some versions of the Troy story, Neoptolemus has a reputation for being a savage and merciless warrior. Readers familiar with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* may recall the Player’s speech that describes how Pyrrhus (another name for Neoptolemus) hunts down the aged Trojan king Priam

¹ In most accounts of this story, Odysseus goes himself or is accompanied by Diomedes, another hero from *The Iliad*.

and brutally slays him. The Neoptolemus presented by Sophocles, however, is an as-yet-unformed young man whose moral allegiance is still up for grabs. His decisions form the moral center of the play, and his emergence as a responsible man provides a second major theme in the play, alongside the battle between the worldviews of Philoctetes and Odysseus.

Philoctetes is cleverly balanced between Odysseus and Philoctetes. Like Philoctetes, he feels that he has been wronged by Odysseus and the Greek commanders in the matter of his father's weapons, a detail that also ties him to Ajax. Like Odysseus, however, he also has a mission, and he aspires to victory and glory. His lack of reputation may explain why he initially agrees to Odysseus' strategy of deceiving Philoctetes into getting aboard a ship and sailing him to Troy, since Odysseus holds out the prospect of his being recognized for both bravery and intelligence. As the play makes clear, however, Odysseus' strategizing goes against Neoptolemus' *phusis*, a word suggesting both innate nature and birth (social standing). As the noble son of a noble father, Neoptolemus finds himself incapable of carrying out Odysseus' stratagems without revealing the true nature of his mission to Philoctetes. Of course, Odysseus proves to be correct in that Neoptolemus cannot persuade Philoctetes to join the war through honest means, as he hopes. Philoctetes' stubbornness allows Neoptolemus to demonstrate his nobility when he rejects the opportunity for glory and risks the safety of his homeland by returning the bow to Philoctetes and promising to sail him back to Greece. Of course, by doing so both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes would be defying the will of the gods, which leaves the playwright in a serious bind.

Luckily for Sophocles, such difficult situations as this one can be resolved through the *deus ex machina*. The realm of the supernatural has already entered the play in the form of the two sons of Asclepius who are destined to heal Philoctetes of his wound at Troy. Asclepius was

the demigod son of Apollo and a human woman who became legendary as a healer and after was eventually elevated to the rank of a deity in the Greek pantheon. Sophocles, as mentioned earlier, had played an important role in introducing the cult of Asclepius to Athens. Although Asclepius' legacy of healing will be critical to subsequent events and the play's allusion to him clearly plays off the relatively recent arrival of Asclepius worship in Athens, the healing god cannot heal the breach between Philoctetes and the Greeks, even for the sake of the young man who calls Philoctetes his only friend.

Sophocles therefore chooses to bring in Heracles, who was like Asclepius deified after his death, to command the man who now wields his bow. The appearance of Heracles brings the story of Philoctetes as we know it so far full circle. The original possessor of the bow now appears to command its new master into battle, where Philoctetes will take Troy just as Heracles did in his lifetime. Philoctetes received the bow because of an act of compassion that ended Heracles' sufferings, and Heracles now commands Philoctetes to leave Lemnos and be healed. (It should be noted that the foot is not healed at the end of the play; the crew of the ship that takes Philoctetes to Troy will have to endure his screams and the stench of his foot, which the original Greek expedition could not bear.) Heracles' final injunction also establishes him as a heroic paradigm for Philoctetes, one who combined heroism and great suffering. Philoctetes has already shown tremendous fortitude in enduring pain and solitude for ten years; by returning to the Greek host he will, like Heracles, perform great deeds with his bow.

8. *Theater of War*

The two plays that Bryan Doerries has brought together in *Theater of War* were written decades apart and were not intended to be performed together. Since tragedies were composed in

trilogies, each of these plays has two original companion pieces that have been lost. By bringing them together, however, Doerries has conjoined two powerful tales of tragic suffering. One ends with a terrible downfall, and the other with the prospect of a joyous victory. As you read the plays, consider how these two plays and their characters speak back and forth to each other.

In his translation, Doerries has produced a text that speaks more directly to a modern experience of war than many other translations of these plays. This effort is evident immediately in his use of contemporary military terminology such as “affirmative,” and “body bag”.

Likewise, whereas Menelaus and Agamemnon are generally referred to in Sophocles as “the Atreidae,” or sons of Atreus, Doerries’ warriors refer to them as “the generals,” a substitution that is both easier for a modern reader to grasp and one that emphasizes the greater and more depersonalized distance between today’s soldier and their command structure. Across over two millennia, these plays can still speak to us about the hard lessons of war and the nature of leadership. Sophocles wrote as a man with military experience who during his lifetime had known decades of war against both Persians and fellow Greeks. As you read, ask yourself what he was trying to say to his fellow Athenians and what his plays might still be able to tell us today.