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

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.

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 abandon on Lemnos.
SAILOR: attendant on Neoptolemus.
CHORUS: sailors from Neoptolemus’ ship.*
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’ cave. The opening to the cave is on stage, above the level of the orchestra. Enter into the orchestra ODYSSEUS and NEOPTOLEMUS with a SAILOR attending on Neoptolemus]

ODYSSEUS

So here we are on the shores of Lemnos, a lonely place—well off the beaten track, surrounded by the sea. No one lives here. This was this place, Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, bravest and best of all the Greeks, where, many years ago, I left Philoctetes, son of Poeas, a man from Malis. I abandoned him, acting on orders from our two commanders.*

His foot was dripping with infectious sores, painful ulcers. He kept screaming all the time. 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 long 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 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 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. [20]

[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 mentioned.
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.

ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

What you describe must be 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.

His foot is crippled with that old disease.

He can’t go far. He’s gone to find some food 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,
you must be loyal to your ancestry.
That’s more than something merely physical.
If you hear a plan you’ve not heard before
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—
in their prayers they summoned you from home
to Troy, since you’re the only hope they’ve got
to take the city. But then they judged you
not good enough to have Achilles’ arms,
although you came to claim them as your right.
Instead they gave them to Odysseus.
Say what you like of me—pile up the insults,
the worst there are. That won’t injure me.
But if you don’t go through with what I say,
you’ll hurt the Argives, every one of them.
If we don’t get our hands on that man’s bow,
you’ll never capture Troy successfully,
ever destroy the realm of Dardanus.*
Let me tell you why you can talk to him
and safely win his trust, while I cannot.
You’ve joined the Trojan expedition freely—
you’d made no oath to anyone. In fact,
you weren’t a member of that first contingent.*
But I was, and I can’t deny the fact.
If he sees me while he still has his bow,
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.
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 without a sense of shame. In time to come they will 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 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. 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.

NEOPTOLEMUS
What are your orders, then, apart from lying?

ODYSSEUS
I’m ordering you to use deceitful means to seize Philoctetes.

NEOPTOLEMUS
But why deceit?

Why not persuade him?

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

NEOPTOLEMUS
Is he that confident, that powerful?

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

NEOPTOLEMUS
I have no chance at all if I move out to challenge him?

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

No, I don’t—not if the lies will save us.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But how can anyone control his face 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 am not the one who’ll take that city, as you told me?

ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

ODYSSEUS

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right, I’ll do it. I’ll set all shame aside.

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’ 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
who rules with Zeus’ godlike sceptre
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
when I give you the sign. Try to help me.
Provide whatever aid I may require.

CHORUS
My lord, this help you talk about
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,
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.

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

NEOPTOLEMUS
I think that’s clear.
He’s dragging his foot along some place nearby,
looking for things to eat. I’ve heard it said
that that’s the way he usually lives,
In his 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,
and no companion’s face to see,
he lives a miserable life,
alone, always alone,
infected with a cruel disease,
confused about what he should do
to cope with every pressing need.
How does he bear a fate so grim?
It is the workings of the gods.
What a wretched race of men they are
whose life exceeds due measure.

This man Philoctetes,
for all we know, is just as good
as any member of the finest clan.
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.
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.

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.
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
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.

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.

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES

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

NEOPTOLEMUS

Did you take part in that great enterprise?

PHILOCTETES

My boy, you mean you don't know who I am, you have no clue who you are looking at?

NEOPTOLEMUS

How can I know a man I've never seen?

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, 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, the man who stands here right in front of you is someone you perhaps have heard about as master of the arms of Hercules. 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.* I was bitten by a savage deadly snake. Our fleet had sailed from Chryse by the sea. 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 my storms of pain had passed and I was sleeping, they were so happy to abandon me under an overhanging rock, here onshore, setting out some rags, some scraps of food, a pittance—enough to please a beggar. I hope they get the treatment they gave me! My boy, can you imagine how I felt after my sleep that day, when I awoke, when I got up to find they’d disappeared? How I wept, how I cried out in distress, when I saw the ships on which I’d sailed had all gone off, with no one else around, 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,
by shooting birds as they passed overhead. Each time an arrow flew out from this string 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 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, 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. 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, once I suggested it—take me safely home. This is the tenth year of my misery, 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 how bad the sons of Atreus can be, and Odysseus’ brutality as well.

PHILOCTETES
What’s that? You mean you, too, have complaints against those 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.*

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

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

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.

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,
onece 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 we had reached Sigeum, that bitter place.* 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, I went to Atreus’ sons, as friends of mine, or so I thought, to claim my father’s arms 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 to another man rather than to me without even bothering to tell me?” 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. 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, 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 depends completely on those in control, and so must all the army. And when people
grow unruly, it’s what their teachers say
that makes them so corrupt. That’s my story,
all I have to tell. If there’s anyone
who hates those sons of Atreus, I hope
the gods will cherish him the way I do.

CHORUS
All-nourishing mountain mother Earth,
mother of Zeus himself,
you who live and rule
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
on your splendid decorated throne,
where carved-out lions slaughter bulls.*

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.
No, what you’ve said does not surprise me,
though I do wonder how great Ajax,
if he was there, could bear to witness it.

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

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

NEOPTOLEMUS
He’s dead and gone. Imagine Ajax
no longer standing in the sunlight.

PHILOCTETES
No, no. It’s dreadful. But Diomedes,
son of Tydeus, and that Odysseus,
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.*

NEOPTOLEMUS
No they won't. That's something you can count on.
In fact, right now within the Argive army
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.

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

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

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

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 was also dead. 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?

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.
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.
Somehow with all those stubborn criminals
they like to turn them back from Hades,
while always sending good and righteous men
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
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.
Now, I’ll get back to my ship. Farewell,
Philoctetes—as best you can fare well.
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,
not alone like this, living helplessly
in such distress. You see what this is like.
You’ve heard how much I suffer. Think of me
as something incidental. Yes, I know
you have a great disgust for such a load.
But even so, bear with it. Noble minds
find unkind deeds disgraceful and 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
the greatest tribute given to honour,
if I can reach Oeta’s land alive.
Come, not even one full day of trouble.
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,
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
Oeta, the Trachian 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,
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
who can carry me and be my messenger.
Have mercy, and rescue me! Bear in mind
how everything for human beings is strange
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
will ever have to undergo.
And if, my lord, you hate
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.
That’s easy. But later, when you’ve had your fill
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.
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,
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
the very sight of it would have convinced
anyone but me to give up this ordeal.
But from necessity I’ve had to learn
to bear such misery.

[Philoctetes starts to lead Neoptolemus up to his cave]

CHORUS
Wait a moment!
Two men are coming. We should talk to them.
One’s a sailor from your ship, the other one
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,
to tell me where I might run into you.
I did not intend to have this meeting,
since I was driven to this very coast
by chance. I’ve been sailing my own ship
without much company on my way home,
back from Troy to wine-rich Peparethus.
But once I heard that all these sailors here
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
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.

MERchant

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

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?

MERCHANT
He was getting ready,
along with Tydeus’ son, to apprehend
some other man, just as I was leaving.*

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.

MERCHANT
Then question me no more. Get out of here.
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.
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,
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. . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS
All right. Speak up.

MERCHANT
Then I’ll explain it to you. That man there—he’s the one the two of them are chasing, those men I spoke of, 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. 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. Now, boy, you’ve heard it all, and I’d advise 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.*

MERCHANT

I don’t know about all that. But I’m going back to my own ship. I pray 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! 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. 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.
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.

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

NEOPTOLEMUS
Well, if that’s what you think,
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
until it is completely cured.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Bring that. 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.

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.
NEOPTOLEMUS
   I’d love to hold it, 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 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.*

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. My sick condition craves your company.

[Philoctetes and Neoptolemus enter the cave together]

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

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 his all-consuming agonies eventually would subside.

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 he eased his hunger with a meal he got himself with feathered arrows from his swiftly striking bow. He’s lived a miserable life, 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. 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, 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.*
[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. Why are you so silent? There’s no need for that. Have you been paralyzed?

PHILOCTETES
Aaiii . . . aaiii.

NEOPTOLEMUS
What’s wrong?

PHILOCTETES
It’s nothing serious, my boy. 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 . . . Aaaaiiiii! . . . Aaaaaiiiiii!!! . . . Aaaaaiiiiiiiiiii!

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.

PHILOCTETES
I’m done for, my boy. I can’t conceal this dreadful thing from you . . . Aaiiiii . . . 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 have 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!

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

PHILOCTETES
You know, my son.

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? Aaaaiiiii!

NEOPTOLEMUS
It’s the agonizing weight of your disease.

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

NEOPTOLEMUS
What shall I do?

PHILOCTETES
Don’t 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 really suffered every kind of trouble. What do you want? Can I help you up? Do you need my hand?

PHILOCTETES
No. Don’t do that. But take this bow for me—you just asked 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—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,
in case this bow brings you much suffering,
as it has me and the man who owned it
before I did.*

NEOPTOLEMUS

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

PHILOCTETES [still in great pain]

My boy, I'm afraid your prayers are useless.
Dark red blood is dripping down, oozing out
from deep within my sore, and I expect
there'll be new attack. Aiiiii . . . aaiii . . .
it's really bad . . . this accursed foot . . .
it keeps tormenting me . . . creeping up my limb . . .
it's almost here . . . aaiii, it hurts so much . . .
You know what's going on—don't abandon me,
don't leave . . . aaaaaiii . . . 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 . . .
Aaaaii . . . it strikes again! You two commanders—
you, Agamemnon and Menelaus,
may this disease feed on the pair of you
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,
my child, my welcome friend, take me away,
and burn me in that famous Lemnian fire.*

I thought it right to do that service once
for Zeus' son—and in return I got
those weapons you are holding for me now.
What do you say, lad? What do you say?
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.

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
for me to go without you.

PHILOCTETES
Give me your hand—
a pledge of trust.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I will stay. Here's my pledge.

[NEOPTOLEMUS and PHILOCTETES shake hands. Then a new fit attacks
PHILOCTETES, and he falls to his knees]

PHILOCTETES
Take me back . . . in there.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Where do you mean?

PHILOCTETES [indicating the opening to the cave above them]
Up there . . . 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 any more. [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,
and bring him happiness.

Hold before his eyes that light
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,
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
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.
Take it without alerting him.
If you hold to what you intend for him—and you know clearly what I mean—then there are surely going to be some desperate problems facing us, which a shrewd man could well foresee.*
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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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—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.

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,
this man’s intending to betray me—
he’ll leave me here and sail away.

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

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

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

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.

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.

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.
I’m begging you. Please, my lad, return it.
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,
Achilles’ son, who made me a promise he’d take me home and who now leads me off to Troy. With his right hand he pledged his word, then took my bow and keeps it for himself, the sacred bow of Hercules, Zeus’ son, which he 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, 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, 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,
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
no sense of evil. May you perish, too!
But no, not quite yet, not before I see
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.

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.

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.
PHILOCTETES
Who’s that? Do I hear Odysseus’ 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
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.
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.
I am his servant.

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

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.

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,
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,
and he’s already showing his remorse
for mistakes he’s made and what I’ve suffered.
Your vicious spirit, always peering out
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,
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.*
A complete disaster! They threw me out,
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,
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?
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.

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.*

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.

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?

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?

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. 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 leave from here at once.

[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. Alas, for me! Yes, for me!

Sad cave so full of painful cries wrung from me in my agony, what will each day bring to me now? Where will I find my nourishment 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, 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.

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, 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!

CHORUS
This is your fate set by the gods. You’ve not been tricked by hands of mine. So aim your dreadful fatal curse 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
which fed me in my wretched life,
which no one else had ever held.
O my lovely bow, my friend,
wrenched from these loving hands,
if you had power to understand,
you’d feel such pity as you looked on me,
for Hercules’ friend no more
will from now on be using you.
Another man will handle you,
a man of much deceit. You’ll see
his shameless tricks, his hateful face,
that enemy whom I despise,
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,
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,
no longer will you spring from me
and run away from your own dens.
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.
My life I’ll give up soon enough.
Where can I find my nourishment?
For who can feed himself on winds,
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.

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?

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

CHORUS
What do you mean?

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.

[The CHORUS turns and starts moving off]

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

CHORUS
Calm down.

PHILOCTETES
O strangers, by the gods, stay here.

CHORUS
Why are you calling?

PHILOCTETES
Aaaaiiii . . . aaaaaiii . . .
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!

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.

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.

CHORUS
    But why do that?

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.

[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.

[Enter NEOPTOLEMUS and ODYSSEUS. NEOPTOLEMUS is still carrying Philoctetes’ bow and arrows]

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

NEOPTOLEMUS
I was wrong before.
I have to fix all those mistakes I made.

ODYSSEUS
You sound odd. What mistakes are those?

NEOPTOLEMUS
When I obeyed you and the entire army.

ODYSSEUS
What error did you make that shamed you so?

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

ODYSSEUS
What sort of man? Oh, oh.
Are you devising some foolhardy scheme?

NEOPTOLEMUS
No, nothing rash. But with Poeas’ son . . .

ODYSSEUS [interrupting]
What are you going to do? A certain fear
has just occurred to me . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS
. . . whose bow I took . . .
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.

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—
for you’ve heard all I have to say.

ODYSSEUS
There are those
who will prevent you carrying that out.

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,
    aren’t you afraid of the Achaean troops? [1250]

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.]*

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 wander into trouble. [1260]

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

NEOPTOLEMUS [calling up to the cave]
    You there, son of 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?

PHILOCTETES

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

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.

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. You’ll never win my confidence, not now 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
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.

PHILOCTETES

I agree.

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.*
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, predicts we will seize Troy this coming summer. 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 that 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, gazing at the light? Why not release me, send me down to Hades? What shall I do? 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, 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 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 and should prevent me going there. Those men did you an injury by taking away your father's weapons, when, in that contest for his arms, they judged heart-broken Ajax inferior to Odysseus. After that, will you fight as their ally and force me to do so, too? Do not do it, my son, but take me home, as you have sworn to do. Then you should keep yourself on Scyros and leave those 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.

NEOPTOLEMUS
What you say makes good sense. But 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?

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?

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?

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?

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 about Troy any more. I’ve had enough of howling laments 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 . . .

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]*

HERCULES  
    Not yet, son of Poeas, not until you've heard  
    the words that I shall utter. Know this—  
    you're listening to the voice of Hercules  
    and you're gazing on his face. For your sake  
    I have left the throne of heaven and come  
    to announce to you the purposes of Zeus  
    and to stop the journey you're proposing.  
    So pay attention now to what I say.  
    First, I will 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,  
    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,  
    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  
    of Poeas, your father. Whatever prizes
you get from the army, select from them
an offering for my bow and carry it
to my funeral pyre. Son of Achilles,
this advice I’m giving is for you, as well.
You are not strong enough to capture Troy
without this man, and he’s not strong enough
without you there. Like a pair of lions
stalking prey on common ground, 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.*
But remember this—when you lay waste that land,
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.

HERCULES
Then do not spend a long time waiting here.
A stern wind will blow to urge you onward.
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
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.

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.

[They all move off together]

NOTES

*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. [Back to Text]

*The two commanders of the Argive expedition to Troy were the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus. [Back to Text]

*Dardanus, a son of Zeus, was the legendary founder of Troy. [Back to Text]

*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. [Back to Text]

*The Achaean forces had learned by prophecy that they needed Neoptolemus and the bow of Philoctetes to capture Troy. [Back to Text]

*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. [Back to Text]

*Cephalenian was an island in Odysseus’ kingdom, but the name is often applied to his territory generally (and his soldiers are commonly called the Cephalenians). [Back to Text]

*Menelaus is king of Sparta, and Agamemnon is king of Mycenae. Neoptolemus was born and raised on the island of Scyros. [Back to Text]

*Sigeum was a prominent coastal location northwest of Troy. [Back to Text]

*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. [Back to Text]

*Sisyphus, the founder of Corinth, was famous for his devious ways. According to one story very popular among Odysseus’ enemies, he was the father of Odysseus and sold his mother to Laertes while Odysseus was still in the womb. Diomedes was a close comrade of Odysseus. [Back to Text]

*Thersites, the only common soldier described in detail in Homer’s Iliad, was well known for his abuse of his superiors. He gives a lengthy speech insulting Agamemnon. [Back to Text]

*Tydeus’ son is a reference to the famous Greek warrior Diomedes, a frequent companion of Odysseus on various adventures. [Back to Text]

*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). [Back to Text]

*The virtuous act Philoctetes is referring to is lighting the funeral pyre for Hercules. [Back to Text]

*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’ wife Hera in her own bed. Zeus had Ixion tied onto a wheel of fire in Hades. [Back to Text]

*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. [Back to Text]

*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’s possessing such a weapon. [Back to Text]

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

*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. [Back to Text]

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

*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). [Back to Text]

*This short speech of Odysseus is a conjecture based on Jebb’s commentary to supply a line which is apparently missing from the manuscript. [Back to Text]

*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. [Back to Text]

*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. [Back to Text]

*Hercules himself had in earlier times attacked the king of Troy, Laomedon, and
captured the city. [Back to Text]