

Crisis on Stage

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Tragedy and Comedy in Late Fifth-Century Athens

Edited by
Andreas Markantonatos
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Preface

The aim of this volume is to offer new insights and to pose new questions to the tragic and comic texts produced in late fifth-century Athens by bringing together both internationally acclaimed senior scholars as well as many acute younger authors of the study of Greek drama. The exclusive focus on this fundamentally important period in Greek history is, as we think, completely justified. The final phase of the Peloponnesian War coincided with the very last years of the fifth century, in which the resounding defeat and failure of the Athenian empire in the wake of the Sicilian debacle and numerous other military setbacks and constitutional predicaments sent ripples racing across the social and political pond in Greece and elsewhere. It would not be overbold to argue that this historical moment is a significant threshold placed at an edge, and yet not merely an edge, for the threshold always carries with it a sense of opening up toward or closing away from. To put it plainly, the last decade of the fifth century is a crucial point of movement and transition, at which the people of Athens not only had to face the consequences of membership in a fading empire wracked by military disasters and internal political rivalries but also extricate themselves from a senseless battle of conflicting interests for power that obstructed their capacity for judgement and prudence.

The close of the fifth century was a time of deep stocktaking for the citizens of the Athenian polis, during which a nostalgic craving for the glorious past invaded the present and even the slightest attention to the present was invaded by anxious concern for the uncertain future. Regardless of their theoretical stance, the vast majority of scholars of Greek history agree that the social and political crisis of the late fifth century aggravated the weaknesses of Athenian society and stifled its strengths, undermining well-established norms and polarizing personal or national relations. Under those fast-changing circumstances, the security achieved over time through social and political arrangements was dismantled by the wide differences between diverse segments of the Athenian community such as old and young, citizens and non-citizens, slave and free, democratic and oligarchic coalitions. In the absence of strong leadership the Athenians had to reconcile their personal aims with social order by find-

ing a way out of the acute conflict between private interests and the public good. Against this background of major civil unrest and deep disenchantment with democratic values and constitutional safeguards, which further exacerbated already-existing social and political frictions, Greek drama, we suggest, strongly deplored the large divergences among the interests of the members of the Athenian polis and, more importantly, condemned with full force those who attempted to guide the community with the intention of pursuing their own exclusive interests.

Attic comedy entered into the intense political debates all throughout the Peloponnesian War with unabashed frankness and straightforwardness facilitated no doubt by the special conditions of the genre. Comedy was not alone in this, however. Athenian tragedy registered the pressure of the vicissitudes of Greek history by showing increased responsiveness to the social and political realities of the day. This receptiveness is not, of course, a glassy reflection of contemporary events: it is a powerful argument couched most influentially in stage terms. There seems so far no reason to doubt, at least in our view, that Greek drama performed a distinctly didactic function, especially one that aimed at fostering the expansion and deepening of democratic values in spite of the intense polarization of political relations within Athens. If one is willing to grant that this sort of response to historical realities and current political trends is intended, among much else, to influence state policy by evoking for the Athenian audience valuable paradigms of wise administration and governance, social stability and political order in the face of the corrosive effects of factional conflict and ethical disintegration, then we believe it is legitimate to examine in more detail the special ways in which the actual storylines of some end-of-the-war tragic and comic plays illuminate critical aspects of the Athenian empire.

The promotion of certain figures of authority, especially those who have the strength and determination to oppose the whims of the people and refrain from launching personal attacks on opponents, awakens the kind of reflections that lead audiences to perceive that their real interests do not lie with self-centred political rivalry, and that incorruptibility and public-mindedness are both possible and desirable. It is also important not to overlook that Greek drama sheds particularly strong light on certain female characters, who with their significant ethical positions and their honourable responsibility to divinely sanctioned laws and familial bonds, defend those ideals that ancient audiences would have interpreted as characteristic of Athenian democratic traditions and principles. Every man can understand what kind of behaviour will preserve the

Athenian polis and enhance his own well-being, especially when he is prompted by those examples of virtuous and capable male rulers and citizens faced with the deleterious effects of internal disorder and plots from outside as well as righteous and dutiful female figures ruthlessly persecuted by fanatical and cynical men in the seats of power for their inherent moral fibre. We have no doubt, therefore, that this principle has extensive implications for our interpretation of Athenian drama.

New Historicism, as well as Old Historicism to a lesser extent, has already recognized that Greek tragedy poses a broad range of social and political questions by offering revealing analogues to particular historical sequences and real-life trends. It is indeed fair to say that, far from standing aloof from the storm and stress of the earth-shaking events that triggered massive socio-political changes during the closing years of the fifth century and more widely during the latter half of the fifth century, Greek theatre showed striking penetration and insight in its view of contemporary issues and concerns. An example may flesh out our position. Euripides' war plays, – that is, *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, and *Trojan Women* – take on a special relevance to Athenian politics through their relentless exploration of the dreadful aftermath of ruthless fighting and brutal revenge. More than this, in his markedly topical plays (*Suppliant Women*, *The Children of Heracles*) and in his Athens-related plays (*Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Heracles*, *Ion*, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Phoenician Women*) Euripides filters traditional values and axioms that underpin the political machinery of democratic Athens through the prism of well-known mythological stories. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Attic theatre is a sort of training ground for the exercise of political virtue, as Athenian politics is constantly reflected on the big screen of mythical lore and comic satire. And what is even more fascinating: the plays' political message feeds back into the audience and the polis.

It is significant, however, to realize that throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century there has been much debate on the issue of tragic and comic politics. We strongly believe that readers should bear in mind some of the background history of this critical appraisal when dealing with applications of heavily politicized proposals to Greek drama. More specifically, when we consider fifth-century Athens in terms of crisis, we mostly keep our minds on the last ten years of the Peloponnesian War. It is common knowledge that this period had its fair share of crucial events. One may recall the disastrous Sicilian expedition, the coup d'état of the oligarchs in 411 BCE, the collapse of the polis at the end of the war, the dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants, not to

mention the expulsion of the oligarchs, the restoration of democracy, and all the hard-hitting measures enacted against those deemed to have supported the oligarchs.

Looking at the events of the fifth century *in toto*, however, there seems to be little doubt that the whole, or at least almost the whole, century was experienced through a series of crises – that is, it included events which contributed to Greek civilization through an explosion of creative energy. With society precariously balanced on the edge, or even at times dangerously imbalanced, the direction of historical developments remained radically uncertain, totally unpredictable. Consider, for instance, the last ten years of the sixth century BCE: the introduction of democracy, the Persian Wars, Ephialtes' democratic reforms in 462 BCE; these events, which served as the political prelude to the 'long' fifth century, can hardly have contributed to stability. In the absence of any solidity in power structures, how can the outcome of events have been anything but unpredictable? Arguably, in the final scene of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* the Chorus' prophetic words which emphasize the need for the polis to stave off the danger of civil stasis should be seen as a profound reflection on Ephialtes' reforms (976–987):

τὰν δ' ἄπληστον κακῶν
μήποτ' ἐν πόλει στάσιν
τᾷδ' ἐπεύχομαι βρέμειν,
μηδὲ πιοῦσα κόνις μέλαν αἷμα πολιτᾶν
δι' ὄργαν ποινᾶς
ἀντιφόνους ἄτας
ἄρπαλίσαι πόλεως·
χάρματα δ' ἀντιδιδοῖεν
κοινοφιλεῖ διανοίῃ
καὶ στυγεῖν μιᾷ φρενὶ
πολλῶν γὰρ τόδ' ἐν βροτοῖς ἄκος.

I pray that civil strife,
insatiate of evil,
may never rage in this city;
and may the dust not drink up the dark blood of the citizens
and then, out of lust for revenge,
eagerly welcome the city's ruin
through retaliatory murder;
rather may they give happiness in return for happiness,
resolved to be united in their friendship
and unanimous in their enmity;
for this is a cure for many ills among men.

(transl. A. H. Sommerstein)

As we have already noted, when we think of crisis in fifth-century Athens, we tend to focus our attention on the last decade of the Peloponnesian war and on the following five years up until Socrates' death. This is inextricably linked with the observation that far more literary texts from this period survive than from any other period in the history of fifth-century Athens. Thucydides is our primary historical guide through these turbulent years, at least till the coup d'état of 411 BCE after which his successor Xenophon attempts to fill the remaining gap. Thucydides proposes a particular interpretation of the first twenty years of the Peloponnesian War; it is inevitable therefore that our own reading of Athenian history is heavily influenced by his own reflections and biases.

Many scholars have argued that Old Comedy is thoroughly political, although 'political' should be understood in the broadest sense of the word as 'everything that has to do with the polis'. As Friedrich Schlegel stressed in 1794 in his "On the Aesthetic Merit of Greek Comedy" – and this work remains well worth reading having anticipated much subsequent research – Aristophanic comedy is marked by an unawareness of limits and boundaries. Such work could only flourish within the context of the absolute freedom of fifth-century Athens. Schlegel views Old Comedy, i.e. Aristophanic comedy, as an 'art for the people' ('Kunst für das Volk'), an art, that is, which speaks the language of the people. According to Schlegel, satirical elements, especially those involving mockery and scorn, have a politically unambiguous 'demagogical' sub-text: the poet tries to influence decisions that affect his society, and thereby theatre becomes a political space.

While this interpretation of the political function of Old Comedy has remained uncontested, the same cannot be argued about Greek tragedy. Up until the 20th century attempts had been made to extricate tragedy from the degenerative circumstances of contemporary politics, but to little avail. In his "Introduction to Greek Tragedy" (Berlin 1910, p. 256) Wilamowitz expressed his views about the political value of tragic plays:

Athens, which took up the old physics and *ιστορία* from Ionia and thus prepared the ground for philosophy using the sophistic movement as her eloquent rhetorician, speaks to us directly only through drama itself.

This analysis has led to extreme positions. In his book on Sophocles, Victor Ehrenberg argued that all dramatic texts should be seen as polit-

ical allegories: real persons are recognizable behind the *dramatis personae* (*Sophodes and Pericles*, Oxford, 1954).

Nevertheless, various theoretical attempts to view the tragedies from a purely political perspective have been met with excessive scepticism. In his seminal book *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (the first edition was published in 1953 at Oxford) Arthur Pickard-Cambridge suggested that it was essential to take into account the intellectual backdrop to the tragic performances, simultaneously lamenting the aggressive ignorance with which scholars had disputed the idea that the institutional context could in some way leave traces in the tragic texts. The harshness of the debate about the political importance of tragedy is typified by W. Kraus' review (*Wiener Studien* 15, 1981, p. 252) of W. Rösler's succinct monograph on Sophocles' *Antigone* (*Polis und Tragödie: Funktionsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen zu einer antiken Literaturgattung*, Konstanz, 1980), which got into print eight years before the publication of Christian Meier's book (*Die politische Kunst der griechischen Tragödie*, Munich, 1988), a classic work that was much quoted in the German-speaking world and beyond. Kraus deemed Rösler's book not worth the paper on which it was printed!

A decisive step in the analysis of the political worth of tragic plays was made in 1987. In his groundbreaking treatise "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology" (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107, 1987, 58–76), Simon Goldhill decisively emphasized the dynamic interplay between the ceremonies preceding the tragedies ('pre-play ceremonials') and the tragedies themselves, suggesting that polis ideology, powerfully affirmed through these symbolic actions, was carefully scrutinized in the plays, as the debate over tensions, apprehensions, and concerns of Athenian democracy was thrown open to the ancient audiences. As a matter of fact, Goldhill's central thesis has been considerably expanded by Richard Seaford in numerous essays, in which the political function of the Dionysiac element has taken centre stage. These include: *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford, 1994) and "Something to Do with Dionysos: Tragedy and the Dionysiac", in: M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford, 1996), 284–294. Both Goldhill and Seaford have opened a lively debate which continues unabated to the present day. We should note here the following polemical essays raising serious doubts about their proposals: J. Griffin (1998), "The Social Function of Attic Tragedy", in: *Classical Quarterly* 48, 39–61, and P. J. Rhodes (2003), "Nothing to Do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the Polis",

in: *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123, 104–119. Goldhill and Seaford have accepted the challenge, producing further strong arguments for the political dimension of Greek drama: S. Goldhill, (2000), “Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference: The Politics of Aeschylean Tragedy, Once Again”, in: *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 120, 34–56, and R. Seaford (2000), “The Social Function of Attic Tragedy: A Response to Jasper Griffin”, in: *Classical Quarterly* 50, 30–44. It would be an exaggeration to say that research has shown beyond doubt the historical particularity of Greek tragedy; we are certain nonetheless that in the not so distant future competent scholars, such as Eric Csapo and Peter Wilson, will reveal all too clearly the close connections between Athenian institutions and dramatic performances (cf. e.g. P. Wilson (2009), “Tragic Honours and Democracy: Neglected Evidence for the Politics of the Athenian Dionysia”, in: *Classical Quarterly* 59, 8–29).

It is a pleasure to record here our thanks for help received from so many quarters; to Antonios Rengakos and Franco Montanari, the capable editors of *Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes*, for their kind invitation and memorable hospitality at Thessaloniki, to Poulcheria Kyriakou and Stavros Frangoulidis for sagely watching over the organization of a successful and fruitful conference, and last but not least to Anna Lamari for her inexhaustible patience and resourcefulness. It is only fair to conclude this inordinately long Preface by saying that the Department of Philology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and especially the intellectual force behind this notable academic institution, Antonios Rengakos, have offered the world a vibrant forum for scholarly research in the humanities, a peaceful haven for classical studies in an economy-driven world – and this is no mean achievement.

Andreas Markantonatos

Bernhard Zimmermann

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I. Sophocles

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Political Nostalgia

Ruth Scodel

At *Philoctetes* 438–452, Philoctetes, who has just heard of the death or impairment of Greeks he admired, asks Neoptolemus about Thersites. After some confusion, because Neoptolemus thinks he is referring to Odysseus, Neoptolemus reports that he has heard that Thersites is alive, and Philoctetes comments that the gods kill the just and good, but enjoy turning criminals away from Hades:

Νε. οὐκ εἶδον αὐτός, ἥσθόμην δ' ἔτ' ὄντα νιν.
Φι. ἐμελλ'· ἐπεὶ οὐδέν πω κακόν γ' ἀπώλετο,
ἀλλ' εὖ περιστέλλουσιν αὐτὰ δαίμονες,
καὶ πῶς τὰ μὲν πανοῦργα καὶ παλιντριβῇ
χαίρους' ἀναστρέφοντες ἐξ Ἄιδου, τὰ δὲ
δίκαια καὶ τὰ χρήστ' ἀποστέλλουσ' αἰεί. (445–450)

The passage is famously troublesome, because according to the epic tradition Thersites is dead: Achilles killed him.¹ As the scholiast on 445 comments, τοῦτο παρὰ ἱστορίαν. The preceding catalogue of heroes has followed the tradition completely, so this sudden deviation is perplexing. While the detail supports the general theme of the catalogue, that the good perish and the evil survive,² the audience has no way of knowing whether Neoptolemus is lying or the poet is innovating. That Neoptolemus says explicitly that he knows of Thersites' survival only second-hand makes lying seem likely, since it suggests that Neoptolemus is uneasy about the topic and does not want to discuss it in detail.³ Still, the spectator cannot be certain, since Neoptolemus' evasiveness could also represent the poet's deference to tradition, and the audience can only guess at Neoptolemus' motives. Perhaps Neoptolemus thinks that this response will be more helpful in winning Philoctetes' trust, but perhaps he thinks that this information is indifferent in itself, and tells the truth.

1 Bernabé 1987, 67–68.

2 Kamerbeek 1980 *ad* 445.

3 Huxley 1967.

The survival of Thersites is a narratological question, but I hope it can open an approach to seeing one aspect of the play's view of political life more clearly. The detail that Thersites is alive follows Neoptolemus' report that the best leaders of the Greeks are dead or incapacitated, while the representative of the Greek army within the play, Odysseus, is a double of the contemptible Thersites. When individuals or groups see their present as corrupt and degraded in contrast to an idealized past, they enter the politics of nostalgia. Political nostalgia is not confined to reactionaries, conservatives, or nationalists, although such movements most obviously exploit it. Indeed, it may not express itself in any actual attempt at transforming existing realities, if the inferiority of the present appears irremediable – as it must be, if the difference between the miserable present and the glorious past is defined by particular individuals rather than by institutions or practices that could be reformed.

Philoctetes has long been interpreted in terms of the politics of the immediately preceding years (in part because it is firmly dated). Jameson saw Neoptolemus as the younger Pericles,⁴ and Calder made the play a defence of Sophocles' role in the oligarchic revolution of 411 BCE, though he did not convince many that Neoptolemus is deceiving Philoctetes throughout.⁵ For Knox, Neoptolemus chooses between political traditions, Achilles as the symbol of aristocracy and Odysseus as the democrat.⁶ New Historicism, which looked for fundamental ideological tensions more than direct contemporary allusions, can be dated without too much distortion to the 1990 volume *Nothing to Do with Dionysos*; it had a powerful influence on scholarship on Greek tragedy, including the *Philoctetes*. Simon Goldhill used *Philoctetes* as a central example of the problematic of tragedy, arguing that its questioning of the merits of loyalty to the communal cause was out of place in the context of the patriotic rituals that preceded the tragic productions.⁷ New Historicism, however, led to a revival of the Old Historicism. Both Angus Bowie and Michael Vickers have revived the old idea that Philoctetes is about the return of Alcibiades from exile.⁸ Vickers indeed identifies Odysseus with Andocides and Heracles with Pericles. Yet as Jouanna

4 Jameson 1956.

5 Calder 1971.

6 Knox 1964, 121–122.

7 Goldhill 1990 (first published as Goldhill [1987]).

8 Bowie 1997; Vickers 1987 and 2008.

has demonstrated, while the myth certainly seems to offer possible parallels to Alcibiades, the allusion seems less likely the closer the interpreter considers the drama itself.⁹ Others have suggested that its Chorus of sailors might evoke the importance of the fleet as an independent force in Athenian politics in opposing the oligarchy.¹⁰ Yet this is an exceptionally subservient Chorus.

There have been other political interpretations that do not depend on allegory. Hawthorne reads the play against the background of Thucydides' emphasis on deceit in the establishment and rule of the Four Hundred.¹¹ Neoptolemus' attempt to persuade Philoctetes, and Philoctetes' counter-insistence that neither of them go to Troy, represents democratic debate, while Heracles provides an authoritative answer that democracy cannot give. Recently, interpreters have considered the play as an exploration of the problems of democratic rhetoric, persuasion, and deception, so that it is political, but does not necessarily refer to recent events. Odysseus, for example, becomes an exponent of the Platonic Noble Lie.¹² Tessitore looks at the play as a study of the conflicts between justice/piety and those of politics, and so thinks that Odysseus has something of value to teach Neoptolemus,¹³ while Herbel argues that the play tries to show that deception is never justified and leads to a breakdown in politics itself.¹⁴ Biancalana develops Knox's discussion of class issues and believes that the events of 411 BCE have shaped the play, but emphasizes persuasion and the attempt to formulate an adequate concept of justice: for him, the play is immediately relevant to the problem of whether the United States can reach a theory of constitutional justice that would make it a true community.¹⁵

It seems hard to say anything new and not far-fetched amid such lively and ongoing discussion, but this paper will try to tease out the political implications of Thersites and the passage in which he is mentioned, in the hope that this limited issue may help resolve some of the broader questions. For Thersites to be alive makes Philoctetes even more discouraged about the situation of the Greek army, which perhaps would make him even more inclined to trust Neoptolemus.

9 Jouanna 2007, 64–72.

10 Greenwood 2006, 98–108.

11 Hawthorne 2006.

12 Hesk 2000; Schofield 2006, 294–295.

13 Tessitore 2003.

14 Herbel 2009.

15 Biancalana 2005.

However, it also has another effect. In the *Aethiopis*, Achilles killed Thersites in anger after Thersites mocked his love for Penthesilea. He was purified by Odysseus on Lesbos – not perhaps surprisingly, since the *Iliad* says that Thersites was ‘most hateful to Achilles and Odysseus’ (*Il.* 2.220). So removing the story of Thersites’ death from the tradition also removes the most powerful moment of overt friendship between Achilles and Odysseus. That, I want to suggest, is an interesting move, because friendship between Achilles and Odysseus complicates the simple picture of social and political life in the play.

The play, at least on its surface, offers a straightforward battle for the loyalty of young Neoptolemus between Philoctetes, who represents the values of Achilles and of Heracles, and Odysseus, who cares only about success. Odysseus strongly evokes the politicians and sophists of the late fifth century,¹⁶ and both Thucydides and Aristophanes show that Sophocles’ contemporaries saw a contrast between old and new values and political behaviours. So it is easy to associate Philoctetes with older, aristocratic norms. This tidy division, though, is not entirely without difficulties (if we have won anything of lasting value from the theoretical turn, it is to expect that any tidy opposition will be less tidy on careful examination). The play seems to endorse a politics of nostalgia, while revealing a certain unease about such an idealization of the past.

It may be useful to look at a change in tradition that has not received the attention of the change in the story of Thersites. When Neoptolemus begins his tale by mentioning his father’s death, Philoctetes interrupts him (332–333) and receives more specific information about Achilles’ death through Apollo’s bow:

Νε. τέθνηκεν, ἀνδρὸς οὐδενός, θεοῦ δ’ ὕπο,
τοξευτός, ὡς λέγουσιν, ἐκ Φοίβου δαμείς.
Φι. ἀλλ’ εὐγενῆς μὲν ὁ κτανὼν τε χῶ θανών. (334–336)

This account is odd, since it does not just suppress the role of Paris, but explicitly denies that any mortal killed Achilles. Here, again, the deviation from epic tradition is marked by Neoptolemus’ emphasis that he speaks only from report. On this passage, however, commentators waffle by trying to reconcile what Neoptolemus says with the epic account.¹⁷ The omission of Paris clearly elevates Achilles’ death even fur-

16 Blundell 1987; Rose 1976.

17 Jebb 1894; Webster 1970; Kamerbeek 1980 *ad loc.*

ther beyond the mortal norm; Philoctetes in response calls both man and god εὐγενής. The removal of Paris would not be so striking were it not that Philoctetes' one attested heroic deed at Troy is the killing of Paris, as Heracles announces in his appearance at the end of the play (1426–1427). While Philoctetes also seems to have a wider role in the sack of Troy, the only real function of the bow, which receives so much attention, is to kill Paris.

Here, too, we cannot know for certain whether the account is accurate within the world of the play, inaccurately filtered by Neoptolemus, or inaccurately filtered by those who have reported the event to Neoptolemus, since he emphasizes that he knows the story only through report. At the beginning of the play, it was quickly clear that Neoptolemus' belief in his own inherited excellence is based on what he has heard about his father (89), and his belief in his father' merits is evidently sincere. So if others have filtered the story for him, or he has filtered it himself, he need not be lying; this version, if it is false, is idealizing. A spectator is not entitled, however, simply to select one of these options. While a spectator or interpreter may incline to one view or the other, the play provides no basis on which to judge.

Here the ambiguities of Neoptolemus' lie of how he was abused by Odysseus and the Atridae are revealing. When they refuse to acknowledge his claims, and instead Odysseus criticizes him for not being where he should have been (379) – he bursts into tears, and resolves to sail for home rather than endure the insult. The story evokes Achilles' repeated threats to go home in the *Iliad*, and so acquires a certain poignancy, since the audience can recognize this story as the son's imitation of his father, but Philoctetes is excluded from this understanding, since he does not know the story of the *Iliad*. Neoptolemus, although he was not at Troy, apparently does know the story, since it appears to be a source of his own.¹⁸ Neoptolemus' tale also, however, points to the gap between Achilles' threats and his actions. Achilles in the *Iliad* does not sail home. Remaining at Troy, he is reconciled with Agamemnon. The spectator does not know whether the entire tale of Neoptolemus' dispute with Odysseus is false, or whether they actually did argue, but were reconciled, in which case Neoptolemus has actually followed his father's example more closely than his story suggests.

18 Knox 1964, 123.

The catalogue begins as Philoctetes responds to Neoptolemus' story of how Odysseus refused to give him his father's arms by asking about Ajax:

ἀλλ' οὐ τι τοῦτο θαῦμα ἔμοιγ', ἀλλ' εἰ παρῶν
 Αἴας ὁ μείζων ταῦθ' ὀρώων ἠνείχετο.
 Νε. οὐκ ἦν ἔτι ζῶν, ὦ ξέν'. οὐ γὰρ ἂν ποτε
 ζῶντός γ' ἐκείνου ταῦτ' ἐσυλήθην ἐγώ.
 Φι. πῶς εἶπας; ἀλλ' ἡ χοῦτος οἴχεται θανόν;
 Νε. ὥς μηκέτ' ὄντα κείνον ἐν φάει νόει. (410–415)

Philoctetes does not believe that Ajax would have endured this mistreatment of Neoptolemus, and Neoptolemus explains that Ajax was dead. Neoptolemus provides no further detail, and Philoctetes does not ask how he died, although the spectator, of course, immediately realizes that the author has selected Ajax as Philoctetes' first thought of a hero who would have defended the young man's rights precisely because Ajax himself had quarrelled over these very arms. The Judgment of the Arms becomes a second traditional basis for Neoptolemus' story – if his own behavior is modelled on his father's in the *Iliad*, the dispute with Odysseus over Achilles' arms makes him a doublet of Ajax. Again, Philoctetes' ignorance is poignant; but ironies multiply if we try to relate what we know of the Judgment of the Arms to the story Neoptolemus has told. Are we to assume that if Ajax had received the arms, he would have given them to Neoptolemus without ado? In that case, the message that the allusion to the story of Ajax conveys to the audience would be relatively straightforward – Odysseus treats Neoptolemus as he treated Ajax – except that Neoptolemus is actually cooperating with Odysseus, and some part of his tale must be false, although it is impossible to know exactly how much. So the parallelism between Ajax and the Neoptolemus of the narrative may thus imply that the lie is really, at some level true. Odysseus is the kind of person who deprives people of goods appropriate to them, so that if he has not literally taken Achilles' arms from Achilles' son, in turning him into his own agent and training him to lie he is figuratively stealing the arms.¹⁹

Or are we to consider that Ajax was ineffective in defending even his own claims, and would not have been likely to do better at supporting those of Neoptolemus? When Odysseus rebukes Neoptolemus for not being where he should have been, the spectator probably thinks that Odysseus is complaining that he should have come to fight as

19 Whitman 1951, 177.

soon as he was old enough. Once the Judgment of the Arms becomes a part of the play, however, Odysseus' anger with Neoptolemus may have a different sense. If Neoptolemus had been present, as heir he would have claimed the arms and there would have been no Judgment. Ajax would not have killed himself. These arms have been very costly to the Greeks and to Odysseus, whose personal reputation is not improved by Ajax's death. The story of the Judgment would make it plausible either that Odysseus would be eager to give them away or that he would be furious at being asked to give them up. In any case, Neoptolemus shows no inclination to tell Philoctetes the entire story of Achilles' arms, which the spectator probably assumes he knows, just as the spectator assumes that he knows the story of Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon. His failure to explain any of the circumstances seems deliberately evasive. Especially since the spectator cannot know what really happened between Odysseus and Neoptolemus, the relationship between the two narratives of Ajax-Odysseus and Neoptolemus-Odysseus produces unstable ironies.

Similarly, the deaths of Patroclus and Antilochus evoke stories that Neoptolemus does not tell. Both, in the tradition, are terrible losses for Achilles, but here they stand in no chronological or causal connection to Achilles' death. When Neoptolemus summarizes by claiming that war voluntarily claims no bad man, but only the good (436–437), he implies that all these heroes died straightforwardly in battle. Only for Ajax is this implication truly false, but the *Iliad* provides a complex causal chain in which Achilles' anger is a primary cause of Patroclus' death and Nestor's advice contributes to it. Again, in the *Aethiopis*, Achilles must die after killing Memnon, whom he slays to avenge Antilochus, who perished rescuing his father.²⁰ Neither Achilles nor Nestor is reliably always right.

The catalogue is not straightforward above all because all these heroes, and Achilles too, were alive when Philoctetes was abandoned. Either they must have consented, or their objections were unsuccessful. All continued as members of the Trojan expedition, so that all certainly compromised with Odysseus and the Atridae. Philoctetes' surprise that Neoptolemus could have been deprived of his father's arms over the objections of the Achaeans he respected seems misplaced, as if he has never considered what part they did or did not play in his own case.

So it is clear that Philoctetes, who does not know either of the stories the audience can use to interpret what Neoptolemus says, also does

20 Bernabé 1987, 68.

not really comprehend the way the politics of the army have played out. As Neoptolemus continues to answer his questions and inform him of the deaths of the comrades he respected, the spectator must accept his ethical judgments, but the assumption that motivates them – that any of these heroes could have prevented the wrong allegedly done Neoptolemus – seems to be misguided. Ajax, Patroclus, and Nestor are all alive in the *Iliad*, but they do not stop Agamemnon from wronging Achilles. Indeed, all intervene ambiguously in the action. Ajax's plea to Achilles in the Embassy prompts Achilles' assertion that he will fight to protect his own ships – an assertion that is both a success for the Embassy, since it means that Achilles will not return to Phthia, and a misfortune, since it keeps him from returning to battle. Nestor prompts Patroclus to suggest that Patroclus fight in Achilles' place, a proposal that saves the Greeks but leads to Patroclus' death.

That is, by evoking these characters, Philoctetes successfully identifies himself as a survivor from among a group of great men who are now dead or destroyed by grief, but he cannot convince the audience that there was a past in which the wise counsel of these men generally prevailed. If his own story is not enough to remind the spectator that these heroes did not always prevent terrible injustice, the plot of the *Iliad* and the Judgment of the Arms provide further evidence. It is very sad that these great men have died, but their loss cannot mark a sharp demarcation between a past when wise and good men united to oppose the unscrupulous and a present when corruption reigns unopposed. Furthermore, once the epic tradition has become part of the background, the spectator may consider how Odysseus and Nestor seem to be close allies in the *Iliad*: both, for example, speak to calm the army after the Diapira.

So at the end of the catalogue, when Philoctetes asks about Thersites, there is an already wide gap between Philoctetes' understanding of the implications of what he is being told and the spectators'. Up to this point, although Neoptolemus has not been forthcoming, his remarks about the dead heroes have followed standard epic tradition. Neoptolemus at first thinks Philoctetes is asking about Odysseus, although his own story has made it clear that Odysseus lives and flourishes. Thersites is not one of the effectively bad; in the epic and in Philoctetes' memory, he is a pest. By contrast he sets off the dead heroes. Their merit is beyond question, and the ease of confusion between Odysseus and Thersites shows how contemptible Odysseus truly is. If it is true that Thersites is alive, the 'real world' of the play does maintain a clear line

between the true heroes and the political operators in at least one way. All the dead were good, all the bad still survive, and Achilles and Odysseus were not friends, nor were Thersites and Odysseus, presumably, enemies. Although the good men were no more able in the past to stop the bad than they are now, at least they existed.

The play thus appears to offer a politics of nostalgia. Philoctetes represents a pure heroic tradition descending from Heracles. Marooned on the deserted Lemnos, he has had no involvement in any action of the Greek army since the very beginning of the war, and so, like the dead, is uncompromised. Philoctetes' stubbornness later in the play, when he would rather starve on Lemnos than submit to Odysseus, certainly suggests that he would never have engaged in the army's politics, but the allusions to the various texts in the background make it clear that he could not have gone on at Troy without ever compromising with the men he despises. Yet as one of Helen's suitors (Odysseus mentions the oath at 72–73), he could not have abandoned the expedition, either.

The sense that there is no uncorrupted merit to be found in the contemporary world has parallels in late fifth-century literature; nostalgia is an outstanding characteristic of the period and it continues to haunt the fourth century. Thucydides and Aristophanes are the obvious sources. In his discussion of the Corcyrean stasis, Thucydides famously claims that the conditions of the war significantly changed the predominant standards of behaviour (3.82–83). Different qualities were required for political success, and in consequence values changed; in particular, traditional 'simplicity' vanished:

Οὕτω πᾶσα ἰδέα κατέστη κακοτροπίας διὰ τὰς στάσεις τῷ Ἑλληνικῷ, καὶ τὸ εὖθες, οὗ τὸ γενναῖον πλεῖστον μετέχει, καταγελασθὲν ἠφανίσθη, τὸ δὲ ἀντιτετάχθαι ἀλλήλοις τῇ γνώμῃ ἀπίστως ἐπὶ πολὺ διήνεγκεν· (3.82)

'Simplicity' has vanished and been ridiculed as a result of the war and the civil strife the war has fostered. This 'simplicity' is a willingness to take others as they present themselves, an expectation that the other, like oneself, is honest and straightforward. For Thucydides, 'the noble', the attitude and behaviour characteristic of the aristocrat, has a very large share in this naiveté – that is, nobility cannot be constituted without it, and has therefore vanished along with it. Such 'simplicity' is in Aristophanes a synonym for 'stupidity' (*Nu.* 1258, *Ec.* 521). The implied author of Thucydides' work shows no trace of it himself, but habitually assumes that political actors are concealing their true motives.

Nobody whose character includes the εὔηθες would have Thucydides' interest in distinguishing rhetoric from underlying motive. Nonetheless, he evidently regrets its disappearance, and he calls the new moral attitudes and behaviour κακοτροπία.

Thucydides is nostalgic also in his idealization of Pericles. Famously, at 2.65 his obituary for Pericles describes him as utterly unlike his successors.²¹ The Funeral Oration represents not only a utopian Athens but an idealization of the man who gave the speech, and it draws the reader into the author's nostalgia.²² Whether or not Thucydides' loathing of Cleon and other later fifth-century politicians was justified, and whether they were as subservient to public opinion and Pericles as superior to it as Thucydides claims, it is clear that he felt a profound gap between the city led by Pericles and the city of his successors. Since we do not know Thucydides' process of composition, however, we do not know how long after Pericles' death he began to idealize the recent past in contrast to the present.

However, in Eupolis' *Demes*, the solution to Athens' problems is the return from death of Solon, Aristides, Miltiades, and Pericles (*PCG* V, pp. 342–343 and frs. 99.47 ff., 104, 106, 110). We do not know the precise date of the play (later than 418 BCE, since the siege of Mantieneia is mentioned, and earlier than 411 BCE, when Eupolis probably died), or the specific problems to which these men are the solution.²³ Striking, however, is the comic poet's decision to bring back four saviours whose chronological distance from each other must have been plain even to an Athenian audience whose historical awareness was fuzzy. Solon comes from a distant past, before the establishment of the democracy. Aristides and Miltiades belong to the great generation of the Persian Wars. Pericles belonged in the living memory of many members of the audience; even if the play was produced at the latest possible date, it is striking, though not perhaps surprising, that the comic poet expected his audience to be willing to associate Pericles with the great names of the past, although Pericles in his lifetime was a regular target of comedy and by no means above criticism.

Nostalgia for Pericles is purely for the individual. Although the idealized Athens of Pericles himself is the creation of a shared national

21 Hornblower 1991, 340–341.

22 Wohl 2002, 70–72.

23 I am convinced by Storey 2003, 112–114, that 417 BCE is likelier than 411 BCE.

character and a set of shared practices and institutions, Thucydides does not offer a cause for the excellence of Pericles and the degeneracy of later leaders; he appears to think that the democracy would naturally tend to create leaders like Cleon, and that Pericles was an extraordinary exception. Similarly, the comic theme of bringing new and improved leadership from the Underworld represents a strain of absolute nostalgia, in contrast to comic utopias that characters create from the existing situation.

Some of Sophocles' contemporaries were also nostalgic in ways that went beyond missing Pericles or feeling that individual moral character had declined, and whose complexities go far beyond the scope of this paper. The creator of the spurious Draconian constitution that is the basis of the description of this constitution in the *Athenaion Politeia* 4 was probably a late fifth-century oligarch, and he probably did not see himself as a forger, but as a recreator.²⁴ Aristophanes' nostalgia for the generation of Marathon, although it is not unalleviated by mockery, is pervasive, and expresses itself as a preference not only for an earlier generation of politicians, but for the poetry and music of that generation. Aristophanes strongly defines the new as (mere) talkers in contrast to the physically strong men of the past, so that Γλώττα is one of the new gods of Socrates (*Cl.* 424) and the young man who selects the Inferior Argument will have a big tongue, while the follower of the Better Argument will have a small one. The Euripides of *Frogs* prays to his γλώττης στρόφιγξ (892). This contrast is salient in *Philoctetes*, where Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that he has learned from experience that the tongue is more powerful than the strong arm:

Οδ. ἐσθλοῦ πατρός παῖ, καὶ τὸς ὦν νέος ποτὲ
γλώσσαν μὲν ἄργον, χεῖρα δ' εἶχον ἐργάτιν·
νῦν δ' εἰς ἔλεγχον ἐξιὼν ὁρῶ βροτοῖς
τὴν γλώσσαν, οὐχὶ τᾶργα, πάνθ' ἡγούμενην. (96–99)

Neoptolemus in his false account of his mistreatment concludes:

ὅπου δ' ὁ χείρων τάγαθοῦ μείζον σθένει
κάποφθίνει τὰ χρηστὰ χῶ δειλὸς κρατεῖ,
τούτους ἐγὼ τοὺς ἀνδρας οὐ στέρξω ποτέ· (456–458)

24 While there is continuing disagreement about whether the Draconian constitution of *Ath.* 4. is a later addition to the text, there is no disagreement that it is a forgery, and it is most often linked with the oligarchs of 411/410 BCE, though some place it as late as Demetrius of Phalerum (Rhodes 1981, 84–86).

His description of the state of the army uses language that evokes anti-democratic propaganda, but the bad men to whom he refers are Odysseus and the Atridae. Indeed, there are parallels between Neoptolemus' false story and the plot of the *Philoctetes* itself.²⁵ Within the action of the play, Neoptolemus is at this point one of those he claims to despise.

Philoctetes as a figure from the more innocent past, victimized by the new politician Odysseus, has strong contemporary resonances. If we turn back to Neoptolemus, he too is a nostalgic figure of a different kind. Until a time shortly before the beginning of the play, he lived far away from the only political arena in the play's world, the army at Troy. He grew up on Scyros. His island life is thus in one respect a counterpart to that of Philoctetes: he has been not corrupted by having to deal with Odysseus or the Atridae. His comment when he pretends to be about to leave Lemnos for home is revealing:

ἀλλ' ἡ πετραία Σκῦρος ἐξαρκούσά μοι
ἔσται τὸ λοιπόν, ὥστε τέρπεσθαι δόμῳ (459–460)

Contact with Philoctetes restores Neoptolemus to his ancestral honesty. The nature of the army, though, is apparently determined by its leadership, and Heracles in his epiphany does not urge Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to contend with the Atridae and Odysseus to direct the direction of the Greek expedition. Instead, he urges Neoptolemus to fight alongside Philoctetes, so that they offer each other mutual protection:

ἀλλ' ὥς λέοντε συννόμῳ φυλάσσετον
οὔτος σέ καὶ σὺ τόνδ'. (1436–1437)

This association of honesty with disengagement invites some further considerations. Being isolated, as Philoctetes has been, has meant that he has not been faced with any of the dilemmas that have arisen, but it has also meant that he is ignorant; Neoptolemus' deceptions play both on his native ingenuousness and on his unfamiliarity with what has happened. On the other side, Neoptolemus succumbs to Odysseus' persuasion easily. He resists only because deceit is not in his nature, and cheerfully offers to use force. It apparently does not occur to him for a moment that Philoctetes' own wishes should be of any concern; he does not worry at all about the deeper ethics of the mission, only that operating by cunning is beneath him. Odysseus need only convince him that

25 Hamilton 1975.

his own glory at Troy requires that Philoctetes come, and that no method other than deceit can succeed.

Οδ. ὡς τοῦτό γ' ἔρξας δύο φέρη δωρήματα.

Νε. ποίω; μαθὼν γὰρ οὐκ ἂν ἀρνοίμην τὸ δρᾶν.

Οδ. σοφός τ' ἂν αὐτὸς κάγαθὸς κεκλή' ἄμα.

Νε. ἴτω· ποήσω, πᾶσαν αἰσχύνην ἀφείς. (117–120)

While Neoptolemus changes his mind after protracted and intimate contact with Philoctetes, the play suggests that youthful innocence, however good an individual's inherited nature and education have been, is inherently vulnerable.²⁶ Indeed, Odysseus persuades him even though some of the language he uses gives a strongly negative coloration to his own position.²⁷

There is an odd moment near the close of the play, when Neoptolemus, having returned Philoctetes' bow to him, tries to persuade him to come to Troy voluntarily. Philoctetes refuses, and argues in turn that Neoptolemus should not fight at Troy himself: οἶδε σου καθύβρισαν/πατρὸς γέρας συλῶντες (1364–1365). I have already pointed out that the audience cannot know whether any part of Neoptolemus' tale was true, although the audience knows that some of it is false. Philoctetes, even before Odysseus appeared, guessed that Neoptolemus has been under bad influence: οὐκ εἶ κακὸς σύ· πρὸς κακῶν δ' ἀνδρῶν μαθὼν/ῥοικας ἤκειν αἰσχρά (971–972). Although he now realizes that Neoptolemus was deceiving him under Odysseus' direction, he has not made the further inference that he cannot believe what Neoptolemus told him. It is hard to know exactly how to interpret Philoctetes' continuing belief in this part of what he knows was false. It may point to the moral truth that Neoptolemus' lie represents, especially as Neoptolemus turns against Odysseus and follows Philoctetes.²⁸ It may serve to remind the audience that 'Odyssean corruption cannot so easily be erased'.²⁹ If we understand it naturalistically, we would suppose that Philoctetes, whose survival has been threatened by the theft of his bow, has been too stunned by the rapid changes in his situation to process his information. The play is full of such internal contradictions; a few lines later, Philoctetes enjoins Neoptolemus to take him home, as he swore to do (1368) – but Neoptolemus has not sworn an oath, and his promise

26 I thus disagree slightly with Rose 1976, 97–100 on the 'aristocratic bias'.

27 Heath 1999, 147.

28 Podlecki 1966, 236–237; Schmidt 1973, 235.

29 Blundell 1988, 145–146.

not to abandon Philoctetes was very explicitly marked as not an oath (811), so that the point is salient. Yet Philoctetes refers to it as an oath also when he is not directly addressing Neoptolemus, but the natural world of Lemnos:

οἷ' ἔργ' ὁ παῖς μ' ἔδρασεν οὐξ Ἀχιλλέως·
ὁμόςσας ἀπάξειν οἴκαδ', ἐς Τροίαν μ' ἄγει· (940–941)

Philoctetes is certainly not lying. He could clearly distinguish oath from promise at the charged moment of deciding whether to bind Neoptolemus by oath, because to demand an oath would be to announce at that moment that he does not trust him. Having trusted him, however, he sees his trust as the equivalent of an oath – no good man would refuse to fulfil a promise because he had not sworn an oath. He fails to make the distinctions among closely related speech-acts for the same reasons he does not draw out the different possible strands of truth and falsehood in Neoptolemus' story: it is not his character to analyze speech carefully.

This inability to appreciate complexity and nuance is part of Philoctetes' simplicity of character, but it is not necessarily a virtue. Both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are in different ways unprepared to defend themselves against Odysseus, and this weakness may undercut the nostalgic effect. Famously, the final epiphany of Heracles includes a warning to both heroes to show piety towards the gods in the sack of Troy:

τοῦτο δ' ἐννοεῖθ', ὅταν
πορθῇτε γαῖαν, εὐσεβεῖν τὰ πρὸς θεούς·
ὥς τᾶλλα πάντα δεύτερ' ἡγεῖται πατήρ (1440–1442)

This warning hints at the famous impiety of Neoptolemus, who slaughters Priam at Zeus' altar. The speech of Heracles promises Philoctetes fame in return for his sufferings, and makes his fate analogous to that of Heracles, but it does not resolve the political issues that the play has raised. Philoctetes has spoken not only of his reluctance to be in the company of the men who abused him, but of his worries about the future:

οὐ γάρ με τᾶλγος τῶν παρελθόντων δάκνει,
ἀλλ' οἷα χρή παθεῖν με πρὸς τούτων ἔτι
δοκῶ προλεύσσειν. οἷς γάρ ἡ γνώμη κακῶν
μήτηρ γένηται, κᾶλλα παιδεύει κακούς. (1358–1361)³⁰

30 κᾶλλα is a conjecture of Cavallin, κακούς of Dobree.

Tradition does not report any further miseries for Philoctetes, and Heracles promises Philoctetes public honour (ἀρετῇ τε πρῶτος ἐκκριθεὶς στρατεύματος, 1425) as well as a successful return. This award will be deserved, and perhaps to some extent addresses Philoctetes' fear. Still, the conclusion places Neoptolemus and Philoctetes back in the corrupt world of the Greek army without answering Philoctetes' fundamental problem, that the previous actions of the Greek leadership give no reason to think that they will be better in the future. The hint at Neoptolemus' impiety may also evoke the tragedies in which Neoptolemus has appeared in close association with Odysseus, such as Euripides' *Hecuba* – that is, it may suggest that the influence of Philoctetes is insufficient to defend his character from the bad effects of everyone else around him. If Odysseus has led him into deceit on this occasion, in the future the Greek army will incite him to brutality and disregard for the gods.

Philoctetes, then, is permeated with nostalgia, presenting a hero whose isolation from the society within the play reflects a feeling shared by at least some groups in Athenian society that contemporary leadership, contemporary morality, and contemporary political practice were inferior to those of even a recent past. The spectator must share this nostalgia. At the same time, the play undercuts a simple idealization of the past. The great dead heroes were not able to prevent injustice when they were alive. It also suggests that nostalgia itself is not an adequate approach to the political world. By recovering Philoctetes, the Greek army can fulfil the divine behest and capture Troy, but Philoctetes does not cure its moral problems. Philoctetes can impress Neoptolemus so that he resists Odysseus on this occasion, but the conclusion suggests that the effect is not permanent. Although the play reflects a frustration with Athenian leadership that was not confined to the oligarchs of the Four Hundred, it does not propose any solution. Even if we could bring a hero from the past into the present, we cannot transform the present into the ideal past – which never quite existed.

Genos, Gennaios, and Athens in the Later Tragedies of Sophocles

Sophie Mills

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* has long been the focus of scholarship which posits a relatively direct relationship between tragedy, contemporary events, and the presumed function of the playwright as public advisor, and it would certainly appear that we know more about the circumstances of its production than is true for Sophocles' other extant plays. The play was produced in 409 BCE, just two years after the brief but bloody ascendancy of the 400 oligarchs who rose to power, aided, probably unwittingly, by the actions of the *probouloi* appointed to deliberate for Athens' survival of Athens after its financial and military disaster in Sicily.¹ Since it is generally accepted that Sophocles was one of these *probouloi*, the apparent connections between history – Sophocles' role in contemporary politics and Alcibiades' rehabilitation from exile, thanks to military successes in the Eastern Aegean – and myth – Philoctetes' NE Aegean exile² and eventual return to the Greek army – have struck many scholars as too close to be merely coincidental.

The difficult and dangerous political climate of the last years of the fifth century would seem to demand a serious response. Tragedy is a serious art form. It is certainly tempting to connect these two propositions, to create readings of late Sophoclean tragedy in which their author is reacting to, and advocating strategies to deal with, contemporary circumstances. Indeed, multiple attempts, perhaps encouraged by the claim of an ancient commentator on Sophocles' *Philoctetes* 99 that Sophocles is attacking contemporary politicians, have been made to read characters of the play as representative of late fifth-century public figures in Athens. As early as the 18th century, Philoctetes was identified as Alcibiades, but cases have also been made for an Alcibiadic Neoptolemus or Odysseus, in various permutations and degrees of complexity,

1 Th. 8.1.2–3, 49; Arist. *Ath.* 29.3. For the historical background of the play and Sophocles' part in history, see Jameson 1956 and 1971; Calder 1985; Edmunds 1996, 142–146.

2 Cf. Beer 2004, 135.

some arguing for specific individual identifications, others that characteristics of contemporary politicians are divided among the *dramatis personae* of *Philoctetes*.³

Since attempts to map contemporary politicians directly onto tragic figures have rather fallen out of fashion over the past few decades,⁴ another influential school of criticism takes a broader view of the connections between *Philoctetes* and its contemporary setting. It is argued that, given the dire circumstances of the late fifth century, Sophocles in his presumed role as public advisor could not have shirked his duty to address his citizens,⁵ whether on the importance of patriotism, engagement with society and looking to a common good beyond individual differences,⁶ or the dangers of sophistic education,⁷ or the benefits of a benign aristocracy over a democracy fatally corrupted by the demagogues of the later fifth century.⁸ Calder 1971 even reads the play as Sophocles' apologia for his part in inflicting the 400 on Athens. This kind of political interpretation is not confined to *Philoctetes*. Lowell Edmunds notes that the meeting at which the Athenian constitution was abrogated in 411 BCE was held at Colonus, a cult centre of Poseidon frequented by the *hippeis* of Athens, and interprets Oedipus's presence at the altar of Poseidon Hippios in *Oedipus at Colonus* (written by 405 BCE but not produced until 401 BCE), and especially the Colonus Ode, as

3 For histories of these identifications, see Calder 1971, 170–171; Bowie 1997, 56–61. Jameson 1956, 219–224 suggests an identification between Neoptolemus and the younger Pericles. The mythical paradigm of Achilles also lies behind the vehemently obstinate Philoctetes: Beer 2004, 136–137.

4 A notable exception is Vickers 2008, who (61–81) divides Alcibiades' qualities between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.

5 Wilson 1995, 8–10, 167, 198.

6 Harsh 1960, 412; Beer 2004, 135–138. Jameson 1956, 220 claims that Philoctetes' destructive attitude to his community would be familiar to 'men who had lived through the Peloponnesian war'.

7 Craik 1980.

8 Wilson 1995, 191–198 and Beer 2004, 167–168 both claim that the Theseus of *Oedipus at Colonus* is an ideal king, not a democrat. But since the genre of tragedy most easily focuses on individuals rather than groups, the paradoxical figure of an Athenian king who represents an ordered and functioning democracy – Theseus in Euripides' *Suppliants* above all – tends to recur in tragedies where Athens is portrayed as the ideal city, because it is a product of two ideologies which decree both that Athens must be a democracy and that it must be the ancient mythological city of its greatest hero Theseus and his sons. It would therefore be unwise to assume that Sophocles was promoting an alternative to democratic government in *OC*: cf. Mills 1997, 97–103.

Sophocles' attempts to rehabilitate the *hippeis* from suspicion of collaborating against the democracy and to promote Colonus as a cult centre for the whole Athenian people, rather than just the *hippeis*.⁹

More broadly-focused political readings such as these seem inherently more attractive because they do not depend on the assumption – entirely absent from any ancient author's view of the expectations brought by members of the audience to tragic performances¹⁰ – that the playwright is writing in some sort of allegorical code for an audience who will naturally understand that a mythological character is 'really' one of their contemporaries. But even when a more broadly-based political interpretation seems useful in getting us closer to what was going on in the Theatre of Dionysus in 409 BCE or 401 BCE, there is a danger that our apparently more comprehensive knowledge of the historical background of late Sophoclean drama may be illusory, and therefore a distorting factor in critical interpretation.

Clearly tragedy cannot be disentangled from the public and political circumstances of its performance. It was a well established ancient belief that poets educate their public and, for some decades, now modern critics have explored tragedy as a medium that explores and often problematizes the institutions and conventions of Athenian society.¹¹ However, a consideration of the nature of tragic practice at Athens leads me to question how far such a medium has any real ability to influence its audience or successfully promote particular points of view. Perhaps it can only challenge those who are open to being challenged, and otherwise offers a greater degree of reassurance and affirmation than has often recently been argued.¹² The case of Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus*, a play

9 Edmunds 1996, 91–92, 142–146.

10 Griffin 1999, 90–92.

11 Ar. *Ra.* 1009–1010, 1032–1036, 1054–1055, and for modern criticism, see, e.g., Vernant/Vidal-Naquet 1988, 1–3, 23–48, esp. 26–27, 33; Goldhill 1990, 116–118; Gregory 1991, 1–19. On tragedy, politics, and audience response, see also Saïd 1998.

12 Indeed, the presumed abilities of fiction or the mass media to change the minds of their consumers may be much overrated: see, for example, Klapper 1960, 38–50; Holland 1968, 72–79; Keen 2007, xiii–xiv, 4. There are real dangers in extrapolating from the experiences of modern audiences to those of the ancient world, of course, but given the paucity of our ancient evidence and the presumed centrality of the relationship between playwright and audience to any discussion of the relationship between tragedy and history in ancient Athens, a cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary approach seems to be worth pursuing, if with a degree of caution.

dramatizing recent historical events which left the audience so moved that they fined him 1000 drachmas for ‘reminding them of their own troubles’ (Hdt. 6.21), and even the hostile reception of Euripides’ first *Hippolytus* – the only play known to have dramatized Athenian suffering in an Athenian setting to Athenians – suggest that there were some limits on what an Athenian audience would wish to see portrayed.¹³ After Phrynichus’ misadventure, the stories dramatized by the tragedians were predominantly those of distant myth: one of the very few safe historical subjects were the Persians, Athens’ exotic and safely defeated rivals,¹⁴ and even these make only rare appearances among the kings and heroes of mythology. Moreover, even some characters who for a modern audience are purely fictional are ancestors of the Athenians and thus bear a potential emotional significance for them. A playwright offering any very direct commentary on contemporary sufferings is taking risks, both to his immediate chance of winning first prize at the dramatic competitions, and even potentially to his chances of being awarded a Chorus at a subsequent competition.

I believe that tragedy can talk directly about Athens, but when it does, it tends to avoid any risk of alienating its audience with potentially unpalatable statements by offering instead a picture of the city congruent with the idealized portrayal of Athens that functioned as the standard account of Athenian history. Alternatively, if tragedy makes a ‘not-Athens’ the home for exploring more challenging questions about political and social issues in the city, by definition, a not-Athens setting cuts any unarguable and inextricable connection between the themes of the play and Athenian society. As Phrynichus found out, if tragedy is to work on its audience, it must paradoxically offer aesthetic and emotional distance from the horrific actions that are being presented to its spectators.¹⁵ Drama necessitates physical and psychological distance from the performers, so that members of the audience can always, if they need to, ‘escape’ through the gaps through the reassurance that after all they

13 Mills 1997, 195–206; Heath 1987, 64–70. On Phrynichus, see Rosenbloom 1993.

14 Bowie 1999, 42; Beer 2004, 23.

15 Arist. *Po.* 1448b10–20; Lada 1996, 404; cf. Rosenbloom 1995, 101–102; Pelting 1997, 228. Steiner 1996, 545 n. 3 mentions the story of a staging of the *Oresteia* in Berlin in 1945 against a vast photograph of the ruined city which severely traumatized many of its audience, presumably because they had to relive their own sufferings through those of the house of Atreus.

are merely watching a performance.¹⁶ Such gaps open up options along a continuum of entirely submitting to belief in what is before us, entirely resisting it or partial acceptance and resistance.¹⁷ Stories of spectators hissing and shouting in the middle of performances¹⁸ exemplify the combination of nearness and distance, engagement and disagreement possible in all dramatic performances. Because tragedy balances on a tricky tightrope between nearness to, and distance from suffering, any tragedian with any sort of 'message' about contemporary conditions, especially those of suffering, controversy and blame, such as in the aftermath of the ascendancy of the 400, is on dangerous ground unless he offers members of the audience clear emotional or intellectual escape routes. But the moment he has done so, he simultaneously renders his tragedy potentially less influential as a genre of advice or advocacy, as is suggested by Plutarch's story of the tyrant who was so moved by Hecuba's sufferings that he simply left the theatre because he saw the inconsistency in crying over a play while he was killing so many of his own subjects.¹⁹

In her conceptualization of 'distancing' and 'zooming' devices by which tragedians sometimes deliberately differentiate the world of tragedy from that of the audience and sometimes bring the two together,²⁰ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood emphasizes that the process is never static, as playwrights move continuously back and forth between heroic and contemporary worlds. In just the same way, each individual in the audience brings his own experiences and prejudices, and can himself zoom or distance according to what he endorses or rejects in what is set before him.²¹ Since, on the one hand, the distancing tendencies inherent in the genre are essential to tragedy, but on the other, the tragedian cannot fully control them, if what the spectator sees and hears matches his experiences and prejudices, the zooming process may be unproblematic,

16 Beckerman 1970, 130–133; Bennett 1997, 15; Ubersfeld 1999, 24–25, 137, 166. Wiles 1997, 207–211, 114–115 takes a less isolationist view.

17 Holland 1980, 125 claims, 'any individual shapes the materials the literary work offers him...to give him what he characteristically both wishes and fears ...The individual can accept the literary work only to the extent he exactly recreates with it a verbal form of his particular pattern of defense mechanisms.'

18 Pl. *R.* 492a, *Lg.* 700c–701a; D. 19.33; Csapo/Slater 1995, 290–305.

19 Plu. *Pel.* 29.4–6; cf. Isoc. 4.168. I have argued this at greater length in Mills 2010.

20 Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, 136.

21 Cf. Oatley 1994, 66.

but more challenging ideas can always be rejected.²² A play can contain different degrees of ‘truth’ at different times and such truths may be different for different members of the audience. For example, most veterans in the audience would probably have disputed Medea’s claim that childbirth is worse than fighting (E. *Med.* 250), but they would have had no reason to distance themselves from the Chorus’ encomium of Athens at 824–845, and a number of recent scholars have emphasized the affirmative, rather than the critical, tendencies of tragedy.²³

When an author does offer material which makes uncomfortable viewing for some reason, tragedy cannot avoid offering the option to look away or feel relief at being ‘outside the pain’ (cf. E. *HF* 1249), because tragedy is multifaceted. Every potential political reference is matched by aesthetic pleasure in the songs and dances of the Chorus; every reference to the contemporary intellectual climate, by the portrayal of acute emotions, designed to stir an emotional response in its spectators to exceptionally intense suffering of a kind quite unlikely to happen in their own lives.²⁴ Each tragedy offers a range of elements which will be more or less appealing to each individual in the audience: those who are inclined may indeed seek political or intellectual comment, but any for whom these have less appeal are given other material – visual, auditory or emotional – to consider.²⁵ Ancient conceptions of the didactic function of poetry tend to have little in common with modern scholars’ highly intellectualized approaches and place much more emphasis on its emotional effects,²⁶ and the idea that the genre of tragedy

22 Cf. Holland 1968, 83–98.

23 Pelling 1997, 219–221; Heath 1987, 47 and 1999, 158–159; cf. Griffith 1998, 39–43. Arist. *Rh.* 1395b1–11 describes ordinary, unsophisticated spectators who are happy if they hear sentiments that correspond to their own prejudices. I agree with Ahl 1984, 197 that moderns can be too sensitive to the possible presence of the intelligentsia in an audience.

24 Griffin 1998, 60.

25 Koriatis describes a psychological experiment in which subjects were asked to view a distressing film while deliberately detaching themselves from feeling emotional pain while watching it. The most commonly used methods of achieving detachment reported were concentration on the fictionality of what they were seeing and on the technical aspects of the film’s production: Koriatis *et al.* 1972, 613.

26 Heath 1999, 139 notes that tragedians will sometimes emphasize and sometimes ignore the moral or intellectual complexities of their themes, but they are very consistent in offering their audience an intense and satisfying emotional stimulus.

confirms the status quo at least as much as it challenges it.²⁷ Of course, tragedy might be *capable* of prodding individual consciences among the audience, but as one might expect from an art form frequently considered reflective of, and a product of the Athenian democracy,²⁸ it must allow for and meet a full range of audience opinion and interest.²⁹ This necessity will inevitably have a fragmenting effect on any attempt by the playwright to present a definite point of view and clear advice to the audience.

I suggest, then, that political tragedy operates in two basic modes, which we see in *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* respectively. It can offer themes of relevance or even potential controversy to the Athenian polis in a place not called Athens, so that individuals in the audience have enough intellectual or emotional distance to endorse or reject the various materials offered to them. Alternatively, it can operate in a more overtly Athenian mode, dramatizing political topics in an Athenian setting, but by so doing, the possibilities for asking hard questions become limited, and instead the standard image of the idealized Athens is reassuringly offered to the Athenian audience.³⁰ What is said of Athens in *Oedipus at Colonus* resembles not only that of plays such as Euripides' *Suppliants*, earlier in the Peloponnesian War, before Athens could be said to be war-weary and on the point of collapse, but even that of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, almost 50 years earlier, when Athens was at its height of power and optimism.³¹ I think it can plausibly be argued that if the date of *Oedipus at Colonus* were entirely unknown, its por-

27 Pl. R. 605d-606b claims that tragedy is dangerous because of its seductive appeal to the emotions and one of his major objections to the genre is its tendency to confirm and reinforce society's values: Heath 1999, 140-142; cf. Bennett 1997, 97-99. Socrates, who did consistently question Athenian social values can hardly be considered typical: Griffin 1998, 48-50.

28 Beer 2004, 1-3, although Griffin 1999 sounds a note of caution about reading too much into the presumed connection.

29 Viewing tragedy from a less emotionally oriented angle, Revermann 2006, 101, 103-104 argues both for an audience with differing levels of intellectual and dramatic sophistication and for dramas which are able to give pleasure to all in spite of such differences between individuals, through what he dubs a 'double-act of appealing to all while sustaining an individual's interest by means of activating and challenging the personal level of competence' (p. 115). For a modern perspective on mass entertainment, see also Ellis 1982, 78-81.

30 Cf. Heath 1987, 64-70.

31 For parallels between the *Eumenides* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, see Winnington Ingram 1980, 272; Mills 1997, 54-55, 167.

trayal of Athens would not necessarily compel scholars to assume that it can only have been written at the eve of the city's fall.³² Such tragedies in which Athens is prominent set up an image of the citizens to themselves which is essentially unchanging, conservative, and reassuring and provides multiple points of contact with the picture of Athens served up by the yearly funeral speeches, which, from their inception, around 470–460 BCE,³³ gradually codified an idealized treatment of Athenian history which, in so far as such a thing existed, became the *de facto* 'official' version.³⁴ Such speeches repeat the same Athenian triumphs to

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- 32 *Contra* Wilson 1997, 5–10 and Edmunds 1996, 92, but their arguments seem to me to rely too much on hindsight. Edmunds states that the location of Colonus must primarily recall to an audience 411's meeting of the *hippeis* which laid the foundation for the rise of the 400 (Th. 8.67), but Colonus has at least two other significant attributes which have nothing to do with the events of 411 BCE. Not only was it Sophocles' birthplace, but also the scene of a skirmish between Athens and Thebes in 410 or 407 BCE: X. *HG* 1.1.33, D.S. 13.72.3–73.2, *FGrHist* 324 F63 (cf. also n. 73 below). Edmunds' connection seems far from clear to me. I am similarly sceptical of his claim (94–95), that since some of the miseries of old age detailed by the Chorus are inappropriate to Oedipus' experience, they must therefore recall the miseries experienced by the Athenians. Edmunds goes on to argue that since Theban Oedipus 'represents' the experience of many Athenians, Theseus' acceptance of Oedipus is a mythical prototype of, and role model for Athens' contemporary acceptance and reintegration into society of the Athenians who had been exiled in the traumatic events of the last decades of the fifth century. An accursed parricide seems an odd choice as a model for acceptance and reconciliation among the Athenians, but such a figure is entirely typical of the wretched exiles – Heracles, his sons, and Adrastus – that the idealized Athens always welcomes because it is the city which pays unique attention in Greece to helping the unjustly ill-treated (e.g. Th. 2.37.3).
- 33 See Ziolkowski 1981, 11–24; Clairmont 1983; Loraux 1986; Pritchard 2000, 17–26.
- 34 A remarkable consistency of material and *topoi* exists, not only among fourth-century specimens but also between fifth- and fourth-century *epitaphioi*. There is a substantial degree of thematic overlap between Pericles' funeral speech in Thucydides and fourth-century *epitaphioi* and related genres, such as [Lysias] 2, [Demosthenes] 60, Hyperides 6; the encomia of Athens in Isocrates' *Panegyricus* and *Panathenaicus* and that of Theseus in his *Helen*, and Plato's parody of the genre in *Menexenus*: Ziolkowski 1981, 133–136, 163, 173. The sentiments of Gorgias' fragmentary *epitaphios* speech (82 F6DK) also resemble those of later sources, even though they are expressed in his unique style. Similarly, stories detailed in the *epitaphioi* recur in other fifth-century literary genres and in public, monumental art suggesting the existence of a pseudo-official set of Athenian achievements: Mills 1997, 45–47; Pritchard 2000, 13–26. When fourth-century writers look back nostalgically on the empire and have to ad-

draw the same lessons about Athenian courage, wisdom, and willingness to offer Greece their best in war and peace alike.³⁵ The funeral speeches offer Athenians a sense of their identity as Athenians, as the speaker sets the sacrifices of the bereaved in a timeless context of Athenian activity, linking its mythical heroes to those of the year being reviewed, as sons continue the same noble mission pursued by their fathers and grandfathers, of expanding the city's power through promoting justice and Panhellenic law.

So I am relatively sceptical about tragedy's ability to offer political advice, at least in the way that it is conceived of in some recent scholarship on Sophocles' last two plays, because I believe that the genre tends more to reflect existing attitudes or tendencies in Athenian culture than advocate particular points of view, and even as it reflects what already exists, it offers multiple possibilities for individuals in its audience to take what they want. Several motifs of the idealized Athens run through *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, such as the importance of integrating λόγος and ἔργον and the importance of pity, but I will instead focus on the use of, and mutual connections between, the words γένος and γενεαῖος and their broader associations in the two plays, because they offer an excellent example both of the way in which Athens-based and not-Athens-based tragedies use similar themes differently, and of the way in which one motif can offer several different meanings, both for those who might wish to interpret what they saw in a more overtly political mode and for those who preferred the use of escape routes away from self-examination.



Sophocles' last two extant plays share a notable number of thematic and verbal similarities,³⁶ played out in two radically different settings to create two different meditations on exile, reintegration and human fellowship. Central to both is the need of a problematic and unprepossessing

dress some embarrassing truths, they shoehorn them into the existing idealized image of Athens and explain them away as tiny anomalies in Athens' generally glorious record: see, for example, Isoc. 4.100–102.

35 On Athens as universal benefactor and some implausible claims, see Mills 1997, 58–78.

36 Torrance 1965, 321; Winnington Ingram 1980, 257; Craik 1980, 252; Whitman 1983, 236–237; Markantonatos 2007, 199–200.

character to be reintegrated into a community. The protagonists of both plays are damaged, physically, mentally, and in their relationship with divinity. A transgression against the divine – Philoctetes’ transgression with Chryse, Oedipus’ more serious offences against divine laws – has brought each physical damage and forced expulsion from their communities. Their exile in turn has inflicted mental wounds on them, through the burning resentment they feel for the injustices done them by the community that once honoured them. Now, however, these two outcasts are needed by their communities, and must be brought back within them, whether or not they are willing to help those who once abandoned them at their hour of greatest vulnerability (*Ph.* 260–284; *OC* 396–454, 765–782, 1356–1366). Philoctetes and Oedipus both have the key to their community’s survival or success: only with Philoctetes can the Greeks sack Troy and end the Trojan War; Oedipus must act as a kind of talisman for whoever is to win the war fought over Thebes by his two sons. Those from their former communities who seek Philoctetes and Oedipus are essentially engaged in a kind of commercial transaction in which the aim is to get maximum benefit at minimum cost.³⁷ Since both still bear the marks of what caused their original exile – Philoctetes is physically disgusting still and Oedipus bears physical marks related to the religious pollution that surrounds him – neither community wants to offer these unlovely creatures any more than the bare minimum necessary to secure their services.

Those such as Neoptolemus and Theseus, who champion Philoctetes and Oedipus against such ill-treatment, see within them a quality of human dignity that their circumstances cannot take away. Both the perception of human dignity and its possession are tied to the word *γενναῖος*,³⁸ derived from *γένος* and denoting that which is true to the *γένος*, generally a noble *γένος*, and thus what is high-born. It is in origin a term of aristocratic approval, and is used, for example, by Pindar for praising aristocratic fathers who pass their excellences on to aristocratic sons.³⁹

37 Cf. Linforth 1956, 103–105.

38 See Ellendt 1841, 354–355 on its range of meanings in Sophocles and for some other discussions; Fraenkel 1950, 551–552; Knox 1964, 187 n. 18; Nussbaum 1976, 44–45; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 309; Calder 1985, 10; Blundell 1993b, 104–106.

39 *Pi. P.* 8.44. The connotations are similar in *Thgn.* 535–538: cf. also *E. El.* 551 and *HF* 872 (of the foot of the vengeful Iris!); *Th.* 2.97.3; [X.] *Ath.* 2. A related, and striking, use of the adjective is found at *S. Aj.* 938, *γενναῖα δῦη*,

Thus, there is common ground between γενναῖος and εὐγενής – indeed *LSJ* defines εὐγένεια first as nobility of birth⁴⁰ and then offers γενναιότης as its synonym⁴¹ – and some commentators connect it with Sophocles' interest in, and endorsement of the power of hereditary excellence. Certainly he makes an explicit link between εὐγένεια and γενναιότης at *Philoctetes* 874, when Philoctetes commends Neoptolemus for staying with him during his attack and enduring the stench of his foot: ἀλλ' εὐγενής γὰρ ἡ φύσις κᾶξ εὐγενῶν. Only one like Neoptolemus, who proves true to his birth from Achilles, could be expected to act so splendidly. But I doubt that Sophocles is promoting old-school class distinctions or questioning the value of the democratic ethos of equality. There is, indeed, an innate class bias in the term,⁴² and it may never completely lose connotations of high birth, but at least from Herodotus' time, γενναῖος broadens its focus to encompass the excellent qualities that should be expected in one high-born, just as the word 'noble' does for us, to denote nobility in a broader sense in mind or action, not confined to those of a particular family line.⁴³ In some cases it is not entirely clear whether the adjective refers exclusively to birth or simultaneously implies moral attributes: at *Iliad* 5.253, in Homer's only use of the word, Diomedes claims, οὐ γὰρ μοι γενναῖον ἀλυσκάζοντι μάχεσθαι: it is either not fitting for one of his line to shun fighting, or such an act would not be noble in the broader sense of the term.⁴⁴ Equally, the concepts of good birth and

where γενναῖα should, according to Jebb, be connected with γνήσιος, 'true-born' (cf. *Hdt.* 1.173.5) and thus 'genuine'.

- 40 *A. Pers.* 442; *Isoc.* 3.42. This term can also refer to highly bred animals (*Pl. R.* 375a, e), or impressive physical appearance: *E. Hel.* 136, *Med.* 1072.
- 41 As, for example, at *E. Cyc.* 201 or *Tr.* 727 where εὐγενῶς must clearly denote 'nobly' in its broader moral sense.
- 42 Which, for Nussbaum 1976, 52, n. 41, constitutes a serious limitation on Sophoclean morality, but the problem is diminished if γενναιότης itself is consciously extended to include those outside the traditional elite classes. Sophocles may never entirely separate the concept from good birth (Kirkwood 1958, 178), but especially in his later plays γενναιότης clearly transcends social position.
- 43 Thus, at *E. IA* 448 and *Hdt.* 1.173.5, γενναῖος is clearly used to denote high birth, but at *E. IA* 1411 and *Hdt.* 1.37.2, a nobility transcending mere birth must be implied. Similarly, at *Hdt.* 3.140.4, 7.139.3, *E. Herad.* 537, *HF* 357 and *Ar. Ra.* 1012, 1014, 1019, the term must unequivocally be used in its expanded sense.
- 44 Cf. Kirkwood 1958, 177–179. Again, the adjective is used of the Chorus of Argive women at *S. El.* 127. While it could simply denote their social status, Jebb claims that it refers to their dispositions, comparing *OC* 1640. At *E. Hipp.* 1452, Theseus addresses his dying bastard son as γενναῖος: the adjective

good behaviour can actually be separated from one another, as they are by Aristotle who explicitly distinguishes εὐγένεια and γενναιότης, defining the former as excellence of birth, but γενναιότης as being true to one's line, and makes a further claim that many of the εὐγενεῖς are useless (εὐτελεῖς) and not true to their line.⁴⁵ This distinction may be even seen in *Oedipus at Colonus*: Creon and Oedipus share a γένος and Creon resembles Oedipus in many ways. However, he entirely lacks his γενναῖον and the γενναῖος Oedipus breaks with his γένος and chooses instead a friendship with his γενναῖος counterpart Theseus.⁴⁶ Euripides (*Hel.* 726–727, 1641) goes even further in separating γενναιότης from social station by claiming it as a possible attribute for slaves, while his Electra (253, cf. 263) describes her poor and righteous husband as γενναῖος.⁴⁷ Thucydides 3.83.1 (cf. 82.7) claims τὸ γενναῖον as a major part of τὸ εὐηθές, simplicity of mind or good character⁴⁸ – surely not tied to any one class – and laments its obliteration by the cruelties of the Peloponnesian War. To be truly γενναῖος in its extended sense, then, is to resemble the ideal aristocrat: as Philoctetes says, a man who shuns what is shameful and honours what is good (*Ph.* 475), and one who is enduring,⁴⁹ honest, courageous, and self-sufficient.

In the *Philoctetes*, the word bridges both its aristocratically oriented and its more inclusive senses. Neoptolemus comes from one of the most distinguished families in mythology. Being true to Achilles' γένος is a major part of his understanding of what it means to be γενναῖος

probably refers to his generosity of spirit in forgiving his father for causing his death, but it cannot quite be detached from issues of legitimate birth, given the prominence of this theme in the play as a whole.

45 Arist. *Rh.* 1390b22; cf. *HA* 488b9–11. At *Ph.* 902, Philoctetes complains that Neoptolemus is τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν λιπών: at this moment, he is acting like someone εὐγενής who is failing to be γενναῖος.

46 Wilson 1997, 7; Edmunds 1996, 118–119; cf. also Blundell 1993b, 112; Rose 1992, 320–327.

47 Cf. also E. *Alc.* 624, 642, 993, *Or.* 869–870, *Ph.* 1680. The adjective γεννάδας at Ar. *Ra.* 179, 640 is used of the slave Xanthias: cf. Dover 1994², 95.

48 For which, see Creed 1973, 229–30. Pl. *R.* 348c defines justice as γενναίαν εὐθήθειαν; compare the just and ἀπλοῦν καὶ γενναῖον man of *R.* 361b; cf. D. Chr. 52.16.

49 At *Ph.* 872–874, Philoctetes contrasts the γενναῖος Neoptolemus with the Atreidae: οὐκ οὐν Ἀτρεΐδαι τοῦτ' ἔτλησαν εὐφώρως οὕτως ἐνεγκεῖν. Indeed, there seems to be quite a strong connection between γενναιότης and endurance: S. *OC* 1640; E. *Hipp.* 207; Pl. *R.* 329b, 440c–d. At E. *Tr.* 987, Hecuba commends suicide to Helen as the behaviour of a truly γενναία woman and at 727 Talthybius instructs Andromache to endure her troubles εὐγενῶς.

and influences his own internal character (φύσις), whose growth into nobility in the broader sense of the term is a central theme of the play: thus, to Odysseus' request to deceive Philoctetes into coming to Troy with the Greeks, he says that neither his nor his father's φύσις (88–89) can let him do this. Neoptolemus' parentage recurs repeatedly in the *Philoctetes*, because central to it is his ability to be true to his γένος in all senses of the term, and match not only the looks (358) but also the excellence of Achilles, who lurks as a shadowy presence behind the action of the play (96, 222, 226–227; cf. 260, 719). Neoptolemus is repeatedly addressed as 'child of Achilles', and while this is hardly an unusual mode of address, in the mouths of Philoctetes (940, 1066; cf. 1284, 1310) and Odysseus (1237) it is a kind of shorthand for the great question of the play as to Neoptolemus' true nature and what he will do in his dilemma.⁵⁰ At 799 and 801, Philoctetes invokes both Neoptolemus' youth and his γενναιότης as he begs him to put him out of his misery. Moreover, he uses Neoptolemus' presumed γενναιότης and the relationship he once had with Achilles, his former comrade and Neoptolemus' father, to forge a bond of common interest and to appeal to shared *mores* between himself and the young man as kindred spirits against the world of Odysseus and the Atreidae (e.g. 260–263, 468, 869–876).

The meaning of the quality of γενναιότης is central to both *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* and both plays feature reciprocal recognition between those who are γενναῖοι.⁵¹ It is, of course, true that the word is not actually used of Philoctetes, but he appreciates Neoptolemus' γενναῖον (475, 799, 801), believing that they share a common bond, and his belief is gradually reciprocated by Neoptolemus, even though it starts under false pretences. He calls himself courageous (εὐκάρδιος, 535) and ἐσθλόν (905), both of which are a part of γενναιότης. At 535–537, he states that only someone like himself could have endured what he has done: this statement so strongly resembles the claim of the old Oedipus, that only his γενναῖον (OC 8) has helped him to endure his wretched life, that I think we can allow Philoctetes γενναῖον also. The quality is visible to those who do not view the disadvantaged in a purely instrumental manner, and those who have it can see through others' material

50 Cf. Avery 1965, 285; Bowie 1997, 60. The fatherhood/φύσις theme shapes Odysseus' portrayal also: at 625 (cf. 633), he is claimed to resemble his father, the cheating Sisyphus, not Laertes (cf. 1310 and 384).

51 Torrance 1965, 284–288.

circumstances to underlying truths of their nature, so that it becomes a binding agent in human society at a deeper level.⁵² Moreover, and crucially in these tragedies, it is often a somewhat paradoxical designation, because it can be ascribed as often to those such as Oedipus who, though once prosperous, are now despised, as much as it is to the ‘winners’ in society like Theseus and Neoptolemus. Indeed, at *Ajax* 1355–1359, Odysseus calls his once powerful but now vanquished enemy Ajax, γενναῖος. Evidently Odysseus can appreciate an enduring quality in him that transcends their vexed personal relationship and recognizes that his ruin exemplifies not only the fragility of all human prosperity (*Aj.* 121–126), but also the possibility that an enduring quality of character within some people exists independently of their power and status.

In a similar manner, the incestuous, parricidal, polluted, old, and hideous Oedipus still has a γενναῖον in him (8), and it shines through even to the stranger from Colonus, who, on first meeting him, is able to look beyond his hideous appearance to tell that he is γενναῖον (*OC* 75). Later in the play, at 1042–1043, Oedipus gratefully acknowledges Theseus’ own γενναῖον, claiming this characteristic as common to them both, just as Theseus at greater length had acknowledged his common humanity with Oedipus at 562–569.⁵³ At 1636, the messenger commends Theseus as γενναῖος both for his pity for Oedipus and his promise never to betray his oath to look after Oedipus’ daughters, while Oedipus apparently commends γενναιότης to his daughters a little later at 1640, although the text may be corrupt.

Γενναῖος is therefore paradoxically both an adjective of traditional social commendation and one which can transcend social status. It is aristocratic and elitist since clearly not everyone is γενναῖος, yet also it is democratic: those who are truly noble need not be those whose current social station is high. In this double reference, it might be connected with the contemporary tendency, well documented by Nicole Loraux and others, for the Athenians to overlay their much vaunted democratic characteristics with aspirations to a common aristocracy.⁵⁴ In this incarnation, it has both a contemporary colouring, and also offers a comfort-

52 On γενναιότης and reciprocal bonding in society, cf. γενναῖα γὰρ παθόντες ὑμᾶς ἀντιδρᾶν ὀφείλομεν (‘having received generous treatment we owe you similar treatment’), *E. Supp.* 1179. Whether coincidentally or not, the word γενναῖος seems strikingly prevalent in Attic drama of the late fifth century, appearing six times each in *Philoctetes*, *Frogs*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

53 Cf. Whitman 1983, 235.

54 Loraux 1986, 180–202; Mills 1997, 70–72.

ingly familiar nod to Herodotean or early Sophoclean ideas of the profound instability of human prosperity. A person's γενναῖον might remain, even after divine envy or other malign forces in the universe have removed the social status that was a part of his life, comfortingly refuting the claim of Simonides 542 that 'Everyone who fares well is good but if he fares ill, he is bad' (cf. OC 228, 252).⁵⁵ Such a sentiment, with its mixture of appeal to contemporary aspirations and pleasurably familiar ideas of universal vulnerability, might have an extremely wide appeal to many different constituencies in the audience. For those who longed for the good old days or, like Thucydides, lamented a world from which τὸ γενναῖον had been banished, the play could satisfy nostalgia for what might seem like a happier and more successful Athens. Equally, however, the theme has enough emotional and intellectual heft to provide a satisfying dramatic and emotional experience without *unavoidably* invoking present or recent sufferings.⁵⁶

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, τὸ γενναῖον is relatively uncomplicated: Oedipus' γενναῖον might in some ways be surprising, given who he is and what he has done, but it is acknowledged by the uncomplicatedly γενναῖος Theseus whose judgement is surely beyond suspicion. It is perhaps significant, however, that γενναϊότης appears to be more complicated in the *Philoctetes* than in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and this greater complexity might conceivably reflect an attempt by Sophocles to offer political advice through the medium of a relatively safe, distanced setting, far from Athens or, indeed, any polis at all. Neoptolemus' character and the choices he will make are central to *Philoctetes*, and the play sets up several models of γενναϊότης for him: first, being true to his father's γένος, by which he seems to mean acting without any deceit (88–89), following the Iliadic Achilles who hates like the gates of Hades a man whose words and deeds do not match each other; second, doing what the older, dominant and more experienced Odysseus commands him to do to help the Greek army; and third, later in the play, compensating for his earlier cruelty to Philoctetes by forfeiting his chance of heroic glory at Troy in order to keep his original promise to take him back home. These models are, of course, hopelessly incompatible with one another.

At *Philoctetes* 51, Odysseus equates being γενναῖος with deceiving Philoctetes into returning to Troy with Heracles' bow in order to secure victory for the Greeks and end ten years of wretchedness for his com-

55 Cf. Whitman 1983, 233.

56 Cf. Easterling 1997a, 35.

munity. At its best, Odysseus' form of τὸ γενναῖον involves privileging the interests of the wider community over those of the individual,⁵⁷ and at 1068, he scornfully slights the γενναϊότης of Neoptolemus when the youth's individual scruples appear to be undermining the safety and success of the whole Greek army. Odysseus himself states that he prefers to subordinate his individual interests to the interests of his community and claims not to care about what people might say about him (*Ph.* 66). This in itself is not necessarily an unattractive or immoral characteristic and might show a level of public spirit that Neoptolemus actually lacks by being so firmly fixated on his duty to his φύσις and his reputation as the son of a traditional hero. However, the more explicit reprise and expansion of Odysseus' point of view at *Philoctetes* 1049–1052 emphasizes its fundamental moral ambiguity as he claims that whatever man the community needs, he is that one. Where justice is needed, he is just, but nothing is as important as winning, however that may be achieved. It turns out that for Odysseus, justice and morality are not fixed absolutes, as Neoptolemus characterizes his own φύσις, but they are like a coat to be donned and removed according to the conditions around him. He views moral conduct as a matter of 'being called' good (82, 119, 93–94),⁵⁸ of reputation in others' eyes rather than something clear and unchanging. From Homer onwards, κλέος – fame, reputation – is an important part of heroism,⁵⁹ but in Homer there is no question that reputation does not reflect reality. In Odysseus, a new gap between appearance and reality has opened up and his idea of what is right is mutable, νόμος, not φύσις. Neoptolemus, by contrast, has a strong sense of the fixity of his own φύσις and thus of morality and τὸ γενναῖον, and refuses to act in a manner he considers wrong.⁶⁰

And yet, Odysseus' position is not entirely wrong, nor does the ending of the play conclusively invalidate it. The Greeks are at war, and in a war which, in line with both the mythological tradition and with simple justice, they must ultimately win. Since they need Philoctetes to do so, as a good soldier and servant of his community, Odysseus is obliged to

57 Nussbaum 1976, 36 defines Odysseus' idea of γενναῖος as 'reliably obedient in the services of the common good'.

58 Segal 1995, 100–102.

59 Blundell 1989, 191.

60 See Guthrie 1969, 353–354 for a discussion of the relationship in sophistic thought between νόμος and φύσις, and appearance and reality.

get him.⁶¹ And though he might be morally tainted in most people's eyes and routed by the end of the play,⁶² in fact, he gets exactly what he wants as Philoctetes is reluctantly borne off to Troy. At 925–926, Neoptolemus states that what is advantageous (cf. 131) and what is right must force Philoctetes to obey those in power: though the sentiment is expressed in distinctly sophistic terminology, which may raise some questions about its moral validity,⁶³ it is actually true.

Once Neoptolemus extricates himself from Odysseus and stands alone as a moral agent, the task before him is exactly the same as it was when Odysseus first laid it out to him – to bring Philoctetes to Troy. Persuasion is his only hope, since force and deception are no good, and he mingles compassion with a concrete appeal to the benefits Philoctetes will gain from coming – restored health and heroic reputation, the two things he has lacked and longed for so long. And because of this, although we have been encouraged throughout the play to offer Philoctetes' troubles great sympathy, above all when we see his devastated response to betrayal by the friend he had come to trust, once Neoptolemus offers him a sure way to regain all that he has lost, he is no longer a worthy recipient of pity and Neoptolemus in fact should not submit to his entreaties. Pity is only for those actively unable to improve their lot⁶⁴ and he has now been given the chance to escape his miseries. But in a particularly fine paradox of γενναϊότης when Neoptolemus understands that earlier decisions that went against his γενναῖον and his φύσις have now hopelessly trapped him into agreeing to take Philoctetes home rather than pursuing glory at Troy, Philoctetes considers this to be his truly γενναῖον ἔπος (1402) through which he can finally trust his friendship again. And yet, how can this be γενναῖον in the traditional sense? It is true that Neoptolemus' father once turned his back on the Trojan War effort, but he was motivated by his own hurt honour,

61 Kirkwood 1958, 149; Heath 1999, 143–147. Bowie 1997, 61 argues that the play's pervasive reminiscences of Homer are intended to remind the audience of Odysseus' considerable skills and that he is not one-dimensionally evil.

62 But since he has achieved exactly what he originally set out to do, we should perhaps not make too much of his failure. After all, he has himself denied that reputation is important to him.

63 On Sophocles and the sophists, see Craik 1980, 248, for whom Odysseus' relationship with Neoptolemus is one of teacher and pupil; Whitman 1951, 179–180; Rose 1992, 266–330, esp. 307–308; Beer 2004, 139.

64 Blundell 1989, 200 notes the connection between pity and justice; cf. Whitman 1951, 175; Harsh 1960, 410–413.

not by personal sympathy with another human being, and it is hard to imagine him deliberately abandoning the glory of taking Troy in an instance such as this. By placing the traditional aristocratic bonds of friendship above his duties to the polis, it could even be argued that Neoptolemus is not acting honourably.⁶⁵ His final promise to take Philoctetes home *can* be interpreted an act of extraordinary γενναιότης in its extended sense, yet this is not the only way to interpret it: it is far from compatible with Neoptolemus' heritage from his γένος,⁶⁶ and it is arguably detrimental to the greater good of the Greek army.

Neoptolemus' dilemma encompasses questions which could have central importance to the Athenian democracy: if many benefit, might not the coercion of one or a minority be justified? Or can a successful democracy only be run by means of sympathy, or a certain fellow feeling, expressed in terms of mutually respected γενναιότης? One boast of the Athenian democracy was that it is flexible, self-sufficient, and always equal to any task that is set before it,⁶⁷ rather like Odysseus, in fact.⁶⁸ In his final attempt to intervene between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes (1222–1258), Odysseus appeals to the force of the army – a kind of democracy in the sense of majority rule, but hardly the type built on the consent through persuasion that is central to the image of democracy at Athens.⁶⁹ Is Sophocles, therefore, exploring some potentially negative aspects of stereotypical Athenian flexibility through its workings in the superficial and insincere Odysseus and showing how, with the admixture of some recognizably sophistic elements, it can lead to extremely undesirable moral consequences?⁷⁰ Under Odysseus the quick, flexible thinker who works to help the community lurks Odysseus the seeker after his own advantage who lacks any sense of the fixed principles associated with traditional morality. The gap between the superficially attractive elements of his character and their unattractive consequences has certainly recalled to some moderns Thucydides' characterization of the Greek world during the Peloponnesian War as a place where

65 Beer 2004, 147.

66 Blundell 1993b, 109–111; for a different interpretation which sees less ambiguity in the term, see Avery 1965, 289.

67 Pl. R. 561e; cf. Th. 1.70–71, 73; Mills 1997, 55, 70, 77.

68 Harsh 1960, 409–410, Knox 1964, 124, and Bowie 1997, 58 align him more specifically with the contemporary demagogues.

69 Compare also Creon's appeals to a pseudo-democracy, OC 741–742.

70 Nussbaum 1976, 34–39 offers a philosophically oriented discussion of the moral problems attendant on Odysseus' philosophy.