

FURTHER LIGHT ON FOLK-TALE ELEMENTS
IN SOPHOCLES' *PHILOCTETES*

A recent article of mine entitled *Philoctetes: Wild Man and Helper Figure*¹ argued the relevance to understanding the Sophoclean treatment of that individual of a folk-tale pattern whereby the questing hero encounters, at an early stage of his adventure, an ambivalent helper figure who gives him a magical agent, as Vladimir Propp termed it², to aid him in his adventure. In the story in question, the agent would be the famous bow originally belonging to Heracles which Neoptolemus has to extract from Philoctetes. As part of a courteous critique of this interpretation³, Patrick Finglass has now proposed that my suggestion should be modified, in that the pattern, though undeniably established in the first part of Sophocles' play, breaks down in the latter half.

Such a process would certainly be at home in Sophocles' late masterpiece. Numerous examples could be cited of how great dramatists set themselves the task of defeating in the second part of a drama those audience expectations so carefully built up in the first. One has only to think of Sophocles' own handling of the theme of exile from Thebes in his *Oedipus Rex*⁴. However, my attitude towards the alleged folk-tale pattern has developed (dare I say 'progressed'?) since the time when I completed the relevant article, and I here publish my second thoughts on the issue. To put the matter in a nutshell, I would now suggest that the play's second half can still be interpreted as maintaining the folk-tale values established in the first, though in a form more flexible than I initially suggested.

The argument had best begin on a level of considerable generality. For another way of looking at the story-pattern posited above would be to observe that the so-called heroic quest can sometimes take the form of an individual's life, the most basic form a quest can take. After all, 'Life' may be conceived as a journey ("Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita"). At the same time, the helper figure mentioned earlier as aiding the hero may be conceived as a *tester* or *tempter* who tries or tempts him, an interpretation equally at home in the approach of Vladimir Propp which has supplied the basic framework for my approach here⁵. The hero who makes the correct choice

¹ "PP" 58, 2003, 347-55.

² *The Morphology of the Folk-Tale*: see "CQ" 38, 1988, p. 278 n. 8 for details of publication etc.

³ *The hero's quest in Sophocles' Philoctetes*, "Prometheus" 32, 2006, 217-24.

⁴ See, for instance my remarks in "Prometheus" 17, 1991, 7f.

⁵ See "CQ" 54, 2004, 606.

wins through. Perhaps the most obvious instance of this pattern from Greek literature is Heracles at the Crossroads, though such apparently diverse narratives as the Judgement of Paris or Christ's temptation in the wilderness also derive from it. The number of the tempting figure(s) varies, it will be observed, from one to three.

Now as applied to Philoctetes, this developed scheme obviously functions very well. The hero near the start of his life or quest is Neoptolemus: note in particular the significant etymology⁶ of his name. In the three examples of the requisite pattern just cited, the testing or tempting of the hero takes the form of a presentation of contrasting modes of life between which the hero has to choose. In general, these modes of life are frequently *personified*, as in the cases of Heracles and Paris, where two and three females embodying the contrasts respectively encounter the hero. The same is true of Neoptolemus in Sophocles' play. The young hero has to choose between two contrasting views of life or heroism as embodied in Odysseus on the one hand and on the other his own father Achilles in the past and Philoctetes in the present. The use of Achilles and Odysseus as two emblematically antithetical types of heroism was frequent in the ancient world⁷. Neoptolemus therefore has, as it were, a new choice of Heracles to make, and it is significant that Heracles in particular should be invoked at this stage, given his role in the play as a whole and what he means for Philoctetes⁸. In other contexts, Odysseus' type of heroism can receive a more positive presentation, even when this variety of antithesis is at stake: recall, for instance, the treatment by Euripides in his *Telephus*⁹. But in Sophocles' treatment, Neoptolemus has to reject Odysseus' world-view in order to get on the right path. Initially he errs due to immaturity. In the prologue, Odysseus holds out to Neoptolemus the intoxicating prospect of becoming a species of superhero, who will combine the qualities of wisdom and valour that form the characterising traits of both Odysseus himself and his own father Achilles (v. 119 σοφός τ' ἄν αὐτὸς κάγαθός κεκληῖ ἄμα). Then, as the play darkens, the realisation comes that such a prospect is the merest wish-fulfilment: a definite choice between the two options has to be made, rejecting one and embracing the other, however tragic the consequences. Neoptolemus initially opts for Odys-

⁶ See the article cited in n. 1, p. 354 n. 30.

⁷ See "ZPE" 133, 2000, 7. Note further that in Euripides' earlier *Philoctetes* (see Kannicht *TrGF* 5.2, p. 829, test. iv.c) the titular hero was faced with an *agon* between representatives of the Greeks (Odysseus) and the Trojans (probably Paris), each eager to win him to their side. This may well have influenced Sophocles' presentation of a (younger) hero's need to choose between two divergent views of the world.

⁸ See my remarks in "SIFC" 1, 2001, 57.

⁹ See the article cited in n. 7.

seus. But the growth in maturity alluded to above gives the hero a chance not usually enjoyed by individuals faced with folk-tale's life-choice – he is given the opportunity to correct this wrong decision, and by siding with Philoctetes he finally makes the right choice, (like Heracles, but unlike, for instance, Paris), and can thenceforth proceed, as any folk-tale hero, to his main quest, the sack of Troy.

It has long been realised, and on grounds utterly independent of the arguments just cited, that one of the central themes of Sophocles' play is Neoptolemus' growth to maturity¹⁰. In the course of depicting this growth, Sophocles exploits a strictly irrational, but dramatically very effective device in the form of Neoptolemus' sudden and mysterious acquisition of a new-found moral authority within the second half of the play¹¹. There is a rather surprising analogy for this change in a drama that is very different from Sophocles', though one originally produced not many years later. I refer to Aristophanes' *Frogs*, in whose second half the god Dionysus, presented in the initial half as a buffoon and coward, suddenly and inexplicably (inexplicably, that is, on grounds other than those of the relevant type of dramatic technique) gains in authority and power¹². This change is very largely motivated by the need to have Dionysus act, in the later part of the play, as judge in the *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides, but this *agon* too can be shown to be yet another example of the folk-tale pattern of the choice between antithetical styles of life, personified in two contrasting characters¹³. Dionysus must choose between Aeschylus and Euripides just as Neoptolemus must choose between Achilles / Philoctetes and Odysseus; and the choice transpires to be a very similar one, involving the old and the new.

This is by no means the first time that these two seemingly diverse dramas have been juxtaposed. Ludwig Radermacher compared them many decades ago in the Introduction to his commentary on Aristophanes' *Frogs*¹⁴. He

¹⁰ See, for instance, Karin Alt, "Hermes" 89, 1961, 141ff. = *Sophokles* (Wege der Forschung 95, 1967), 412ff.

¹¹ See Alt as in previous note.

¹² See, for instance, the remarks of K.J. Dover in the Introduction to his commentary on the play (Oxford 1993) p. 41f., esp. p. 42 on Dionysus' "idiocy and inanity" as being "in abeyance during the weighing-scene" and "his questions about politics" as being "serious enough". As he further observes, in his new role the god "must cajole, command, and reprove (830-94, 1410)", and these (changed) dramatic requirements are not so very different from those existing for Neoptolemus near the end of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Dover also considers the question whether this change in the presentation should necessarily be interpreted in terms of a "development" of character, a question to which it is easier to answer "yes" in the case of Sophocles' Neoptolemus.

¹³ See my remarks in "SIFC" 2, 2004, 39.

¹⁴ Vienna 1904, pp. 41ff. Cf. my remarks in the article cited n. 13, p. 35f.

there pointed out that the two plays shared the primordial pattern of two individuals partaking of a quest to bring back a third from a distant and grim locale, and that in each case that individual was returned from the Other-world, as it were, to this world in order to perform a valuable function: Philoctetes' presence is essential if the Greeks are to conquer Troy and Aeschylus' presence is essential if Athens is to survive the war with Sparta. In effect, both individuals are restored to life or rejuvenated as part of this process.

It is notorious¹⁵ that the initial *conchetto* behind the Aristophanic treatment undergoes a radical change during the course of the play itself: Dionysus' original aim is to bring back Euripides from Hades and this plan somehow metamorphoses into the different scheme of an *agon* between that playwright and Aeschylus to determine which of the two will be allowed to return to the upper world. Something similar can be detected in Sophocles' play. The original scheme entertained by Odysseus and outlined by him in the prologue is that Neoptolemus is to go to Lemnos and fetch back Philoctetes with Odysseus' help. This quest develops, in the course of the drama, into something infinitely more complex and tragic: the necessity for Neoptolemus to make a choice between Philoctetes and Odysseus (whose guidance initially seemed relatively so simple and straightforward).

That Aristophanes may specifically have had Sophocles' play at the back of his mind while crafting his own seems to me to be made likelier if we consider one particular string of jokes in it. At lines 648ff., in an attempt to decide whether Dionysus or his slave Xanthus is the real divinity, robust physical force is applied to each and much comedy is extracted from the way in which each cries out in pain and then attempts to disguise the cry as a random exclamation or prayer. Note in particular vv. 659ff., where a god's name in the vocative, originally an exclamation of pain, is then passed off as a prayer:

Δι. ὦ Ἀπολλων – ὅς που Δῆλον ἢ Πυθῶν' ἔχεις.

Ξα. ἤλγησεν· οὐκ ἤκουσας;
* * *

Δι. Πόσειδον –

Ξα. ἤλγησέν τις.

Δι. ὦς Αἰγαίου πρῶνός ἢ γλαυκᾶς μέδεις
ἀλὸς ἐν βένθεσιν.

A surprisingly similar impression is produced to tragic effect about half way through the *Philoctetes*, when the hero is struck down by an onset of pain from his wound and tries to hide the fact from his new-found friend

¹⁵ See, for instance, Dover's commentary (above, n. 12) p. 6f.

Neoptolemus. Here too (at 736-7) a cry of agony is retrospectively converted to a prayer:

Φι. ὦ θεοί.

Νε. τί τοὺς θεοὺς ὧδ' ἀναστένων καλεῖς;

Φι. σωτήρας αὐτοὺς ἡπίους θ' ἡμῖν μολεῖν.

In both cases a common formula of cletic prayer or hymn is drawn upon to convert the original cry of physical suffering. The two scenes are very different, but I believe the earlier, Sophoclean, acted as a sort of catalyst upon the later, Aristophanic.

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