

### 3. The Death of Herakles

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Herakles was a hero who became a God.<sup>i</sup> As a hero, he was credited in the myths with many feats of a distinctly superhuman kind. But the Herakles of Sophocles is a very human hero indeed. The most remarkable of his heroic deeds — his wrestling-match with the River Acheloos — is set before us at the beginning of the *Trachiniae* as a riddle. How could a *human* hero wrestle with a *river* at all? and what could his *victory* in such a struggle mean? Deianeira makes the wrestling physically imaginable by telling us that, as a suitor for her hand, the River came to her father in three forms: as a bull, as a dragon-serpent, and as a bull-headed man. In his human shape the spring-water ran continually down his beard. So this third shape is the *complete* shape of the River. The dragon-serpent must be present in him, even though its presence is not clearly visible. But the steady running of the spring-water reminds us that the River Acheloos is a God. It is only as a God himself, that Herakles can possibly overcome him; and his translation from man to God can come only after his death. So the *death* of Herakles is *essentially* involved in his wrestling victory, and the winning of Deianeira as his wife. Deianeira must logically be his *last* human bride.

The whole problem of the play is contained in Deianeira's opening speech. Herakles wrestled with the River and won. But Deianeira could not watch the struggle; and the marriage that followed was a direct continuation of the fear and uncertainty that she was in while the wrestling lasted. She shares the bed of Herakles, but not his *home*, because he does not have a home. Like the owner of a distant farm, he comes for the planting and the harvest, but is never with her at any other time. In substance, his life is one of servitude to alien masters (or mistresses); and now finally, Deianeira has been left in Trachis as an exile. Herakles is free (as far as she knows); but she has not seen him for fifteen months.

In fact Herakles *was* free when he left home; but Deianeira's son Hyllos (presumably the eldest child of the marriage) has heard of how his father got into servitude for another year. Now he is free again, but making war upon Eurytos in Euboea. Deianeira knows — from an oracle that Herakles himself revealed to her — that this will be his last adventure away from home. Either he will meet his death, or he will live peacefully at home. What neither of them realize is

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that these two destinies are *identical*. For Herakles, peaceful life is the same as living death. The Chorus warns Deianeira that she must not try to change the pattern of her life. She must live like a widow with hope as her only comfort (121-4). But this she cannot actually do, because, as we shall see, she is threatened with the loss of her wifely status.

Herakles himself anticipates his own death. He has made his will. Logically there is nothing left for him to do but die, since his labors are now over. It appears that he can look forward to a long life of quietness at home. But it is an ominous sign that his herald, Lichas, is proclaiming his return to the people, and not first to Deianeira herself. Lichas knows more than he is willing to tell even when he does arrive. He gives us (and Deianeira) the official cover story about Herakles' latest warfare. Herakles was supposedly taking his revenge on Eurytos for causing him to be in servitude to Omphale for a year. But actually, as our messenger has heard Lichas say, Herakles was in love with Iole, the daughter of Eurytos; and the silent girl whom Deianeira has met and pitied as destined in future for the live of slavery will displace her not only in Herakles' bed but as mistress of his household.

We must understand clearly that Deianeira does not resent the waywardness of Aphrodite. Herakles has taken many women to bed; and she never said a harsh word to any of them (460-2). It is the attempt to deceive her that she finds alarming. Lichas, when challenged, tells the truth, and also asserts that the deceit was all his own idea. But he indulged in it, because he knew how deeply Herakles was in love, and he wanted to spare Deianeira's feelings. Deianeira understands that the new love is likely to be permanent, and that Herakles will have two wives from now on. Iole will be the blooming rose, while she herself is fading. Herakles will be her spouse formally speaking, but Iole's "man" properly (550-1).

This is the context of Deianeira's decision to use the love-charm given to her by the Centaur Nessos when he was dying. We need to study the story of his death carefully. It happened when Herakles and Deianeira were just married. Nessos was carrying her across a river, and "touched her with wanton hands" when they were in mid-stream. Herakles shot him at once when Deianeira cried out (564-7). We might ask at once why Herakles was not carrying her himself, and how she got safely to the other bank when Nessos was shot; but the absence of any further explanation alerts us to the *symbolic* character of the story. The River represents human life as a ceaseless flow of impulse and desire. It is Herakles who must wrestle with himself as Acheloos. He must conquer and control the bull and the dragon-snake. Nessos in mid-stream is the half-human being, driven by his sexual urge. The bow of Herakles (or, more precisely, his arrows) represents here his control of sex. We should notice that "bows" were

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somehow involved in the great wrestling-match. The Chorus knows this (518); and it is in this physically incoherent way that the “dragon-snake” is actually represented in the struggle. Thus what Nessos tells Deianeira makes symbolic sense. She can use the Centaur’s blood to keep Herakles from straying sexually once he comes home properly. The Hydra-poison on the arrow is just what is needed. Nessos warns her to take care that the magical blood is kept in the dark.

Deianeira, as a good wife, has woven a new robe for Herakles; and she now anoints this with the magical blood. She takes no care for the flock of wool that she used for that purpose; and when she happens to see it in the light, she realizes at once what a terrible thing she has done in sending the robe to Herakles. The dying Centaur has deceived her. Herakles will die through his own venom, and she must die too.

Her reading of the situation is confirmed at once by her son Hyllos, who wishes she were dead (or at least not his mother) because of what her gift has done to Herakles. Herakles, while sacrificing bulls, revealed the bull in himself, when the venom began to torture him. The curse of the Chorus (383-4) falls upon Lichas (in spite of his repentant truthfulness). Herakles destroys him with the same uncontrolled violence that he had displayed towards Iphitos in the encounter which led to his becoming the bond-slave of Omphale (270-8). Deianeira goes out and stabs herself before Herakles is brought in. She kills herself on her marriage bed.

All of this provides the opportunity for two Choral Odes; Herakles is carried in during the second one. In spite of his torment, he is asleep. This is a clear sign that the agony, which comes and goes, is essentially psychological. He pleads for a quick death now that his long career spent in destroying the natural enemies of human social life is over. But, as the Chorus has told us, the child of Zeus cannot simply go to Hades (829-30). The problem now is to work out a way of dying that will be an appropriate transition to Heaven. Herakles wants Hyllos to put him out of his misery, but Hyllos will not do it. Death must be the work of Herakles himself.<sup>ii</sup>

When Herakles learns the truth about what Deianeira did, he says that he has come to his death through one who dwells in Hades. He puts two oracles together, one that foretold this, and one that promised release from his toils. He sees now that the second one meant death, and not a life of ease. So he makes Hyllos promise to take him to the mountain-top and build the funeral pyre for him. In spite of his oath Hyllos will not consent to put the torch to the pyre, so Herakles will have to find someone else to do that (but it is clear that that is not a problem for him).

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It is significant also, that Hyllos is commanded to marry Iole. In loyalty to his mother, he does not want to do it; but he consents because his resistance causes a new onset of Herakles' agony. This helps us to see that sexual desire is itself the torturing force here. Herakles himself has already commented on the fact that after successfully completing all of his trials, he has been brought low by a mere woman (1062). It was really Iole who subdued him; and the whole history of the last fifteen months has been the story of Herakles in subjection to a woman. Now Hyllos must accept the destiny of peaceful home-life that Herakles cannot fulfil.

Symbolically speaking, Herakles must light his own pyre, and burn himself to death. He has no future in the world now pacified and at peace. By calling the play *Trachiniae*, Sophocles brings out the crucial transition from warfare to the new world of the womenfolk who make their homes in peace. Herakles and Deianeira are not native residents of Trachis. For Herakles, home-life would be a living death under perpetual torture. Deianeira's hope is vain because the wrestling-match with the River of Life produced only a very qualified victory. At his best, Herakles was only a "bull-fronted man" (11-2). He was a great warrior; but once the dragon-snake declared itself clearly, it was time for Herakles to die, because a quiet home-life was quite beyond his compass. Deianeira's first suitor was really the only one she had, because Herakles and the River are identical. Sophocles has turned the deification of Herakles into a great allegory about the emergence of true humanity out of bestial drive and impulse. We must not think that Deianeira's jealousy towards Iole is important. When Herakles killed Iphitos he was sent into servitude under Queen Omphale; and at that same time, Deianeira and her children were sent into exile in Trachis (38-40). All of the female characters are aspects of the domination of sexual desire. In the whole story of his last year, Herakles, the great human benefactor, is turned back into a bull. To Heaven he must go, and the sooner the better.

The significance of Herakles' translation to Heaven is the essential topic of the *Philoctetes*. The principals here are human heroes, not embodied allegories. "Herakles" is in the cast-list; but he is only a ghost-voice, which resolves the ethical impasse in which the human heroes find themselves. The play, which is a deep and subtle meditation on the ethics of communal loyalty in a war situation, leads us to see the terrible inadequacy, the one-sidedness of the divine death of Herakles. We must come back to that death step by step with Philoctetes himself.

We begin with Odysseus, the human master of deceit and cunning. He has brought the son of Achilles, Neoptolemos, back to Lemnos where the archer, Philoctetes, who inherited the

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bow of Herakles, was abandoned ten years ago. Lemnos is a fairly large inhabited island; but for the purposes of the drama, Sophocles wants us to think of it as completely uninhabited. Philoctetes was bitten by a temple-snake; and the wound has never healed, but causes him a perpetual torment like that of the dying Herakles. He was abandoned because the heroes could not endure his cries and screams (or his smell). The fact that he has survived *alone* by the use of the bow is (as we shall see) essential to the symbolic purposes of Sophocles. But apparently his loneliness *also* means that we should not concern ourselves with the sexual interpretation of the wound. It is the *bow* of Herakles upon which all of our attention should be focused.

With Odysseus is the young Neoptolemos, son of Achilles. Neoptolemos came to Troy only after Achilles was killed by Paris (from a distance, with a *bow*). Naturally his ideal of heroism is his father. But it was Odysseus to whom the arms of Achilles were awarded after his death; and Odysseus begins at once to teach Neoptolemos a conception of heroism in which cunning is more important than courage and bodily skill. He must deceitfully persuade Philoctetes to come back with them to Troy. He is to tell him that he is returning home in disgust, because the Greek chiefs have not made Odysseus give up the arms of Achilles to him. He came to Troy because he was told (by Odysseus who fetched him) that his presence was necessary for the victory of the Greeks. Odysseus himself declares that the bow of Herakles is essential for victory; and we can readily understand that as the lesson he would be the first to learn from the death of Achilles.<sup>iii</sup>

Neoptolemos wants to persuade Philoctetes openly and honestly. But Odysseus persuades him that the deceit is his patriotic duty. Even in the older aristocratic code it would be right to deceive an enemy Trojan; but Philoctetes is a Greek, and a friendless man. When he appears, and recognizes the strangers as Greeks, he expects help and pity. Philoctetes has survived alone for years with his painfully wounded foot, after being abandoned while he slept (so like Herakles he is not always in pain). He is very ready to believe that Neoptolemos has quarreled bitterly with Odysseus about his father's armor; and that he is therefore on the way home again. (The truth about the arms of Achilles we never learn; but it seems quite probable that Odysseus handed them over to Neoptolemos quite willingly. He is himself an archer.) Philoctetes is amazed that Ajax let the commanders give Achilles' armor to Odysseus. Neoptolemos tells him only that Ajax is dead. But we are certainly meant to remember that Ajax went mad, and slew sheep and cattle, while in the grip of that uncontrollable Heraklean *bull*. Then he killed himself.

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Philoctetes is not named in the *Trachiniae*. But in order to receive the bow, he had to be present when Herakles died. The general tradition was that he lit the funeral pyre (which Hyllos refused to do). Probably Sophocles intends us to remember this, when he has Neoptolemos speak of the father of Philoctetes as coming from the region of Mount Oeta (453), where Herakles' funeral pyre was.<sup>iv</sup> Philoctetes wants to go home to Oeta. It seems that he is anxious for the quiet home life that was just a slow painful death for Herakles. It is clear that his state of torment is connected with his isolation; but Sophocles wants to leave the problem of his healing as an open question, because, in fact, he will be healed (as Neoptolemos promises later — 1333-5) by his return to Troy; and that is certainly the *Heraklean* solution. Philoctetes' old father, Poias, is still there at home. He never mentions wife or children, but since he suffers so terribly in his isolation, they are perhaps what he needs.

It is reasonable to suspect that Neoptolemos is genuinely sympathetic to Philoctetes, when he tells the Chorus that they must be firm in their expressed desire to take Philoctetes home. But this speech also fits in with the planned pretense; and Odysseus gives the plan a good push at this point by sending in one of the sailors as a supposed merchant, with the news that the Greeks are on their way to take both Neoptolemos and Philoctetes back with them to Troy. Escape now appears to Philoctetes to be in their common interest.<sup>v</sup>

According to the supposed merchant's story (which Neoptolemos certainly believes), Helenos, the Trojan son of Priam captured by Odysseus, has prophesied that Troy will never be taken unless Philoctetes is persuaded to come. Philoctetes seizes on the word "persuasion," because he says that he will never be talked into coming. The supposed merchant has already said that Odysseus and Diomedes are willing to use force (599). That would be somewhat difficult because Philoctetes can defend himself at a distance. But the real problem is that Philoctetes would have to be willing to fight when he got to Troy. (The whole policy of deceit masterminded by Odysseus ignores this problem.)

Neoptolemos now asks to handle the famous bow. What his attitude is with respect to the plan of Odysseus, is quite ambiguous at this point. (We should notice that he has pointed out to Philoctetes that the prevailing wind is not right for their proposed voyage onwards to the Greek mainland.) Philoctetes emphasizes all of the reasons why he should accede to Neoptolemos' request; and this is bound to increase the conflict in his mind. When the Chorus now compares the torment of Philoctetes to that of Ixion on his wheel, we are meant to think of Neoptolemos as bound to the wheel also.

Philoctetes hands over the bow, while he is in the throes of an attack of pain so terrible that he urges Neoptolemos to cut off his foot. He adjures the young man not on any account to let the bow fall into the hands of their enemies. To do that would be to murder Philoctetes and to commit suicide himself. The bow, says Philoctetes, has brought trouble on himself, and Herakles before him; and it may bring trouble on Neoptolemos in future. This leads us to reflect that both Herakles and Philoctetes have used the bow selfishly, and not for the general good of humanity. The bow does not feature in Herakles' famous "Labors," but only in his final sex-dominated adventures; and Philoctetes has used it strictly for the purpose of survival.

Philoctetes suggests that Neoptolemos should light a funeral pyre for him, as he (Philoctetes) did for Herakles; and that he should be the guardian of the bow for the future. At this moment, the attack of pain subsides, and the proposal lapses. But this is certainly the moment when Neoptolemos changes sides. He says only that it would not be right (*themis* — 812) to go without Philoctetes; and he plainly hopes to persuade him to go to Troy. But he has no intention now to take him there without his knowledge, or against his will. Philoctetes is on the verge of falling asleep; when he does, the Chorus asks Neoptolemos what he will do now. It would be easy enough (as Neoptolemos himself says) to abscond with the bow. But he believes the prophecy, which says that Philoctetes himself must be brought to Troy. The Chorus hold — reasonably enough — that this is an opportunity to be seized. But Neoptolemos does not seize it.

Philoctetes, himself, almost expected to find them gone when he wakes up. It is Neoptolemos whom he trusts; and Neoptolemos must now help him to go on board. But at this point Neoptolemos must tell him where they are really going — with a wind that is fair, and not adverse. Philoctetes is naturally appalled, and demands to have his bow back. Neoptolemos says he cannot give it up; so Philoctetes assumes that he will be carried to Troy as a prisoner; and he says that the son of Achilles is one who swears false oaths. If he is left behind, he will starve. But he rightly suspects that Neoptolemos is acting against his own true nature.

Odysseus, seeing that Neoptolemos is about to give the bow back, comes out of hiding and asks for it. There is a great altercation between him and Philoctetes, at the end of which Odysseus says that Philoctetes can remain on Lesbos if he wants to. He will not be taken by force. The bow can be given to Teucer, or Odysseus can use it himself. But this offer is probably a blind. The fact is that Philoctetes must go with the bow, if he wants to stay alive — and this has already been made clear enough. What strikes Philoctetes first, however, is the

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thought of Odysseus using *his* bow (and we can be sure that Odysseus was counting on the effect of that thought).

Philoctetes appeals to Neoptolemos, and to the crew. But both feel themselves to be under orders; and, for the moment at least, Neoptolemos is satisfied by the compromise that will allow Philoctetes to remain without the bow. Philoctetes is left to commune with the Chorus about the terrible prospect of starvation (and of abandoning the bow to the use of Odysseus). The Chorus firmly maintains that it is his duty (as it is theirs) to go to fight at Troy. But when *he* faces this choice plainly Philoctetes asks only for the means to kill himself.

At this point, Neoptolemos returns, followed by Odysseus. He has resolved to follow the path of honor, and give the bow back to Philoctetes. It is clear that he has never let Odysseus have it in his hands. The fears of Philoctetes on that score were quite groundless. But Odysseus puts the dilemma to him roundly: “We are not fighting with the Trojans, but with you” (1253). If he returned to Troy Neoptolemos would be condemned. So if Philoctetes stands firm, they must both go home. When Neoptolemos gives Philoctetes the bow, Odysseus reappears; and Neoptolemos has to prevent Philoctetes from shooting him out of hand. What Philoctetes wants to do, is what Herakles himself would have done without a second thought; but the world of human nobility (*kalon* — 1304) has become more complicated. Personal loyalties must now be reconciled with social obligations — that is what the whole play is about.

Now the final argument can begin. Neoptolemos tells Philoctetes that his terrible affliction is “divine chance” (1326) for which he ought not to blame the Greeks; and that if he will only come to Troy, the Asklepiadae will cure it. Helenos has prophesied that Troy will fall at last, this year, if Philoctetes comes. Philoctetes is tempted; but he finds the thought of “consorting with the sons of Atreus” (1355-6) unbearable; he is amazed that Neoptolemos can do it after the awarding of Achilles’ armor to Odysseus. Let us go home together, he says — and finally Neoptolemos gives in. It seems that Philoctetes has some confidence of being healed at home; for he thinks he can defeat a Greek onslaught on Skyros with the bow of Herakles.

But now, as they are about to go, the spirit of Herakles himself appears. He comes from Heaven, with the commandment of Zeus. But first he tells us that he has won “immortal virtue” (1420) for his labors on behalf of mankind. Then he says that Philoctetes will kill Paris, from whom it all began, and take home rich booty from the sack of Troy. He tells Neoptolemos that

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the two of them must fight together for the fall of Troy; and he ends by ordering them to reverence the Gods, even when they are laying waste the City.

It seems that honor and honesty have won the day. Philoctetes will do what Herakles foretells; and Neoptolemos wants, above all, to be worthy of his father. We remember that Lichas explicitly declared that Herakles did not tell him to use any deceit in bringing Iole home to Trachis. The impetuosity of the bull is supposed to give birth to the sort of chivalry that Neoptolemos finally achieves. But everyone who saw the play knew what actually happened. It was the cunning of Odysseus that actually defeated Troy. The great duel of the archers, Philoctetes and Paris, was followed by the conclusive triumph of cunning and deceit; and when the Wooden Horse brought about the fall of the City, the most memorable deed of Neoptolemos in the Sack, was the slaughter of the aged Priam (whom he dragged away from the altar of Zeus). He was one of the men in the Horse; and he did other, braver things that night. But there were also stories in which he was the slayer of Astyanax and of Polyxena. This is not the “reverence” that Herakles commanded. It appears to me that Sophocles chose very well, when he was looking for a young man in doubt about how to be a hero. Certainly he had all this in mind when he wrote the last two lines of Herakles’ speech: “For piety does not die with mortals/ Among the living and among the dead, it does not perish” (1443-4).

We hear nothing to the discredit of Philoctetes. His role as an archer saves him from any involvement in the final horrors of the Sack of Troy; he returns home safely (with an impressive share of the booty, no doubt). The return to Troy is, for him, the final resolution of his tragic conflict. He typifies the deified Herakles whose struggle with the River is over and won.<sup>vi</sup>

Sophocles himself had been a notable follower of Herakles in his younger days. He helped to create the naval supremacy upon which the “Athenian Empire” was founded; and whereas the *Trachiniae* (as its title tells us) is a meditation on the permanence of peaceful homes, in contrast to the transience of warriors and their women, the *Philoctetes* exalts personal self-sacrifice for the sake of the community. The death of Herakles has a crucial social significance. His final victory over the River means that the bull-front of the warrior must give way to a properly submissive human face. No matter how unjust the leadership of the Atreidae may appear to Philoctetes, to Troy he must go; and although the return home might perhaps heal the ceaseless torment of desire, and bring peace to the Centaur, it is not the way of healing that Zeus has decreed. In the appearance of Herakles at the very moment when Philoctetes and Neoptolemos have decided to go home, we can recognize a comment on the desire of many cities

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to break away from their subjection to Athens. Athens was certainly quite as unjust, as arbitrary and tyrannical, as Agamemnon and Menelaos. But the will of Zeus is for submission and self-sacrifice in the service of a community greater than one's own City.

Athens, however, was destined to be defeated; and although Sophocles did not quite live long enough to see this, he certainly saw it coming. This makes the tragedy of Neoptolemos, which he did not write, into the more insightful verdict on the death of Herakles. Neoptolemos, at the outset of his warrior existence, finds his way painfully to the reconciliation of the warrior's communal obedience with personal loyalty and honor. But he ends in ethical disgrace, and the violation of all human piety. No victory over the River is final for the warrior. Both of the plays about the death of Herakles deal with his transition from the Club to the Bow. It is the Bow that is his weapon of war; and in this new *social* context, he does not himself learn to employ the Bow unselfishly. That is the lesson that he enforces upon the mind of Philoctetes. But the last word remains with Herakleitos: "For the bow, the name (𐀀𐀁𐀂𐀃) is life (𐀄𐀅𐀆𐀇); but its work is death" (Fragment 48).

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<sup>i</sup>The *Iliad* knows nothing of Herakles' elevation to divinity. Achilles uses him as the paradigm case to prove the inevitability of death for mortals (18:117-9). In *Odyssey* 11, Odysseus sees him grimly threatening all and sundry *with his bow*. This unhappy shade (☒☐☒☑☒☐☒☐) is clearly unaware of the divine destiny that has come upon him since the Homeric tradition was originally established. That destiny is glowingly described in three lines that must surely have added later to the original scene (11:601-4).

<sup>ii</sup>Actually the service of lighting the pyre was performed by Philoktetes. But Sophokles leaves that out, because for the moment — as inheritor of the Bow — Philoktetes is to be regarded as identical with Herakles.

<sup>iii</sup>Neoptolemos really has been told (by Odysseus — 344-7) that his presence at Troy is essential (114). Odysseus makes no reference to any oracle. And it is clear that this is because *he*, at least, did not need Apollo's guidance. For *him*, it seems, Neoptolemos is only essential as the ideal agent for the enticement of Philoktetes. (See note 5 for the way in which Sophokles has adjusted the tradition to give this result.)

<sup>iv</sup>Philoktetes does tell Neoptolemos later (801-3) that Herakles gave him the bow, when he lit the funeral pyre for him. He proposes that Neoptolemos should do a like service and receive the same reward.

<sup>v</sup>The merchant's story is that Odysseus is coming with his usual sidekick Diomedes to fetch Philoktetes. The main epic tradition seems to have been that Odysseus and Diomedes *did* fetch Philoktetes. The arrival of Neoptolemos at Troy came later. Sophokles altered the epic chronology in order to put Neoptolemos into an ethical dilemma between Odysseus and Philoktetes.

<sup>vi</sup>There are stories of further adventures and final settlement in Southern Italy (see Gantz, 700-1). But these are not part of the Epic tradition, and are quite probably post-Sophoklean in origin. Sophokles certainly did not mean his audience to take any account of them.