SOPHOCLES' *PHILOCTETES* AND THE INTERPRETATION OF *ILIAD* 9

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In Book 9 of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon's emissaries, Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax attempt to persuade Achilles to return to battle.[1] They employ a variety of arguments both moral and prudential in form. Among these, Odysseus promises the hero glory (κῦδος, 9.303) and lists the many gifts that Achilles will win if only he relents (9.262–99). Phoenix, portraying himself as a surrogate father to Achilles, appeals to a hero's normal regard for the values of the *oikos* or household (9.434–95). Ajax, for his part, speaks of the claims of friendship (φιλότητος, 9.630, 642) and of the moral obligations imposed upon a host by the presence of guests beneath his roof (9.640–42). The embassy moves the disaffected hero but, still, it fails to persuade him to return. Some scholars have claimed that the embassy fails despite the fact that the ambassadors employ the full range of arguments likely to be persuasive in the heroic culture of the *Iliad*. In one of the most eloquent statements of this position, J. B. White has claimed: "Everything that can be said in this world on such an occasion is said; everything that can be done is done. The resources of the culture are defined, as it were, by their exhaustion. . . ."[2] I wish to suggest, on the contrary, that the heroic culture of the *Iliad* offers resources for persuasion that the ambassadors tragically fail to exploit.[3] Using evidence drawn from the *Philoctetes* of

1 Citations of the *Iliad* use the OCT of Monro and Allen 1920. The text of the *Philoctetes* is Webster 1970.

2 White 1984.46.

3 As Griffin 1995.21 argues, the poet of the *Iliad* has taken the traditional pattern of a hero's angry withdrawal and triumphant return and complicated it with "a darker and less manageable story, tragic in its colouring and its outcome."

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Sophocles and also from Books 7 and 11 of the *Iliad*, I interpret the failure of the ambassadors in Book 9 in light of more successful examples of heroic persuasion carried out by Heracles in Sophocles' play and by Nestor in the *Iliad* itself. Heracles manages to persuade the disaffected Philoctetes to change his mind and participate in the Trojan War by employing a rhetorical technique well exemplified by Nestor's speeches in the books preceding and following the embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* 9; Heracles uses the details of his own life in order to provide a paradigm for heroic emulation, a *mythos*, the most persuasive rhetorical weapon in the heroic armory.[4] Only when we consider the reasons underlying the successes of Heracles and Nestor, I think, can we appreciate what is lacking in the embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* 9.

As P. E. Easterling has pointed out, Sophocles seems more interested than either of his great rivals in the dynamics of heroic behavior and, in the construction of his dramas, he was much influenced by the Homeric epics.[5] According to Polemo the Academic, "Homer was the epic Sophocles and Sophocles the tragic Homer."[6] Scholars have sometimes used evidence gleaned from Homer in the interpretation of Sophocles' plays, especially the *Ajax*.[7] I wish to reverse this process somewhat and use Sophocles in an attempt to understand Homer a little better.[8]

A number of significant parallels between the *Philoctetes* and the ninth book of the *Iliad* have been pointed out by C. R. Beye:

> The situation of the *Philoctetes* is that of the ninth book of the *Iliad*. The same group of army leaders, reduced to desperation, aware of how central to their objectives the absent hero is, are forced to set off on a mission to persuade him to return.[9]

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4 For this sense of *mythos* as a story told with paradigmatic intent, cf. Henderson 1990.169 (with bibliography) and Martin 1989.39.

5 Easterling 1984.1.

6 Cf. Diogenes Laertius 4.20, cited in Easterling 1984.1. Much is also made of Sophocles' preoccupation with Homeric epic in the anonymous *Vita* of Sophocles. The details of the argument there are difficult to make out with any precision: cf. Radt 1983.199. Nonetheless, as Davidson 1994.378 says: "What remains without question is Homer's pervasive 'presence' in Sophocles . . ."

7 For a partial listing of these scholars, cf. Zanker 1994.64 n. 17.

8 As does Zanker 1994.64–71.

9 Beye 1970.63. However, the situations are not parallel in every respect: Sophocles plays with the idea that deceit, violence, *or* persuasion may be successful in the end (cf. 100–07).

In constructing his play along the lines of *Iliad* 9, Sophocles seems to be developing the implications of a suggestion in the *Iliad* to the effect that certain similarities underlie the careers of Achilles and Philoctetes. In the Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* 2, Achilles appears in the company of a number of other absent heroes, among them Philoctetes, whom he is said to resemble in a number of respects. The Catalogue points out that both Achilles and Philoctetes are alienated from the Achaean army, absent from the war, and suffering great pain (2.688–94, 721–25). Furthermore, the prolepsis of 2.694, which draws attention to Achilles' imminent return (τάχα δ' ἀνστήσεσθαι ἔμελλεν), finds an immediate echo in the description of Philoctetes, who is also soon to return (τάχα δὲ μνήσεσθαι ἔμελλον / 'Αργεῖοι, 2.724–25).[10]

Kitto has offered insightful commentary on the workings of persuasion in the *Philoctetes*, showing that five attempts are made to persuade Philoctetes to go to Troy.[11] First of all, Neoptolemus, employing the language of obligation and necessity (cf. δεῖ, 915; ἀνάγκη, 922), tells Philoctetes that it is necessary that he sail to Troy and rejoin the Achaean army. Philoctetes refuses vehemently and at length (927–62). Thereupon, Odysseus takes up the argument with a similar stress on the idea of necessity (cf. δεῖ, 982 and 998; πορευτέα, 993; and πειστέον, 994), but his pleas prove to be equally futile. After the lengthy lament and refusal of Philoctetes (1004–44), Odysseus announces that he has one word (ἑνὸς . . . λόγου, 1048) left to say: the Greeks do not need Philoctetes, since they possess the bow (1054–61).[12] Here Odysseus unwittingly summarizes the defect in outlook that undermines the success of his speeches: his words, as he himself admits, arise only from the necessities of the situation and not from any fixed or stable character and set of convictions (1049–51). The third attempt at persuasion comprises the equally ineffectual lyrical exchange between Philoctetes and the chorus (1081–1217), wherein the latter emphasize the role of the gods in the suffering of Philoctetes (1116–18), urge him not to refuse their offer of friendship (φιλότητ', 1122), and offer in mitigation of Odysseus' conduct the fact that he is acting in the interests of his friends (φίλους, 1145). The fourth, penultimate attempt at persuasion

10 Cf. Kirk 1985 *ad* 2.724–25.

11 Kitto 1956.120–37.

12 Beye 1970.73 calls Odysseus' threat to depart for Troy with the weapons "the cruelest πειθώ."

is conducted by the newly repentant Neoptolemus, who first establishes his good faith by returning the bow, which he had previously taken, to its rightful owner (1291f.). Thereupon, Neoptolemus resumes his earlier argument regarding the necessity of Philoctetes' trip to Troy and at the same time gives greater substance to the chorus' generalizations respecting the role of the gods in the unfortunate hero's suffering. Philoctetes, he says, suffers a fate sent by the gods (ἐκ θείας τύχης, 1326) and will not be healed until he goes to Troy and sacks the citadel. Citing the source of his knowledge of the future, Neoptolemus discloses in detail the prophecy of Helenus, who asserted the necessity of these things (δεῖ γενέσθαι ταῦτα, 1339) and declared that Troy must fall (ἀνάγκη, 1340) during the present summer. Therefore, according to Neoptolemus, Philoctetes ought to give in, achieve the healing of his disease, and win pre-eminent glory (κλέος ὑπέρτατον, 1347) for his deeds. Neoptolemus pleads: "You must trust in the gods and in my words (τοῖς τ᾽ ἐμοῖς λόγοις, 1374)," but once again Philoctetes proves impervious to persuasion.

In the *exodos*, Heracles appears *ex machina* and finally convinces the hero to go to Troy. "Don't go until you hear my *mythoi* (1409–10)," Heracles says. Kitto, who so well analyzed the first four attempts at persuasion, judges the effort of Heracles, the fifth, successful example of persuasion, to be a failure as a piece of dramatic rhetoric:

> Nowhere in the whole of Sophocles is there a speech less impressive than this one which he wrote for Heracles. . . . If Sophocles wanted to round off the action, to reverse Philoctetes' decision without giving any theological or intellectual or psychological reasons for the reversal, the speech is excellent.[13]

A number of other scholars have agreed with Kitto's analysis of the quality of Heracles' speech. Poe, for example, notes: "Heracles tells Philoctetes nothing that Philoctetes has not heard before and rejected."[14] Puzzlement over why Heracles manages to be so effective in reversing the hero's convictions has led a number of scholars to deny that Heracles can be said

13 Kitto 1956.105. Calder 1971.153 reads the appearance of Heracles as the *deus ex machina* as a subject that "scarcely matters" for an understanding of the play.

14 Poe 1974.9 judges Heracles' appearance to be "a resolution which does not resolve."

to be engaging in persuasion at all. Thus Gellie claims: "Heracles delivers his fiat and the men bow to the god."[15]

Others have seen the speech of Heracles as the fitting culmination to a variety of themes developed in the play. Thus Easterling claims that Philoctetes is indeed persuaded by Heracles to go to Troy; his appearance marks "the ultimate and paradoxical success of persuasion."[16] She links the power of Heracles' words to the power of friendship, claiming that Philoctetes bends his will to the wishes of his mentor Heracles because the two still remain friends, and one of the major themes of the play is the power of friendship (φιλία).[17] Others have noted how the labors (πόνων, 507–08, 760, 1422) of Philoctetes anticipate and provide a parallel to the labors of Heracles (πονήσας . . . πόνους, 1419), referred to in the *exodos*.[18] Following a similar line of thought, I wish to look at how the occurrence of the word *mythos* in the *exodos* of the play provides at least a partial explanation for Heracles' success in convincing Philoctetes that he should go to Troy. Heracles offers Philoctetes the kind of persuasive *mythos* that is completely lacking in the speeches of Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and the chorus earlier in the play.

Podlecki has pointed out that the word *mythos* occurs only in the *exodos* of the *Philoctetes* and only in relation to the speech of Heracles (1410, 1417, 1447). He argues that Sophocles thus intends to make a distinction between human discourse or *logos*, employed by Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and the chorus, and divine utterance or *mythos*.[19] Gellie claims that Sophocles may be playing with the myth associations inherent in the word *mythos*.[20] I suggest that the use of the word *mythos* both in Heracles' request and in Philoctetes' response signals their mutual recognition of the operation of time-honored methods of heroic persuasion characteristic of the world of the epic, which stand in stark contrast to the abstract appeals of Neoptolemus, Odysseus, and the chorus.[21] We are in a

15 Gellie 1972.158. But as Alt 1961.173 demonstrates, Heracles relies upon prophecy; simple command is characteristic rather of Euripidean *dei ex machina*.

16 Easterling 1983.220–21.

17 Easterling 1983.223–24.

18 So Kirkwood 1994.426 and Hamilton 1975.136.

19 Podlecki 1966.245.

20 Gellie 1972.158 n. 23.

21 Pucci 1994.36–37 studies epic reminiscences in the vocabulary of the *exodos*, concluding: "Heracles' injunction to Philoctetes to join the Trojan War forces the tragic action to switch back and to retrieve the life and thought pattern of the epic world and its narrative."

better position to understand exactly what Heracles means by calling his speech a *mythos* since the appearance of R. P. Martin's study of speech and performance in Homer.

Martin has convincingly demonstrated the importance of *mythos* as a particularly authoritative form of heroic directive. *Mythos* in epic is "the kind of speech that focuses on the speaker."[22] A *mythos* seems to be especially effective when the speaker is able to support a directive or request through an act of recollection,[23] challenging his audience to the imitation and emulation of his own heroic achievements.[24] Furthermore, those heroes in the *Iliad* who regularly speak *mythoi* seem to have a special channel to the divine. Indeed, Achilles and Priam, Martin argues, whose status as speakers of *mythoi* is especially prominent, are even on speaking terms with the gods, while Nestor, though more remote from divinity, speaks *mythoi* (cf. 2.433) which ultimately derive from the *mythos* of Zeus (2.16).[25] In other words, *mythos* provides a major vehicle in the heroic world whereby Zeus transmits his will to mortals and instigates heroic action patterned after the successes of the past. These two aspects of the most persuasive form of *mythos*—its reliance upon the speaker's remembered and represented past and its connection to the will of Zeus—characterize Heracles' *mythos* in the *Philoctetes*.

True, as scholars have sometimes complained, Heracles goes over much of the ground already covered by Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and the chorus, and he makes much the same argument, urging Philoctetes to make his life glorious (εὐκλεᾶ, 1422) by participating in the sack of Troy and finding a healing for his disease (1421–30). But to concentrate too exclusively upon the argument being advanced is to miss the source of much of the speech's compelling power; Heracles persuades through the force of his character and the paradigmatic power of his youthful achievements. Indeed, Heracles exploits a technique of persuasion much valued in Greek rhetorical theory. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle claims, and both Homer and Sophocles, I think, would agree, that the quality of an argument is but a single factor likely to move an audience; the character of the speaker as revealed in speech is of equal or perhaps greater significance. Validity and

22 Martin 1989.14.
23 Martin 1989.80.
24 Martin 1989.82 has good remarks on Nestor's pre-eminence in this type of *mythos* speaking.
25 Martin 1989.60.

truth, Aristotle thus recognized, are not necessarily inherently convincing. For this reason, "character (ἦθος)," Aristotle says, "is pretty much the most important factor in persuasion (*Rhet*. 1356a13)." Of course, Aristotle is speaking of *moral* character, the sort of person one is, nor does he recommend that speakers appeal to their own previous actions or social positions. Perhaps, as G. A. Kennedy claims, he judges such appeals to be "inartistic."[26] However, in a competitive society where achievement is as highly regarded as it is among the heroes of the *Iliad*, the measure of character seems to lie precisely in the performance of great deeds. Thus Heracles achieves success in persuasion by offering the story of his life as a paradigm for the emulation of the younger hero Philoctetes. In contrast, Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and the chorus, lacking the sort of treasure-house of heroic experience available to Heracles, rely solely upon words (*logoi*) in the formulation of abstract arguments based upon obligation, necessity, or self-interest.

Heracles announces that he will begin with the story of his own life and deeds (τὰς ἐμὰς . . . τύχας, 1418). Perhaps because his labors are presumed to be so well known, he avoids fulsome self-presentation and stresses rather the analogy with Philoctetes. As Heracles won immortality through his labors (πόνους, 1419), so Philoctetes is destined to achieve the immortality of glory by similar effort (ἐκ τῶν πόνων τῶνδ', 1422). The labor which Heracles mentions explicitly is his sacking of Troy, which he describes as paradigmatic for both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus: it is necessary that Troy fall a second time (τὸ δεύτερον, 1439) by the force of his bow. Offering the deeds of his own life as paradigmatic for his successors, Heracles employs a *mythos* tinged with an element of the divine, for he also conveys to Philoctetes the plans of Zeus (1413–15).

Book 7 of the *Iliad* offers an example of persuasive rhetoric that, to my knowledge, commentators have not recognized as furnishing a rather close parallel to the situation in the *Philoctetes*. There, the Achaeans face a test of their heroic resolve when Hector challenges the best of them to a duel. At first, they feel ashamed to refuse the challenge but fear to respond (7.93), so that the momentum of the battle temporarily grinds to a halt. Thereupon, we are provided an immediate and powerful appreciation of the special persuasive power of the *mythos* over abstract, less speaker-based, forms of persuasion. First of all, Menelaus rebukes his comrades in the

26 Kennedy 1991.38 n. 43.

strongest possible terms (7.96–102), calling them Achaean women, not men, and even mildly curses them for failing to take up the challenge. By refusing Hector's offer, the Achaeans are acting ingloriously (ἀκλεές, 7.100). Yet Menelaus' rebuke accomplishes nothing and Nestor intervenes, proving the persuasive power of his *mythoi*. The old hero recalls a crisis of his youth when a similar problem arose during a war between the Pylians and the Arcadians at the banks of the Iardanus. Ereuthalion on that occasion challenged all of the best of the Pylians to fight, but the people were afraid and refused (7.150–51). Nestor, though the youngest of them all, accepted the challenge and, killing Ereuthalion, won glory for himself (7.154). Nestor offers the Achaeans nothing new in terms of incentive; like Menelaus, he constructs his argument as a speech of rebuke (cf. 7.94, 157) and promises only glory as an inducement to action. Nonetheless, he succeeds where Menelaus failed because he is able to construct a persuasive paradigm out of the details of his own life and give the Achaeans a concrete example after which they may model their own heroic conduct. That is, Nestor (like Heracles in Sophocles' play) employs *mythos* where Menelaus (like Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and the chorus) offer only arguments which, however valid and compelling, are based upon mere words. Immediately following the conclusion of Nestor's speech, *nine* champions of the Achaeans stand in order to respond to Hector's challenge, and the poem continues with the duel between Achaean and Trojan heroes. This dramatic change in resolve, based upon the power of Nestor's *mythos*, provides a minor but nonetheless significant precedent for the change of heart of Philoctetes in the play of Sophocles. Equally, Book 7 looks forward to Book 9, where persuasion is employed without such decisive success.

Of course, the arguments made by the ambassadors to Achilles in Book 9 are not totally lacking in educative paradigms. Most significant in this regard is the speech of Phoenix, who tells Achilles the story of the hero Meleager of Calydon as a negative paradigm of the kind of behavior to which the young hero is urged *not* to conform. While Meleager participated in the fighting, the Couretes, the enemies of Meleager's city, were unable to remain outside the walls of their own city (9.550–52). However, when anger took hold of Meleager, he withdrew from the fighting, and the noise of battle was heard around the gates of the besieged city of Calydon (9.573–74). Thereupon, Meleager was approached by a succession of emissaries: first of all, by the elders and priests of Calydon, who promised great gifts (9.574–80); next, by his family (9.581–85); and finally, by his dearest (φίλτατοι, 9.586) companions. But even they could not persuade him to return (9.585–87). Only when the city was about to fall did Meleager yield

to the persuasion of his wife Cleopatra, who spoke of the evils that befall a city when it is taken: the enemy kill the men, burn the city, and lead the women and children into slavery (9.591–94). Thereupon, he was persuaded to save the city at the very last moment. However, according to Phoenix, he received no gifts in return (9.598–99). Phoenix's paradigm is followed by an enthymeme. He urges Achilles not to be like Meleager, but to take the gifts and fight.

Phoenix's negative paradigm is not without effect upon Achilles. Indeed, as R. Scodel has pointed out, Achilles makes use of the story of Meleager in the construction of his official reply to the embassy, for he decides to wait until the fleet is burning before he returns to the battle (9.649–53).[27] His decision is not arrived at arbitrarily; rather, it represents the attempt to reduplicate what he sees as the triumph represented in the story of Meleager, who waited until the city of Calydon was burning. Meleager spurned the gifts offered him; he responded only to the appeals of his wife. However much he seemed unable to express the point in words, Achilles' answer to the embassy intimates that he regards his services as a gift to be freely shared rather than a response dictated by need or personal ambition. In the *exemplum* of Meleager, he rather perversely finds a way to give clear and decisive expression to the point of view that his service as a hero cannot be purchased for a price represented by gifts.

The ambassadors move Achilles in other ways also. Thus, Achilles tells Odysseus that he will leave tomorrow for home (9.356–63), he tells Phoenix that he will decide tomorrow whether to leave (9.618–20), and he tells Ajax, in formulating his final, official response to the embassy, that he will not fight until the last moment, when Meleager in similar circumstances returned to battle. I think that Homer has constructed the embassy to Achilles in such a way that we are meant to sense the need of a *fourth* ambassador, a Heracles-figure who might finally appear and offer the kind of persuasive paradigm of heroic endeavor that proves itself so effective in Sophocles' play. In Homer's story, this fourth ambassador, in the person of Patroclus, is dispatched by Nestor in Book 11, and he arrives at Achilles' tent in Book 16; however, he ignores the substance of the *mythos* entrusted to him.

Nestor's ability to persuade through the paradigm of his own recollected experience, first demonstrated before the duel in *Iliad* 7, is dramatically reconfirmed in Book 11, when he uses the story of his

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27 Scodel 1989.93.

youthful exploits against the Epeians as a paradigm from which Achilles is urged to profit (11.656–803). Nestor relates to Patroclus, Achilles' alter ego, the story of how a border dispute once arose between the Pylians and the Epeians. At that time, he killed Itymoneus, drove the herds of his enemies to Pylos, and effected the repayment of a great debt, which was owed to the Pylians by the Epeians (11.671–707). This border dispute then erupted into total war. Acting against the wishes of his father, who thought him too inexperienced (11.719), Nestor triumphed in the subsequent engagement. He defeated Mulius, captured fifty chariots, and killed a hundred of the enemy when the Epeians unsuccessfully attempted reprisals (11.736–49). Nestor admonishes Patroclus to report the contents of the speech to Achilles for the purpose of arousing him to fight in imitation of the heroic example provided within the paradigm (11.765–93), since Achilles is obviously the hero best capable of rescuing the Achaeans in their hour of need. However, so persuasive is Nestor's appeal that his paradigm misfires, as it were. Patroclus neglects to relate the full contents of Nestor's *mythos* to Achilles in Book 16 and, instead, speaks only of the old man's second best alternative: that Patroclus *himself* take the field in Achilles' place. In his subsequent *aristeia*, the gentle Patroclus attempts to appropriate for himself the role of defender of the host, which should properly belong to Achilles, and he dies at the hands of Hector (16.855–57). As a result, Achilles is forced to take the field as well, though, as Thetis tells him (18.95–96), his own death will soon follow.

In the *Iliad*, Nestor's ability to speak *mythoi* that challenge younger heroes to the emulation of his great deeds is ultimately attended by tragic consequences for both Patroclus and Achilles. Heracles' *mythos* has a happier outcome for Philoctetes. Yet both Homer and Sophocles confirm the special persuasive force of the *mythos* in heroic society.[28]

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