

Hunger and Heroism in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

The opening lines of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* invoke a particularly Homeric type of hunger. When Odysseus and Neoptolemus approach Philoctetes' cave and find him absent, Odysseus speculates that Philoctetes must have ventured out on a "journey for nourishment" (φορβῆς νόστον 43). The *nostos* is of course the central theme of the *Odyssey*, and this comment invites comparison between Philoctetes and the Homeric Odysseus. While many scholars have commented on the relationship between the *Philoctetes* and Homeric epic (Schein 2013, Schein 2006, Davidson 1995), no one has fully examined the Homeric valence of food and hunger in the *Philoctetes*. This paper will argue that Philoctetes' abandonment on Lemnos is constructed as an Odyssean *nostos*. Both 'journeys' – the one stationary, the other spanning the geography of the world – present their respective heroes with tremendous food insecurity and thus provide a venue for demonstrating heroic endurance.

First, this paper will establish the role of food in Homeric society by discussing the *dais eisê* ("well-portioned feast") as a social ritual that reinforces communal bonds and codifies heroic status (Węcowski 2014, Bakker 2013, Sherratt 2004). There is an inverse relationship between the *dais* and the *nostos*, and prolonged wandering cuts the hero off from normative banqueting practices. Odysseus' stag hunt in *Od.* 10 and the slaying of the Cattle of the Sun in *Od.* 12 will be analyzed as phases in the hero's progressive isolation from civilization (Williams 2019, Bakker 2013). The conditions that Philoctetes endures on Lemnos will then be compared to Homeric precedent. Philoctetes' hunger is repeatedly connected to his dislocation from society. As the Chorus sings in the *parodos*, "He lies alone, away from others, among the spotted and shaggy beasts, in pains like famine" (κεῖται μούνος ἀπ' ἄλλων/ στικτῶν ἢ λασίων μετὰ/

θηρῶν, ἔν τ' ὀδύνας ὀμοῦ/ λιμῶ 183-186). Furthermore, prominence is given throughout the play to Philoctetes' lack of access to agriculture and wine, as well as his reliance on bow-hunting: "He has no seed of the holy earth as nourishment, nor from anything else we working men harvest and enjoy, unless he ever he gets from his swift-shooting bow with his flying arrows some nourishment for his stomach" (οὐ φορβὰν ἱερᾶς γᾶς σπόρον, οὐκ ἄλλων/ αἴρων τῶν νεμόμεσθ' ἀνέρες ἀλφησταί/ πλὴν ἐξ ὠκυβόλων εἴ ποτε τόξων/ πτανοῖς ἰοῖς ἀνύσειε γαστρὶ φορβὰν 708-711). Philoctetes' means of survival will be shown to diverge from the ideals of Homeric food culture, thus mirroring the dire conditions of the Odyssean *nostos*. Finally, this paper will consider the relationship of hunger to *kleos*, proposing that the hero must necessarily endure hunger in order to secure his *nostos* and eventual acclaim. In closing, the *Odyssey* is unique in depicting a hero in the throes of hunger. In fact, Odysseus is the only Homeric hero to speak of his *gastēr* ("belly," see Stanford 1968). The *Odyssey* provides a poetic vocabulary of hunger, and this paper aims to illustrate its reception on the tragic stage in the *Philoctetes*.

Bibliography

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