

---

MISCELLANEA

---

GIULIA MARIA CHESI

A FEW NOTES ON *NOSOS* AND LANGUAGE  
IN SOPHOCLES' *PHILOCTETES*



In this essay I intend to explore how the motif of Philoctetes' *nosos* in Sophocles' play is related to the way the characters interact and use their language. This topic has already been carefully addressed by Biggs, Podlecki and Worman. As these scholars have shown, Philoctetes' *nosos* affects his ability to speak and, simultaneously, grounds Neoptolemus' painful companionship with him: the wretched hero who is in such a pitiful condition.<sup>1</sup> However, there are good reasons to expand further on these critical positions. First of all, it can be fairly argued that Philoctetes' *nosos* also jeopardizes Neoptolemus' capability to speak, marking a dividing line between divine and human language. Secondly, it seems important to consider what Philoctetes' *nosos* actually represents and how it affects the interaction between human and divine characters. I will begin with the crisis of Neoptolemos' *logos*, turning, at some length, to a discussion of lines 865-909.

---

1. Cf. Biggs (1966) 23-235; Podlecki (1966) 233-235; Worman (2000) 19-29.

In this passage, Philoctetes wakes up after a terrible pain attack and praises Neoptolemus' good nature: the young boy was able to endure, with feelings of pity, his cries of agony and the stench of his wounded body (869-870, 874-876). Neoptolemus asserts that he is happy to see that Philoctetes' pain is gone (882-883). After a short exchange, in which Neoptolemus encourages Philoctetes to stand up (886-894), Neoptolemus' words, i.e. his language (*logos*), suddenly reach a state of *aporia* (895-898). I quote the whole relevant passage, lines 895-898:

Neoptolemus:	παπαῖ· τί δῆτ' <ἄν> δροῦμ' ἐγὼ τοὐνθένδε γε;
Philoctetes:	τί δ' ἔστιν, ὦ παῖ; ποῖ ποτ' ἐξέβης λόγῳ;
Neoptolemus:	οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπῃ χρὴ τᾶπορον τρέπειν ἔπος
Philoctetes:	ἄπορεῖς δὲ τοῦ σύ; μὴ λέγ', ὦ τέκνον, τάδε

Several interpretations of this passage have been put forward. According to Knox and Winnington-Ingram, Neoptolemus is wondering whether he should obey Odysseus and look like a villain, or, on the contrary, follow his own good nature by disobeying Odysseus' authority and telling the truth.<sup>2</sup> This explanation is not entirely satisfactory, since it does not take into due account — as a possible explanation of Neoptolemus' hesitancy — Philoctetes' awful physical distress, which is repeatedly recalled in section 865 to 900 (870: τλήναι σ' ἐλεινῶς ὧδε τὰμὰ πήματα, 876: βοῆς τε καὶ δυσσομίας γέμων, 885: πρὸς τὰς παρούσας ξυμφοράς, 891: ὁσμῇ πρὸ τοῦ δέοντος, 900: δυσχέρεια τοῦ νοσήματος). Segal emphasizes the connection between the disease of Philoctetes and the loss of Neoptolemus' control over language: Neoptolemus, deeply sympathetic for Philoctetes' pain, is no longer able to deceive the infected hero with his words. Segal takes this interpretation a step further. In his reading, Neoptolemus' loss of control over language shows that only the divine voice of Heracles, i.e. the *mythos* (1409-1410: ἡμετέρων ... μύθων; 1417: ἐμῶν μύθων; 1447: τοῖς σοῖς μύθοις), “resolves the impasse in the social and moral order caused by faithless and deceitful *logos*”.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, *mythos* or divine language has to be truer than *logos* or human language.<sup>4</sup>

2. Cf. Knox (1964) 132-133; Winnington-Ingram (1980) 288-289.

3. Cf. Segal (1981) 33: “As Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are about to depart, the deified Heracles suddenly appears above and addresses Philoctetes directly. [...] The *lógos* of rational argument is here transcended; we have in their place the *utterance* of a divine voice, against which there can be no objection, no delay. [...] *Λόγοι* have

Relying on Segal, I maintain that the crisis of Neoptolemus' *logos* is related to Philoctetes' physical distress. However, I don't think we need to come to the conclusion that *mythos* (divine speech) is truer than *logos* (human language). I doubt that an epistemic dichotomy between *mythos* and *logos* is the major issue in this play. So I ask again: why does Neoptolemus' *logos* reach a state of *aporia*?

A possible answer may take the symptoms of Philoctetes' disease as a starting-point:

884-885: ὡς οὐκέτ' ὄντος γὰρ τὰ συμβόλαιά σου  
πρὸς τὰς παρούσας ξυμφορὰς ἐφαίνετο

In these lines, Neoptolemus says that the 'signs' of Philoctetes (*τὰ συμβόλαιά σου*, i.e. the stench of his wound, his cries of pain etc...) are the signs of his fatal agony (*πρὸς τὰς παρούσας ξυμφορὰς*), i.e. of his disease. Thus, when Neoptolemus uses the word "agony" (*ξυμφορὰς*), he connects the signifier (the cries of pain, the stench of the wound etc.) with its signified (the disease) and arrives at the conclusion that Philoctetes is affected by a lethal illness. This means that for Neoptolemus interpreting the signs means revealing their signified. It is important to note here that Neoptolemus first describes how meaning works through signs (884-885) and then he describes how his language faces *aporia* (895-897). If we take those two passages together, it appears that, in the case of Neoptolemus, the process of signification is stuck with signs and words. The motif of Neoptolemus' struggle with language returns a few lines below in passage 908-909, where Neoptolemus confesses that he does not know how to act with words:

908-909: ὦ Ζεῦ, τί δρᾶσω; δεύτερον ληφθῶ κακός,  
κρύπτων θ' ἂ μὴ δεῖ καὶ λέγων αἰσχιστ' ἐπιῶν;

We must consider the crisis of Neoptolemus' *logos* carefully. The language of Neoptolemus does not fall into *aporia* because it has been used wrongly. Certainly, the cries and the stench are the signs (*τὰ συμβόλαια*) of Philoctetes' disease. The *aporia* of Neoptolemus' language seems to con-

---

proven deceptive, and then ineffectual; they are now replaced by the *μῦθοι* of a divine personage". Cf. also Podlecki (1966) 244-245.

4. I am paraphrasing Segal (1981) 337: "*Mythos* is here truer than *logos*".

cern the *nature itself* of signs as a warrant of the unity of signifier and signified. In other words, Neoptolemus' loss of control over language may introduce the notion of human language resisting the stability of signs as combinations of signifier and signified. Contrary to what Segal claims, the crisis of Neoptolemus' language, then, does not show that divine language or *mythos* is truer than human language or *logos*. Rather, as I claim, it points out that the divine and human language cannot be compared: they are incommensurable linguistic systems, even though their vocabulary and syntax coincide. Indeed, human and divine language are substantially different. The process of signification of human language is based on the interpretation of signs. For Neoptolemus, as we have seen, to interpret a sign is to reveal the inherent relation between signifier and signified. Neoptolemus reads the symptoms of Philoctetes and recognizes that the hero is affected by a terrible illness. For the gods, instead, there is no need to interpret signs, since signs are evident in themselves. Heracles' voice does not interpret signs. It makes it possible to find a way out of the process of signification: with Heracles, the very signs of Philoctetes' illness disappear — Philoctetes will be cured. In order to make sense of Neoptolemus' loss of control over language, we may adduce here the Sophoclean fr. 771 Radt (καὶ τὸν θεὸν τοιοῦτον ἐξεπίσταμαι, / σοφοῖς μὲν αἰνικτῆρα θεσφάτων ἀεί, / σκαιοῖς δε φαῦλον κἂν βραχεῖ διδάσκαλον), which seems to echo Heraclitus' fr. 93 D-K (ὁ ἄναξ, οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει).<sup>5</sup> Hence, whereas human language reveals the connection between signifier and signified, divine language signifies (σημαίνει).

Adopting this approach, I differ from Pucci regarding the divine presence in this play. According to Pucci, if I don't misunderstand his analysis, the divine manifests itself through human *logos*, that is to say, through the language of appearance. Anything accidental, therefore, belongs to the divine and there is no difference between human and divine language. I quote: "The difference between the linguistic and rhetorical modes of the divine and those of appearance is, for the most part, unreadable: if the revelation manifests itself through the language of fortuity, is there really a difference between the two modes?" (my translation).<sup>6</sup> Yet, even if we agree

5. On fr. 771 Radt and its Heraclitean tone, cf. Pucci (2003) xxiv.

6. Cf. Pucci (2003) xxviii: "La differenza fra i modi linguistici e retorici dell'Essere, della Verità e quelli dell'apparenza è per la maggior parte illeggibile: se la rivelazione viene alla luce attraverso la lingua dell'accidentalità, c'è veramente differenza fra i due ordini?"

that the *logos* as a path to the divine is of accidental character, this does not necessarily imply that the manifestation of the divine is ‘accidental’ as well. As I see it, the point in Sophocles’ writing is not whether divine action is ‘accidental’ or not. Rather, Sophocles may invite us to consider the fallibility of human language: whereas the oracular language of the gods is always true, human language, in its attempt to achieve meaning through the interpretation of signs, may have to misplace, misinterpret things. With regard to that, the case of Neoptolemus’ loss of control over language is revealing. Neoptolemus, as we have seen, does not use language wrongly. He is able to interpret the symptoms of Philoctetes (his cries, the stench of his wound etc.) properly, and accordingly to use the word “torment” to refer to Philoctetes’ disease correctly. However, Neoptolemus’ language (his *logos*) loses its way. The Sophoclean idea seems to be that the right conjunction of signifier and signified does not secure the production of meaning, since *logos* is always exposed to the risk of getting lost.

Granting that divine and human language sidestep every mutual comparison, we can easily assume that divine language is not understandable through human language. This may explain why in the *Philoctetes* we have many conflicting interpretations of the prophecy. Is the prophecy properly understood by Odysseus (68-69; 77-78) or by the false merchant (610-613) or Neoptolemus (1329-1341)?<sup>7</sup> The play leaves open this question. It seems to me that using the *logos* in order to interpret the divine word is like engaging with the dangerous task of misinterpreting this word again and again. In this respect, as Colli has lucidly pointed out, Apollo is a god of cruelty, since the acquisition of knowledge must proceed through the endless struggle of interpretation: an oracle is always amenable to different interpretations through the *logos*.<sup>8</sup>

Here I come to my second point, namely to the very nature of Philoctetes’ *nosos*. It has been observed that Heracles does not provide any explanation for the cause of Philoctetes’ disease, and, that, therefore, the words of the play, as a revelation of the divine, confront us with the impenetrable

---

7. Odysseus’, the false merchant’s and Neoptolemus’ interpretation of Helenus’ prophecy have been discussed in great detail by Budelmann (2000, 109-130; with full bibliography).

8. Cf. Colli (1990) 23-27.

nature of the divine.<sup>9</sup> But could Heracles provide a reason for Philoctetes' pain after all? I am inclined to say no: the divine cannot explain the reasons for Philoctetes' *nosos* since the *nosos* is supposed to be Philoctetes' *enigma*. If Philoctetes' *nosos* is readable as an enigma and if the divine explained the enigma, the divine would explain *why* there is an enigma — which would obviously be absurd since the enigma is the manifestation of the divine (the divine would essentially be explaining that the divine exists). The point here is not whether the awful manifestation of the divine is impenetrable or not, and therefore, again, whether it is accidental or not. More important is that on the human level the enigma is still present even as it is gone. Philoctetes is going to be cured but the enigma will not disappear, because it will not be solved. Philoctetes will never know why he had to suffer. Following this line of interpretation, we can argue that the enigma, as the indelible intermediary between gods and humans, sets the limit between the human and the divine sphere: human beings do not know what the gods know. Knowledge tears humans apart from gods.

A reading of Philoctetes' *nosos* as an enigma allows a comparison between the *nosos* of Philoctetes and the *nosos* of Oedipus. As in the case of Philoctetes, also in the case of Oedipus the *nosos* is an enigma and the enigma is still present even as it is gone. Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx and rids Thebes from the plague and the monster, but the solution of the riddle does not explain why the Sphinx had brought the plague to Thebes in the first place. Moreover, Oedipus solves the riddle and rids Thebes from the plague, but he is also infected by his own solution (he will become king in Thebes and husband of his own mother). As Philoctetes will never know why he has been bitten by the snake, so Oedipus too will never know why he must suffer the *nosos* of incest.

To conclude, I sum up what I have argued on *logos*, *mythos* and *nosos* in the *Philoctetes*. The *nosos* of Philoctetes is the infected trace of the difference between gods and humans, between human and divine language. On

---

9. Cf. Pucci (2003) xxviii: "La rivelazione che la scrittura di Sofocle dà dell'Essere, dell'ordine delle cose e del divino, si esaurisce in un occultamento d'ogni significato e d'ogni comprensibilità del divino. Non ha senso che Filottete sia morso da un serpente sacro e resti ferito e sofferente per dieci anni [...]. Eracle non cancella questa assurdità". Similarly to Pucci, cf. Parker (1999) 13-14. On the critical position according to which the play gradually proceeds towards a revelation of Helenus' prophecy, cf. Hinds (1967) 170; Gill (1980) 139-144.

the level of human beings, *nosos* and its signs confront the *logos* with the epistemological difficulty to grasp the structure of signs and things. On the level of gods, *nosos* is an enigmatic manifestation of the divine, just like Helenus' prophecy. Because Philoctetes' *nosos* is a manifestation of the divine, the divine language or *mythos* does not explain the *nosos*, but nonetheless can solve it.

*Universität Bamberg*

#### CITED WORKS

- Biggs, P. (1966), "The Disease Theme in *Sophocles' Ajax, Philoctetes* and *Trachiniae*", *CPh* 61, 223-235.
- Budelman, F. (2000), *The Language of Sophocles. Community, Communication and Involvement*, Cambridge.
- Colli, G. (1990), *La sapienza greca. Dioniso, Apollo, Eleusi, Orfeo, Museo, Iperborei, Enigma*, vol. 1, Milan (first print 1977).
- Gill, C. (1980), "Bow, Oracle, and Epiphany in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*", *G&R* 27, 137-146.
- Hinds, A.E. (1967), "The Prophecy of Helenus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*", *CQ* 17, 169-180.
- Knox, B. (1964), *The Heroic Temper. Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*, Berkeley, Calif.
- Parker, R. (1999), "Through a Glass Darkly: Sophocles and the Divine", in: J. Griffin (ed.), *Sophocles Revisited. Essays presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones*, Oxford 1999, 11-30.
- Podlecki, A.J. (1966), "The Power of the Word in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*", *GRBS* 7, 233-50.
- Pucci, P. (2003), *Sofocle. Filottete*, Florence.
- Segal, C. (1981), *Tragedy and Civilization: an Interpretation of Sophocles*, Cambridge, Mass.
- Winnington-Ingram, R.P. (1980), *Sophocles. An Interpretation*, Cambridge.
- Worman, N. (2000), "Infection in the Sentence: the Discourse of Disease in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*", *Arethusa* 33, 1-36.