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The Conditionality of Helenus' Oracle and Tragic Choice in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

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Abstract

Helenus' oracle in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is commonly misunderstood as an unqualified revelation of an immutable future: the gods have fated Philoctetes to rejoin the Greek army at Troy. This has occasioned further misinterpretations of the play, especially as regards the "false ending", in which Neoptolemus and Philoctetes would appear to disregard the divine will in an act of conscious impiety by choosing to sail for Malis instead. This paper argues that the oracle should rather be understood as conditional, allowing Philoctetes either to assent or refuse to rejoin the Greek army in good conscience. In the absence of compulsion from the gods, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes feel free to make tragic choices of real gravity about their futures, and these choices reveal the duo's characters before Heracles appears and reverses their course.

Keywords

conditional prophecy – impiety – tragic choice – character – the false ending of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Helenus' oracle furnishes the motivation for the Greek mission to Lemnos in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, and as such, its precise stipulations and dramatic function have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate.[1] In this paper, I do not wish to propose a new, holistic interpretation of the oracle but hope only to rebut the widespread but unfounded notion that the oracle, whatever its exact contents, represents a straightforward revelation of an immutable future, viz. that Philoctetes is fated to rejoin the Greek army and sack Troy. This assumption has led many readings of the play astray, especially because of its implications for interpreting the "false ending". On this understanding of the oracle, the departing Philoctetes and Neoptolemus consciously obstruct the divine will and their own destinies by declining to sail to Troy. Thus Philoctetes, because "he obstinately refuses to heed the oracles which Neoptolemus describes in detail," "is not, and cannot be, 'pious'" (Segal 1995, 98-99). Neoptolemus, too, "makes it impossible for the oracle to be fulfilled" (Gill 1980, 142), and in so doing, "he makes a moral choice to commit an act in full knowledge that it is directly contrary to the decree of the gods" (Poe 1974, 48). Such scholarly judgments could be quoted at length.[2]

1 The major questions concerning the oracle are whether it requires Philoctetes, his bow, or both to be retrieved; whether Philoctetes must go willingly or can be forced or deceived; and who in the play knows (or rightly understands) how many of its provisions at any given time. I follow the analysis of Hoppin 1981 on these points: both Philoctetes and the bow are necessary (see further Vidal-Naquet 1988, 171 with n. 94); the oracle rules out the use of force, but Odysseus at least considers that deception is compatible with the requirement that Philoctetes must be persuaded; and Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and the chorus already know and understand the terms of the oracle before the drama begins. Nevertheless, Seale 1972 is probably right to argue that confusion on points like these is designed to maintain dramatic tension by keeping the audience guessing about the characters' intentions.

2 I make no claim to exhaustiveness, but some other studies that appear to reflect this assumption include the following: Bowra 1944, ch. 7 *passim* (e.g., "[Philoctetes'] choice … is irreverent to the gods" [293]); Knox 1964, 57-58 ("One man's stubbornness has defeated not only the whole Greek army but also the prophecy of Helenos and the will of Zeus, which is the pattern of history"); Avery 1965, 280-281 ("Philoctetes repeatedly refuses to go to Troy, where, as Helenus and Heracles make clear, his duty lies"); Beye 1970, 64 ("the oracle which insists that Philoctetes will return"), 74 ("Neoptolemus … does at least attempt to fight this fate"); Easterling 1978, 33 ("The message is that Troy *will* fall" [emphasis original]); Raubitschek 1986, 199 ("[Odysseus'] purpose is the fulfilment of the divine will"); Woodiel 1990-1991, 16 (Neoptolemus is "defying what he knows to be the will of the gods"); Hogan 1991 ad 542 (Philoctetes "resists his own lot," "a known fate"); Cairns 1993, 260 n. 170 (Neoptolemus' "ultimate decision [is] to abandon Troy and his own and Phil.'s destiny"); Ringer 1998, 124 (Philoctetes and Neoptolemus "adamantly refuse the fates assigned them by myth, by the gods, and ultimately by the playwright himself"); Beer 2004, 148 (the false ending "is manifestly contrary to the will of the gods"); Allan 2011, 13 ("as Helenos revealed, it is the gods' will that he [Philoctetes] go [to Troy]"); Kyriakou 2012, 156 ("Philoctetes seems to compromise … his piety. This intransigence makes

But the problem with these assessments is that Helenus' oracle is in fact presented as *conditional*, not absolute. To judge from references to it in the play, the oracle is couched in conditional terms, specifying no more than that Troy will not fall *unless* or *until* Philoctetes and his bow assail it.[3] This wording holds out the possibility of two alternative futures, neither of which is marked as a violation of the will of the gods or, indeed, as its fulfillment: Philoctetes may refuse to go to Troy, in which case it will not fall; or he may rejoin the Greek army, in which case they will be able to take the city. In his appearance *ex machina* at the end of the drama, the divine Heracles will confirm that it is in fact part of the plan of Zeus that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus sack Troy, but before that point, Helenus' oracle evidently had not revealed the divine will on this score. Accordingly, from their (limited, mortal) perspectives, in the false ending Philoctetes and Neoptolemus face a legitimate, unconstrained choice between sailing home or rejoining the Greek army at Troy; and thus the moral calculus that informs their decision-making differs substantially from what many interpreters have claimed. I will proceed by establishing the conditional cast of the oracle in references to it in the play, noting its consistent conditionality in the wider mythological tradition, and considering certain absolute formulations of the prophecy in the play that appear to rule out a conditional interpretation. I will conclude by sketching the implications of the argument for an overall understanding of the drama, particularly as it relates to the tragic choices of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes in the false ending.

But first, I must acknowledge a methodological caveat. To be sure, Helenus' prophecy is never reported verbatim and its exact wording is strictly unrecoverable.[4] Nevertheless, repeated references to the oracle strongly imply that, as in the rest of the mythological tradition, Sophocles conceived of it in conditional terms. Furthermore, I will argue below that it strains credulity to think that if Helenus' original words had in fact been unconditional, multiple characters would repeatedly interpolate a conditional formulation into their reports of his prophecy. And perhaps most importantly, we should remember

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him … disregard Helenus' prophecy"), 163 ("Despite their concern with piety and noble behaviour, neither [Neoptolemus nor Philoctetes] worries at all that their plan to return to Greece may fail, or ruin their lives, because it may offend the gods"); Schein 2013 ad 1314-1347 ("Ne. does not call Phil. unjust in opposing a divine ordinance"—although he could? "[H]e asserts the divine necessity that Troy 'must be taken within the present summer.'").

3 A few scholars have noted the oracle's conditionality in this sense, though none at any great length: e.g., Kitto 1956, 135-136; Robinson 1969, 52; Campbell 1972, 85; Pucci 1994, 39; Clay in Phillips and Clay 2003 ad 606 ("contingent prophecy"). As their notices have evidently gone unheeded, in this paper I re-present and expand upon their arguments.

4 Schein 2013 ad 1339-1342.

that regardless of Sophocles' intentions, the effect of these repeated references to the oracle is to prime the audience from the beginning and throughout the drama to understand it precisely as conditional. I fully admit that one cannot definitively prove the conditionality of Helenus' oracle, but I hope to demonstrate that interpretations that use its supposed unconditionality as a significant datum very much go against the grain of both the text and the wider mythological tradition.

With these considerations in mind, I begin with my primary contention: Philoctetes cannot be accused of disobeying Helenus' oracle because its terms are not, in fact, unconditional. The confusion on this score stems from several unqualified assertions in the play that Troy is destined to fall or that Philoctetes is fated to fight there (200, 1339-1341, 1415, 1439-1440),[5] not to mention the fact that, in hindsight, this is indeed what happened and what the "force of myth" dictates must happen.[6] But both times that Helenus' prophecy is mentioned explicitly, it is framed in conditional terms. First, the false merchant explains the army's renewed interest in Philoctetes by citing Helenus (610-613):

> ὃς δὴ τά τ' ἄλλ' αὐτοῖσι πάντ' ἐθέσπισεν
> καὶ τἀπὶ Τροίᾳ πέργαμ' ὡς **οὐ μή ποτε**
> **πέρσοιεν, εἰ μὴ** τόνδε πείσαντες λόγῳ
> **ἄγοιντο** νήσου τῆσδ' ἐφ' ἧς ναίει τὰ νῦν. 610
>
> He prophesied all other events to them, and told them that **they would never take** the towers of Troy, **unless** they persuaded Philoctetes and **brought** him from the island where he is now living.[7]

5 Cf. the more ambiguous cases of 915 [δεῖ], 921-922 [ἀνάγκη], 998 [δεῖ], 1421 [ὀφείλεται]. In the first three, it is unclear whether the external force compelling Philoctetes to fight at Troy is fate (cf. 1339, 1340) or the Greek army (cf. 50, 54, 73, 379, 983, 1025, 1366); at 1421, ὀφείλεται vacillates between 'it is owed' (in recompense; cf. Schein 2013 ad loc.) and 'it is destined' (by the plans of Zeus; so Lloyd-Jones' translation). Additionally, I believe that Neoptolemus' admonishment that Philoctetes should 'trust in the gods' (θεοῖς τε πιστεύσαντα, 1374) has been misunderstood. He does not mean, 'Do not be impious; obey the gods' will as revealed in the oracle.' Rather, he is addressing the argument about the future that Philoctetes has just made, viz. that he fears being victimized by the Greek commanders again if he goes to Troy (1358-1361). To this Neoptolemus essentially responds, 'Trust the oracle of the gods as I have just explained it; if you go to Troy, nothing awaits you there but glory and a release from pain.' Text and translation of the *Philoctetes* come from Lloyd-Jones 1994.

6 For the phrase, see Budelmann 2000, 95. It is typical in myth for the conditions in contingent oracles to be fulfilled, but occasionally they are not; cf., e.g., Q.S. 10.261-263, 293-294.

7 Although the false merchant does lie, nothing in his report of the terms of the oracle jars either with the mythological tradition or with other references to the oracle in the play; see Hoppin 1981, 17.

Second, Neoptolemus develops this picture considerably as he tries to entice Philoctetes with the promise of healing and glory (1329-1335):

> καὶ παῦλαν ἴσθι τῆσδε **μή ποτ' ἂν τυχεῖν**
> νόσου βαρείας, ἕως ἂν αὐτὸς ἥλιος
> ταύτῃ μὲν αἴρῃ, τῇδε δ' αὖ δύνῃ πάλιν,
> **πρὶν ἄν** τὰ Τροίας πεδί' ἑκὼν αὐτὸς **μόλῃς**,
> καὶ τῶν παρ' ἡμῖν ἐντυχὼν Ἀσκληπιδῶν
> νόσου **μαλαχθῇς** τῆσδε, καὶ τὰ πέργαμα
> ξὺν τοῖσδε τόξοις ξύν τ' ἐμοὶ πέρσας **φανῇς**.
>
> And know that **you will never have** respite from grievous sickness, so long as the sun rises in one quarter and sets again in another, **before you come** of your own will to the land of Troy, and meeting the sons of Asclepius that are with us **you are relieved** of this malady, and with this bow and with me **you are revealed** as the conqueror of the towers.

Neoptolemus goes on to identify Helenus as his source for this knowledge (1336-1339). Lloyd-Jones' translation of πρὶν ἄν … μόλῃς (1332) as 'before you come' somewhat obscures the sentence's conditional force. A better translation of πρὶν ἄν following a negative (μή ποτ', 1329) would be 'until', which in this context is virtually equivalent to the εἰ μή ('unless') employed by the false merchant at 612.[8] That these constructions are synonymous is shown by a passage of Isocrates that sets them in parallel (*Paneg.* 173, cited by LSJ *s.v.* πρίν, B.II.2):

> οὔτε γὰρ εἰρήνην οἷόν τε βεβαίαν ἀγαγεῖν, **ἢν μὴ** κοινῇ τοῖς βαρβάροις πολεμήσωμεν, **οὔθ'** ὁμονοῆσαι τοὺς Ἕλληνας, **πρὶν ἂν** καὶ τὰς ὠφελίας ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς κινδύνους πρὸς τοὺς αὐτοὺς ποιησώμεθα.
>
> It is not possible for us to cement an enduring peace **unless** we join together in a war against the barbarians, **nor** for the Hellenes to attain to concord **until** we wrest our material advantages from one and the same source and wage our wars against one and the same enemy.[9]

8 To be sure, οὐ … πρὶν ἄν has a temporal element lacking in εἰ μή, and to this extent the construction might encourage us to view the prospect of the condition's fulfillment more as a question of "when" than of "if." But οὐ … πρὶν ἄν does not necessarily imply that the speaker believes the condition so denoted will certainly be fulfilled (even if only at some indefinite point in the future); for instance, Hdt. 4.117 provides a clear-cut example of such a condition never being unfulfilled. See further, e.g., A. *Pr.* 166-167, 756; S. *OC* 1040-1041; E. *Or.* 1357-1359; and the following discussion.

9 Text and translation of Isocrates come from Norlin 1928.

The conditional force of οὐ … πρὶν ἄν is further apparent in such usages as Plato's 'states will **not** be rid of evil **until** philosophers rule in them' (**οὐ** πρότερον κακῶν παύσονται αἱ πόλεις, **πρὶν ἂν** ἐν αὐταῖς οἱ φιλόσοφοι ἄρξωσιν, *R.* 487e)—an eventuality that hardly represents an inevitable state of affairs.[10]

Moreover, the terms of the oracle are alluded to a few times elsewhere, twice with conditionality clearly expressed. So Odysseus tells Neoptolemus (68-69):

> **εἰ** γὰρ τὰ τοῦδε τόξα **μὴ ληφθήσεται**,
> **οὐκ ἔστι** πέρσαι σοι τὸ Δαρδάνου πέδον.
>
> For **if** this man's bow **is not captured**, **it is impossible** for you to conquer the land of Dardanus.

The point is repeated at 113-115:

> ΟΔ. αἱρεῖ τὰ τόξα ταῦτα τὴν Τροίαν μόνα.
> ΝΕ. οὐκ ἆρ' ὁ πέρσων, ὡς ἐφάσκετ', εἴμ' ἐγώ;
> ΟΔ. **οὔτ' ἂν** σὺ **κείνων χωρὶς οὔτ'** ἐκεῖνα **σοῦ**. 115
>
> OD. This bow is the one thing that takes Troy.
> NE. Then am I not the one who is to capture it, as you said?
> OD. You **cannot** capture it **without the bow**, **nor** the bow **without you**.

Additionally, a conditional understanding of the oracle is implicit in Philoctetes' argument at 1035-1039:

> κακῶς ὄλοισθ'· ὀλεῖσθε δ' ἠδικηκότες 1035
> τὸν ἄνδρα τόνδε, θεοῖσιν εἰ δίκης μέλει.
> ἔξοιδα δ' ὡς μέλει γ'· ἐπεὶ οὔποτ' ἂν στόλον
> ἐπλεύσατ' ἂν τόνδ' οὕνεκ' ἀνδρὸς ἀθλίου—εἰ
> μή τι κέντρον θεῖον ἦγ' ὑμᾶς—ἐμοῦ.
>
> May you perish miserably! And you will perish, for the wrong you did this man, if the gods care for justice. And I know that they do care, for otherwise you would never have sailed on this voyage for the sake of a miserable man like me, unless some prompting from the gods had led you to.

10 For this and other examples, see Smyth 2444 and n. 8 above. For πρίν introducing conditional clauses in oracles, see Fontenrose 1978, 170 n. 9, 176. Text and translation of Plato are adapted from Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2013.

Jebb (1890 ad 1037) supposes that Philoctetes takes the κέντρον to be the Greeks' desperation amidst failure at Troy, engineered by the gods as their punishment. In actuality, the "prompting from the gods" that has brought Odysseus to Lemnos must be Helenus' oracle, whose conditions Philoctetes has already heard from the false merchant (cf. Avery 2002, 13). If Philoctetes does mean the oracle, then he can be confident that the Greeks will indeed perish because the gods have contrived that the Greeks will be defeated at Troy if he refuses to fight (cf. 67, 1369).

In fact, even the divine Heracles, who knows the future without recourse to mortal seers, allows (at least rhetorically) that Philoctetes might still choose not go to Troy, as Rose (1976, 101) observes: "[Heracles'] first words, responding to Neoptolemos' injunction to Philoctetes to 'bid the land farewell and start out' (στεῖχε προσκύσας χθόνα, 1408), emphasize the option of their proceeding on their chosen course: '**not yet**, at least **until you have heard** our tale' (μήπω γε, πρὶν ἂν τῶν ἡμετέρων | ἀΐῃς μύθων, 1409-1410)" (emphasis and Greek text added).[11] Thus when Philoctetes assents to Heracles' words (**οὐκ ἀπιθήσω τοῖς σοῖς μύθοις**, 1447), the god fulfills the oracle's evident requirement that Philoctetes must be persuaded (**πείσαντες λόγῳ**, 612) to rejoin the Greek army,[12] even though Heracles also speaks of Philoctetes' future at Troy as necessitated (cf. ὀφείλεται, 1421; χρεών, 1439) by 'the plans of Zeus' (τὰ Διός … βουλεύματα, 1415).

Finally, Neoptolemus provides a good point of comparison in his lying tale, which is designed to mirror Philoctetes' own situation,[13] when he alludes to his recruiters' 'splendid promise that **if I went I would take** the towers of Troy' (χὠ

11 N.b. Heracles' use of a form of οὐ … πρὶν ἄν. His words amount to, "(You may go to Malis if you wish, but) at least (γε) do not go without first considering what I have to say." See further Campbell 1972, 85: "In any case, the prophecy in this play is hypothetical; and so in effect is Heracles' speech, since the present participle in line 1423 'Coming to Troy you will be cured' [ἐλθὼν … πρὸς τὸ Τρωικὸν | πόλισμα … νόσου παύσῃ] does not commit itself as between the meanings 'when you come' and 'if you come'"—*contra* Pucci 1994, 39, who recognizes the contingency of the oracle but not of Heracles' presentation of his prophecy. For a clear case of a participle with conditional force, even in the context of an oracle invoking fate, see Pi. *I.* 8.30-35a.

12 See Easterling 1978, 33-34, Hoppin 1981, 29, Perysinakis 1992, 110; see further Hoppin 1981, 18-20 on the phrase πείσαντες λόγῳ and the "λόγος theme" in which it participates. It is also significant that Heracles refers to his speech as advice (παρῄνεσ', 1434), using the same word that Philoctetes had applied earlier to Neoptolemus' attempt to persuade him (παρῄνεσεν, 1351).

13 See Hamilton 1975, 132-133.

λόγος καλὸς προσῆν, | εἰ τἀπὶ Τροίᾳ πέργαμ᾽ αἱρήσοιμ᾽ ἰών, 352-353).[14] Again and again, the play presents going to Troy as a possibility, not a fixed certainty, by speaking of it as a condition that *may* be fulfilled.

There is nothing exceptional about such a conditional oracle concerning the fall of Troy within the greater mythological tradition. The outcome of a mythical war frequently depends upon the fulfillment of certain stipulated conditions, such as the participation of specific warriors[15] or the removal of various talismanic objects that protect a kingdom from invasion.[16] When it comes to Troy in particular, it is only a small exaggeration to say that different sources are prepared to label practically any event in the Trojan cycle as a foreordained requirement for the city's fall, each revealed via oracles: Achilles must be recruited;[17] the army will require Telephus' guidance to find Troy;[18] the Achaeans must sacrifice at Chryse's altar;[19] Rhesus must be slain on the night of his arrival,[20] or his horses must not be allowed to drink from the Scamander or graze in Trojan pastures;[21] Troilus must be slain,[22] perhaps before he turns twenty;[23] Philoctetes and/or Heracles' bow must be recovered from Lemnos;[24] Neoptolemus must be recruited;[25] the Palladium must be stolen;[26] the bones

14 Cf. the conditional force implicit in 346-347: 'the justice of the gods did not allow … that any other except me should take the towers of Troy' (οὐ θέμις γίγνοιτ᾽ … τὰ πέργαμ᾽ ἄλλον ἢ ᾽μ᾽ ἑλεῖν). This may be paraphrased, "The justice of the gods forbade that Troy should fall unless I took it." On θέμις here, see Schein 2013 ad loc.

15 E.g., the gods cannot prevail in the Gigantomachy unless they receive the help of a mortal (see Preller 1894, 73-74).

16 E.g., Nisus' lock must be cut before Minos can take Megara (see Ov. *Met.* 8.8-10 with Bömer 1977 ad loc.).

17 ΣB *Il.* 19.326.

18 Hyg. *Fab.* 101.

19 D.Chr. 59.9.

20 E. *Rh.* 600-605.

21 ΣA *Il.* 10.435, Verg. *A.* 1.469-473 with Serv. ad 1.469.

22 Plaut. *Bacch.* 954a.

23 *Myth. Vat.* 1.207.

24 Bacchyl. fr. 7 SM = Σ Pi. *P.* 1.100 Drachmann; E. *Philoctetes* test. iiia.9-11; D.Chr. 59.2; S. *Ph.* 610-613, 1330-1342; Ov. *Met.* 13.320, 334; Apollod. *Epit.* 5.8; Paus. 5.13.4; Q.S. 9.325-329; Tz. ad Lyc. 54, 911; *Posthomerica* 576; *Myth. Vat.* 1.59, 2.192. Cf. Proclus' summary of the *Little Iliad*, which strongly implies that the Achaeans must retrieve Philoctetes (and probably also Neoptolemus and the Palladium) in response to Helenus' oracle. V. Fl. 2.570-573 represents a notably unconditional formulation of this oracle, evidently because in context, the narrator is emphasizing the inevitability of the rise of Rome following the sack of Troy by Hercules' arrows.

25 Apollod. *Epit.* 5.10; Q.S. 7.190-192, 220-222; Tryphiodorus 51-54; Tz. ad Lyc. 54, 911.

26 Plaut. *Bacch.* 954; Ov. *Met.* 13.337-349, 373-381; *Fast.* 6.427-428; Conon 34; Apollod. *Epit.* 5.10; Dictys Cretensis 5.5; Q.S. 10.350-357; Tryphiodorus 55-56; Serv. ad *A.* 2.166.

of Pelops must be retrieved;[27] a wooden horse must be built;[28] and a lintel in the Trojan wall must be taken apart (to admit the wooden horse).[29] These traditions are almost uniformly phrased as conditional statements, including the other sources for the tradition that Philoctetes and/or his bow must be taken to Troy. For example, Odysseus explains Helenus' oracle in Dio Chrysostom's paraphrase of the beginning of Euripides' *Philoctetes* (59.2):

> νῦν οὖν κατὰ πρᾶξιν πάνυ ἐπισφαλῆ καὶ χαλεπὴν δεῦρο ἐλήλυθα εἰς Λῆμνον, ὅπως Φιλοκτήτην καὶ τὰ Ἡρακλέους τόξα κομίζοιμι τοῖς συμμάχοις. ὁ γὰρ δὴ μαντικώτατος Φρυγῶν Ἕλενος ὁ Πριάμου κατεμήνυσεν, ὡς ἔτυχεν αἰχμάλωτος ληφθείς, **ἄνευ τούτων μήποτ᾽ ἂν ἁλῶναι τὴν πόλιν.**
>
> So now a task most hazardous and hard brings me to Lemnos here, that Philoctetes and the bow of Heracles I may bear off for my allies. For the one most gifted in prophecy of all the Phrygians, Helenus Priam's son, when by good fortune taken captive, disclosed that **without these the city never could be seized.**[30]

It is knowledge of this earlier *Philoctetes*, itself preceded by a version of the myth in Bacchylides,[31] that would have colored the audience's assumptions and expectations of Sophocles' play, and the playwright does not contradict them.[32] For that matter, neither do the versions of the myth recorded in later extant sources: Pseudo-Apollodorus, Pausanias, Quintus Smyrnaeus, and Tzetzes. The tradition is virtually unanimous on the conditionality of the oracle requiring Philoctetes, his bow, or both in order for Troy to fall.

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27 Lyc. 52-55 with Tz. ad 54, 911; Apollod. *Epit.* 5.10; Paus. 5.13.4; Tz. *Posthomerica* 577.

28 Conon 34, Dictys Cretensis 5.9. This requirement may be implied by Tryphiodorus 45-58, 132-138; cf. 296-299 (in Sinon's deceptive speech).

29 Plaut. *Bacch.* 955a; see further Austin 1964 ad Verg. *A.* 2.234.

30 Text and translation for Dio Chrysostom come from Crosby 1946.

31 At least, as paraphrased by a Pindaric scholiast: 'Bacchylides in his *Dithyrambs* agrees with this story, that the Greeks removed Philoctetes from Lemnos in accordance with a prophecy of Helenus, since it was fated that **without Heracles' bow Troy would not be sacked**' (τῇ ἱστορίᾳ καὶ Βακχυλίδης συμφωνεῖ ἐν τοῖς διθυράμβοις, ὅτι δὴ οἱ Ἕλληνες ἐκ Λήμνου μετεστείλαντο τὸν Φιλοκτήτην Ἑλένου μαντευσαμένου. εἵμαρτο γὰρ **ἄνευ τῶν Ἡρακλείων τόξων μὴ πορθηθῆναι τὴν Ἴλιον**, Σ Pi. *P.* 1.100 Drachmann = Bacchyl. fr. 7 SM; text and translation from Campbell 1992). Cf. Gantz 1993, 459-460.

32 See further Hoppin 1981, 8: "The audience of 409 B.C. must then have assumed that Sophocles was following his predecessors' versions, except where he deviated emphatically and explicitly from them."

But a problem remains: how can we square the conditional formulations of the oracle with the apparently unconditional formulations scattered throughout the play? Indeed, a few scholars who have otherwise taken note of the oracle's conditionality have changed their view in light of 1339-1341, as, for instance, Winnington-Ingram does (1980, 300 n. 62): "The two main statements (610ff., 1329ff.) are both conditional, until Helenus adds (1339f.) that these things *must* be" (emphasis original). Jebb and Budelmann are equally so persuaded by these lines.[33] But need 1339-1341 really be read as a correction of the conditional cast given to the oracle in 1329-1335? I think not, particularly if we attend to the precise import of the Greek and allow the full context to guide us. Here are the lines in the full, including Neoptolemus' paraphrase of Helenus' oracle already quoted above (1329-1343):

καὶ παῦλαν ἴσθι τῆσδε μή ποτ᾽ ἂν τυχεῖν
νόσου βαρείας, ἕως ἂν αὐτὸς ἥλιος
ταύτῃ μὲν αἴρῃ, τῇδε δ᾽ αὖ δύνῃ πάλιν,
πρὶν ἂν τὰ Τροίας πεδί᾽ ἐκὼν αὐτὸς μόλῃς,
καὶ τῶν παρ᾽ ἡμῖν ἐντυχὼν Ἀσκληπιδῶν
νόσου μαλαχθῇς τῆσδε, καὶ τὰ πέργαμα
ξὺν τοῖσδε τόξοις ξύν τ᾽ ἐμοὶ πέρσας φανῇς.
ὡς δ᾽ οἶδα **ταῦτα** τῇδ᾽ ἔχοντ᾽ ἐγὼ φράσω.
ἀνὴρ παρ᾽ ἡμῖν ἐστιν ἐκ Τροίας ἁλούς,
Ἕλενος ἀριστόμαντις, ὃς **λέγει** σαφῶς
ὡς δεῖ γενέσθαι **ταῦτα**· καὶ πρὸς **τοῖσδ**᾽ ἔτι,
ὡς ἔστ᾽ ἀνάγκη τοῦ παρεστῶτος θέρους
Τροίαν ἁλῶναι πᾶσαν· ἢ δίδωσ᾽ ἐκὼν
κτείνειν ἑαυτόν, ἢν **τάδε** ψευσθῇ **λέγων**.
ταῦτ᾽ οὖν ἐπεὶ κάτοισθα, συγχώρει θέλων.

And know that you will never have respite from grievous sickness, so long as the sun rises in one quarter and sets again in another, before you come of your own will to the land of Troy, and meeting the sons of Asclepius that are with us you are relieved of this malady, and with this bow and with me you are revealed as the conqueror of the towers. I will tell you

33 Budelmann (2000, 129) likewise understands the oracle as reported by the false merchant and Neoptolemus to be contingent, but then he comments of 1340-1341: "Here all conditions have vanished; it is a certainty that Troy will fall, and fall this summer." Jebb's comments are more scattered; see Jebb 1890, xxvii, xxviii; ad 606, 1339. Cf. Kitto 1956, 135-136; 1961, 308.

> how I know that **this** is so! There is a man with us who was taken prisoner from Troy, Helenus, the noble prophet, who **tells** us beyond doubt that **this** is bound to happen; and in addition [to **this**], that it is fated that Troy be entirely taken during the present summer; and if he is found to be **telling** lies [when he says **this**], he gives us permission to kill him. Then since you know **this**, give your willing consent!

Despite Neoptolemus' assurance that Helenus speaks σαφῶς, these lines are easy to misread. First, it is important to note that ταῦτα in verses 1336 and 1339 refer to the same thing, viz. the *entire* conditional sentence that Neoptolemus has just spoken (1329-1335). In his commentary, Schein (2013 ad 1339-1342) contends that "ταῦτα and τοῖσδ' must refer to Phil. 'coming willingly to the plain of Troy' to be cured by the Asklepidai and 'sacking the city with his bow, along with [Ne.]' (1332-5)." Schein may have been led to this judgment in part because of how vividly Philoctetes' potential future in Troy is envisioned in these lines, or because of how he understands δεῖ γενέσθαι ταῦτα in line 1339 (cf. below). Nevertheless, at this point in his speech, Neoptolemus has only spoken of Troy's fall in conditional terms; it thus makes little sense to think that all of a sudden ταῦτα refers to only one aspect of the oracle, which at any rate had mentioned merely the *possibility* of Philoctetes' healing and of Troy's destruction, as if these were things that must inevitably come to pass.

Rather, Neoptolemus' train of thought should be reconstructed as follows. First, the young warrior reports the substance of Helenus' oracle without identifying it as such (1329-1335). He then pauses from this report to identify his source for this information (ὡς δ' οἶδα ταῦτα, 1336), including in this notice a brief sketch of Helenus' background and mantic authority (1337-1338). The repetition of ταῦτα in line 1339 serves a resumptive function, as Neoptolemus returns to summarizing what Helenus had said (λέγει, 1338), the substance of which he had just begun to convey in lines 1329-1335. The continuative phrase καὶ πρὸς τοῖσδ' ἔτι, in which τοῖσδ' picks up ταῦτα yet again, combined with the fact that the λέγει of 1338 continues to govern the indirect statement construction that begins in line 1340 (ὡς ἔστ' ἀνάγκη κτλ.), shows that with ταῦτα in line 1339, Neoptolemus has in view (all of) those things that he already reported that Helenus said in lines 1329-1335; and to this first summary, he adds his paraphrase of another prediction that formed a further part of Helenus' original statement (1340-1341). The son of Achilles then notes that Helenus even staked his own life as collateral should he be found to have lied when, literally, "he said **these things**" (τάδε … λέγων, 1342). This guarantee obviously applies to the entirety of Helenus' oracle; at any rate, the occurrence of τάδε at the end of this passage, together with the echo of λέγει (1338) in λέγων (1342), suggests

that the pronoun embraces everything the seer said—in other words, the full substance of the oracle that Neoptolemus has been citing in piecemeal fashion over lines 1329-1335 and 1340-1341. This sense is confirmed by the appearance of yet another summative ταῦτ' at line 1343, which accomplishes the transition from the synopsis of Helenus' oracle to Neoptolemus' "call to action," as it were—the positive encouragement for Philoctetes to come to Troy, be healed, and win glory (1343-1347).

To put this analysis in schematic terms, Neoptolemus' thought progresses as follows:

– I am making claim X about the future (1329-1335).
– I will tell you how I know X (1336).
– Helenus, an excellent seer, clearly said X (1337-1339).
– And in addition to X, he said Y (1339-1341).
– In fact, he staked his life on the truth of these things (i.e., X and Y) (1341-1342).
– Now that you know these things (i.e., X and Y), accede to my request and take the following actions … (1343).

Neoptolemus' consistent focus throughout this passage is on (the whole of) what Helenus said; there is no hint at any point that any of his demonstrative pronouns (ταῦτα, 1336; ταῦτα, 1339; τοῖσδ', 1339; τάδε, 1342) abruptly veers off from this topic to focus in on just one aspect of Helenus' prophecy—for instance, to assert that only one of the potentialities envisioned by the conditional oracle is actually what fate dictates *must* happen. The interpretation advanced by Schein and taken for granted by scholars like Winnington-Ingram does not stand up under scrutiny.

Admittedly, it may feel like an awkward construal of the Greek to imagine Neoptolemus saying 'these things must happen' (δεῖ γενέσθαι ταῦτα, 1339) with reference to the forecast of a conditional oracle that lays out two mutually exclusive contingencies (i.e., either Philoctetes will never be healed or he will be, at Troy, if he comes to sack the city). Nevertheless, such expressions can indeed be paralleled elsewhere in Greek literature. A clear example of such a loose usage of the γενέσθαι ταῦτα variety occurs in a Xenophontic battle narrative: 'The seer bade them not to attack until one of their own number was **either killed or wounded**. 'But as soon as **that happens**' [Thrasybulus] said, 'we shall lead on …'' (ὁ μάντις παρήγγελλεν αὐτοῖς μὴ πρότερον ἐπιτίθεσθαι, πρὶν τῶν σφετέρων ἢ **πέσοι** τις ἢ **τρωθείη**· ἐπειδὰν μέντοι **τοῦτο γένηται**, ἡγησόμεθα μέν, ἔφη, ἡμεῖς … *HG* 2.4.18).[34] Here, τοῦτο γένηται must refer to the realization of *either* of the two possibilities outlined by the seer (i.e., the first death or the

34 Text and translation of Xenophon are from Brownson 1918.

first injury suffered by their side, whichever has priority). A later text evinces an even closer parallel for Sophocles' δεῖ γενέσθαι ταῦτα: in Josephus' rendition of the story of King David's punishment for conducting a census of his subjects, the prophet Gad presents the monarch with a choice between three possible heaven-sent consequences: famine, a military catastrophe, or pestilence. When a despairing David dithers in making his decision, 'the prophet said that **this must inevitably come to pass**, and bade him give his answer quickly, in order that he might report his choice to God' (τοῦ δὲ προφήτου **τοῦτο δεῖν ἐξ ἀνάγκης γενέσθαι** φήσαντος καὶ κελεύοντος ἀποκρίνασθαι ταχέως, ἵνα ἀναγγείλῃ τὴν αἵρεσιν αὐτοῦ τῷ θεῷ, *AJ* 7.322).[35] Here again, τοῦτο … γενέσθαι appears to refer to the enactment of any one of the three possible punishments then hanging over the king's head, as the prophet has just outlined. Gad certainly emphasizes that it is fated (δεῖν ἐξ ἀνάγκης) that one of these outcomes must transpire, but the terms of this prophecy explicitly allow David to choose which particular fate the Israelites must endure.[36]

On the strength of this evidence, I understand that when Neoptolemus affirms that what Helenus has said must come to pass, his somewhat elliptical expression δεῖ γενέσθαι ταῦτα serves as an economical means of affirming the essential truth[37] of the (full) terms of the oracle as he has just laid them out: a seer of supreme skill has unambiguously certified that Philoctetes will never be healed (1329-1330) unless he rejoins the Greek effort to sack Troy (1332-1335)—these are the things that Helenus says must be. This interpretation is consistent with the fact that Neoptolemus stresses the oracle's trustworthiness throughout the passage, as he calls Helenus the 'best of seers' (ἀριστόμαντις, 1338), emphasizes the clarity of his prediction (σαφῶς, ibid.), and notes that the prophet has even staked his life on its accurate fulfillment (1341-1342). By a similar token, Neoptolemus' image of the eternal fixity of the sun's circuit through the sky (1331-1332) conveys the utter certainty of his conviction. The

35 Text and translation of Josephus are taken from Marcus 1934. N.b. that the oracular phrase ἐξ ἀνάγκης finds a further parallel at S. *Ph.* 1340 (ἔστ' ἀνάγκη).

36 Of course, we might press this narrative in various ways and question, for example, whether God foreknew which choice David would make, and thus whether his choice was meaningfully free, etc.; and we might raise similar questions about Philoctetes (e.g., could he *really* have been permitted to choose never to go to Troy?). But theological speculations about the relationship between fate and free will go well beyond the scope of this paper and, I suspect, the themes of Sophocles' drama.

37 Expressions of the type δεῖ τοῦτο γενέσθαι occasionally appear in later philosophical and scientific writing to mark the logical necessity of a given claim or inference; see, e.g., Pl. *Phlb*. 14a, Arist. *Pr.* 946b38-39 Bekker.

truth of the (whole) oracle is at stake, not the supposed necessity that just one part of it be fulfilled.

Indeed, the only place in this passage where Neoptolemus actually appears to speak of Troy's sack in unqualified terms, apparently as an inevitability, is in his second report of a further part of Helenus' prophecy: ὡς ἔστ᾽ ἀνάγκη τοῦ παρεστῶτος θέρους | Τροίαν ἁλῶναι πᾶσαν (1340-1341). Taken out of context, this statement might indeed appear to constitute strong evidence that Helenus' oracle specified in no uncertain terms that Troy *must* fall—and do so this summer, even; and if Troy must fall, then we may surmise that Philoctetes is ineluctably bound to rejoin the Greek army after all.[38] But of course, the context here is in fact determinative: coming on the heels of the conditional formulation of the oracle relayed just seconds earlier (1329-1335), this new assertion naturally invites us to take the same condition for granted again as Neoptolemus reports more of Helenus' prophecy.[39] This is true both because Neoptolemus (and the poet) would have felt no need to repeat himself in so short a space, and because, we should remember, he is conveying separately (1329-1335, 1339-1341) two parts of a single oracle that was originally delivered as an organic unity.[40] Conversely, to think that Sophocles asks us to revise our understanding of the oracle so abruptly—to turn on a dime from regarding it as conditional in lines 1329-1335 to "realizing" four or five lines later that it has actually been unconditional all along—is to accuse the playwright of a most unwonted stylistic sloppiness or, still worse, intellectual incoherence. Given this wider context, which does foreground the conditionality of Philoctetes' participation in the Trojan War, I would suggest that ἔστ᾽ ἀνάγκη (1340) should not be rendered as 'it is fated', as Lloyd-Jones translates, but rather as 'it is necessary'.[41] Neoptolemus'

38 Cf. Lawrence 2013, 189: "The fall of Troy is also fated to occur this summer according to Helenus (1338). (Presumably this implies that it is divine will that Philoctetes come to Troy.)."

39 So Jebb 1890 ad 1339 and on p. xxviii concerning 1340, though in my view he goes on to confuse the matter: "Then at v. 1340 Helenus is quoted as saying that Troy is doomed to fall in the summer. The Greeks could understand this only in a conditional sense, since he had told them that their victory depended on the return of Philoctetes (611 f.). But the absolute statement in v. 1340 is intelligible, if the seer be conceived as having a prevision of the event, and therefore a conviction that, by some means, Philoctetes would be brought" (xxviii).

40 Cf. the extended prophecies of epic seers like Tiresias (*Od.* 11.100-137) or Phineus (A.R. 2.311-425), which begin by emphasizing contingency but then shift into more unconditional formulations as their oracles continue.

41 Cf. LSJ *s.v.* ἀνάγκη A.1 with A.2.d. When ἀνάγκη does refer to fate, this meaning is typically distinguished by personification or reference to the gods, e.g., the ἀνάγκη δαιμόνων of E. *Ph.* 1000. For further examples from tragedy, see Schreckenberg 1964, 72-81.

rhetorical point is that if Troy is to be taken, it must be taken *this summer*, whence the urgency of his mission to recover the Malian bowman.[42] Far from contradicting the foregoing conditionality of the oracle, lines 1340-1341 actually introduce a new stipulation at a critical moment in the drama, raising the stakes of persuading Philoctetes by adding a narrow time limit.[43]

The same argument is broadly applicable for the other passages in which the oracle appears unqualified in a brief allusion; these should be read in light of the clear conditional formulations elsewhere in the play. The importance of context in such matters may be briefly illustrated by a comparandum from Archaic epic: the oracle of Gaia and Uranus concerning Zeus' first marriage that Hesiod reports in the *Theogony*. In his summary of this prophecy, the narrator states baldly that it was 'destined' (εἵμαρτο, 894) that Metis 'would give birth' (ἤμελλεν τέξεσθαι, 898) to two children, the latter of whom would overthrow Zeus as king of gods and men.[44] Again, quoted out-of-context, this passage would seem clearly to indicate that Zeus' downfall was irrevocably ordained by fate, but of course in actuality, 'before' (πρόσθεν, 899) that could happen, Zeus swallowed Metis and thus obviated the oracle's fulfillment.[45] The narrator had earlier stated that Gaia and Uranus themselves had advised Zeus of this stratagem (891-892), so we can assume that their prophecy was in fact conditional in force (if not also in wording). Attention to the wider context reveals conditionality concealed beneath apparently categorical language.

Two final, practical considerations. First, in a drama it is only natural for characters to speak economically and without qualification on a complex subject some of the time, especially as it suits their rhetorical purpose, but the reverse is not true.[46] For example, supposing that Helenus had originally said something very straightforward and unconditional (e.g., "Philoctetes is

42 A similar argument may be made concerning χρῆναι at 200, especially because Neoptolemus' vague λέγεται (199) apparently alludes to this very provision of the oracle that he cites at 1340, i.e., that Troy must be taken this summer (so Jebb ad loc., but cf. Allan 2011, 9 n. 28). N.b. that Neoptolemus again uses a version of οὐ … πρὶν ἄν to introduce his conjecture (cf. 192) that a god has sidelined Philoctetes so that he cannot assault Troy with his talismanic bow until the city's time has come (τοῦ **μὴ** πρότερον τόνδ' ἐπὶ Τροίᾳ | τεῖναι τὰ θεῶν ἀμάχητα βέλη, | **πρὶν** ὅδ' **ἐξήκοι** χρόνος, ᾧ λέγεται | χρῆναί σφ' ὑπὸ τῶνδε δαμῆναι, 197-200).

43 Simultaneously, the new stipulation is also an assurance to Philoctetes that if he does choose to accept, his labor will be short, complete by the end of the summer.

44 Text and translation of Hesiod come from Most 2018.

45 West (1966 ad 894) comments of εἵμαρτο, "[I]t is a case of something prepared by fate, yet not inevitable."

46 For the easy slippage between conditional and unconditional formulations of an oracle in paraphrases thereof, see further Fontenrose 1978, 13-14.

destined to take Troy with his bow"), it is most improbable that different characters referring to this oracle should repeatedly import conditional language that was not there in his clear-cut formulation, whereas it makes much more sense to truncate a wordy, contingent oracle in short references to it. There need be no substantive contradiction between the conditional and unqualified formulations of the oracle. Second, I believe we should be careful about allowing speculations extraneous to the drama to color our interpretation of the oracle's function. For instance, we might consider that if the Greeks had simply cross-referenced Helenus' conditional oracle with, say, Calchas' non-conditional prophecy that Troy would fall in the tenth year of the siege (*Il.* 2.324-330),[47] they might have deduced that Philoctetes' fate must necessarily lie at Troy. Are we thus entitled to think of Helenus' oracle as, in effect, non-conditional? I, for one, would be dubious of any argument that relied upon such an inference. The problem with marshalling such hypothetical evidence is that Sophocles nowhere invites us to connect the dots in this way. What matters, rather, is that the *Philoctetes* consistently frames the oracle in conditional terms, and thus primed, the vast majority of the audience will presumably have understood it precisely as such.[48]

For all these reasons, Helenus' oracle is best regarded as conditional, and thus Philoctetes and Neoptolemus cannot be said to disregard it in the false ending; they do in fact decide to abide by one of the possible outcomes that it presupposes, viz. not to go to Troy. The major significance of the oracle's conditionality for an appreciation of the play is that it leaves the future open and uncertain in the eyes of our protagonists, thus lending real gravity to their choice between Troy and Malis. In this regard as in others Philoctetes resembles the Iliadic Achilles, another figure distinguished by a choice between two potential fates, to fight at Troy or to sail for his homeland (*Il.* 9.410-416).[49] In the event, Achilles chooses to stay and fight, slaying Hector as a prelude to the city's destruction just as Philoctetes will return to kill Paris before sacking Troy (cf. *Il.* 15.68-71 with S. *Ph.* 1426-1428). But before their choices were made and their lives passed into legend, the narrative portrays these characters as

47 Or for another non-conditional prophecy of Troy's destruction, see, e.g., Pi. *O.* 8.41-46.

48 I am reminded of the "Cinderella Fallacy" once articulated by American comic book editor Mort Weisinger: "Everyone knows that at midnight all of Cinderella's finery changed back into rags. Yet has anyone ever asked why one of her slippers remained glass?" (quoted in Tye 2012, 176-177). I take Weisinger's implication to be that most audience members accept the framing of a narrative as it is presented to them, irrespective of the subtler "plot holes" that its lapses in logic might entail.

49 For Philoctetes as an Achilles-figure within the drama, see esp. Blundell 1988, 144.

believing that events really could turn out differently, and that belief is what gives their choices weight.

Sophocles dramatizes this potentiality most clearly in the so-called false ending, where the choices made by Philoctetes and Neoptolemus seem to be leading them off the rails set out for them by tradition. The conditionality of the oracle is essential in the lead-up to the false ending because it allows Philoctetes to refuse Neoptolemus' arguments for sailing to Troy. As Kitto (1956, 132) understood, an unconditional oracle would have equipped Neoptolemus with a strong argument indeed—in his words, "'What the gods have decreed must come to pass. Opposition is idle, and can only anger the gods. I am afraid to sail home with you, lest a bolt from Zeus should destroy us both.'" In Euripides' hands, Philoctetes might have mounted eloquent counterarguments against this position,[50] but evidently Sophocles preferred for dramatic interest to focus instead on the human question, Philoctetes' purely "prudential" choice between the interests of his friend and himself and his bitter grudge against the Greek leadership. Thus the play does not devolve into a legalistic fable about the importance of "obeying" oracles to the letter, as in Bowra's reading of the play.[51]

50 In particular, Philoctetes might have argued that even if the prophecy must be fulfilled, he, like Oedipus, is under no obligation personally to promote its fulfillment (Robinson 1969, 47, 52); see further Scodel 1984, 100. More straightforwardly, he might also have raised doubts about the truth of the oracle or its interpretation (cf. E. fr. 795 Collard and Cropp), especially since Helenus, as an enemy seer, might well deceive the Greeks with misinformation. The Herodotean Onomacritus, an Athenian chresmologue who induces Xerxes to war with Greece by neglecting to report unfavorable oracles (Hdt. 7.6), represents the danger of uncritical trust in a soothsayer whose interests may not align with one's own. In fact, Sophocles anticipates just such objections and has Neoptolemus try to head them off in lines 1338, 1341-1342 (as noted above). But threats of violence were evidently not felt to be a wholly satisfactory assurance of Helenus' trustworthiness in the later mythological tradition. An alternate explanation eventually emerges in which the seer had become disaffected from the Trojans and thus willing to betray them, usually because he had been passed over in favor of Deïphobus for Helen's remarriage following Paris' death (Conon 34, Apollod. *Epit*. 5.9, Q.S. 10.346-357, Serv. ad *A*. 2.166, Tryphiodorus 45-49, Tz. *H*. 6.508-515; cf. Dictys Cretensis 4.18). Of course, even if he was aware of it, for chronological reasons this solution would not have been available to Sophocles to use in this play: this version precludes Helenus' prophesying concerning Philoctetes, because Paris, his victim, must already have died for Helen to have remarried.

51 For Bowra (1944, ch. 7), the *Philoctetes* dramatizes the illusion and ignorance under which human beings operate by showing the failure of the major characters to follow the guidelines of Helenus' oracle. For Philoctetes and, eventually, Neoptolemus, this failure takes the form of disregarding the gods' will for Philoctetes to go to Troy, such that Heracles' intervention is necessary to set aright the divine plan that human fallibility has put awry. But since, as I have argued, the oracle's terms are actually conditional, it does not indicate

Ultimately, the playwright forecloses the aberration threatened by the false ending via the *deus ex machina*, but first he allows the plot to develop organically to its logical conclusion and presents that alternate ending for our contemplation. One of the chief effects of this plotting technique is the revelation of character by showing the choices that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus would have made absent divine intervention.[52] To take a parallel case from the *Iliad*, when Diomedes rides forth three times to meet Hector in battle, deterred only by three roars of Zeus' thunder, he proves his bravery even as he is forced to retreat (*Il.* 8.130-171). By the same token, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus arrive at the false ending through real decisions made in good faith, as if they would have permanent consequences: a Greek defeat at Troy but also continued sickness for one of them, a retributive invasion of Scyrus for the other, and lives without martial glory for them both. Such a fate is undoubtedly bleak, and the audience will doubtless feel that Philoctetes is forcing the pair to adopt by far the inferior of their two options. Nevertheless, their joint acceptance of such a ghastly future serves as a revelation of their values, both to the audience and to each other, even if Heracles waits in the wings to nullify the disastrous consequences that their choices would entail. The characters' freedom in the false ending to choose either of the oracle's options makes true tragic choice possible.

On the one hand, the full extent of Philoctetes' hatred is here laid bare: he lets his bitterness and paranoia outweigh consideration both for himself and his new friend. By allowing Neoptolemus to sacrifice so much for him so that he can exact personal vengeance on the Greek commanders, Philoctetes reveals his selfishness and how much he has to learn about both the reciprocity of friendship and the example of his friend Heracles.[53] The false ending is the low point of Philoctetes' moral arc, which both prepares for and necessitates Heracles' intervention to reverse his intransigence at last. On the other hand,

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which choice the gods would prefer. To be sure, it eventually comes out that Zeus, at least, does want Troy to fall by Philoctetes' bow, and in that sense Odysseus happens to be right, for instance, when he claims to be serving Zeus' will (990; cf. 1116). But what is important in the play is that the human characters *do not actually know the divine will*—not until Heracles definitively reveals "the plans of Zeus" (τὰ Διός … βουλεύματα, 1415) *ex machina* (though cf. n. 11 above). Thus Philoctetes' rejoinder that Odysseus is using the gods as deceitful pretexts (991-992) is also correct. It is also unclear whether Zeus approves of Odysseus' methods, even if their goals align; cf. Pucci 1994, 38.

52 As per Arist. *Po.* 1450b8-10, 'Character [ἦθος] is that which reveals choice [προαίρεσιν], shows what sort of thing a man chooses or avoids in circumstances where the choice is not obvious' (trans. from Fyfe 1932).

53 On Philoctetes' selfishness in the false ending, see Blundell 1989, 217-220; on his failure to emulate Heracles, see Avery 1965, 295-296; Galinsky 1972, 52-55; Eisner 1979, 332-334.

the same scene is the high point of Neoptolemus' moral development, proving his *philia* and overturning the doubts sown by his earlier duplicity. This confirmation of his good will toward Philoctetes is important for the duo's future, because it is only together that they will be able to take Troy, as Heracles foretells (1434-1437):

οὔτε γὰρ σὺ τοῦδ' ἄτερ σθένεις
ἑλεῖν τὸ Τροίας πεδίον οὔθ' οὗτος σέθεν·
ἀλλ' ὡς λέοντε συννόμω φυλάσσετον
οὗτος σὲ καὶ σὺ τόνδ'.

For you have not the strength to conquer the land of Troy without him, neither has he without you; but guard each other like two companion lions.

The basis of this epic partnership is Neoptolemus' fellow-feeling for Philoctetes, rendered unimpeachable by his very real decision to subordinate his heroic aspirations to Philoctetes' wishes, even if it means alienation and quite possibly retaliation from the Greek army. This effect would be ruined if in the back of his mind Neoptolemus knew, because the oracle was unconditional, that somehow, someway, he and Philoctetes would get their glory at Troy—if not now, then at least sometime before the present summer was out. But because the oracle is conditional, Neoptolemus does not know the future, and therefore we know that his sacrifice is serious. There is no need to undermine his sincerity with supposed knowledge of an unconditional oracle, or to complicate his integrity with charges of impiety.[54]

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54 Neoptolemus' traditional impiety at the sack of Troy is alluded to, however, in lines 1440-1444; see Schein 2013 ad loc.

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