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## Sophocles' Philoctetes and the Interpretation of Iliad 9

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 (φιλότιτος , 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. . . ." <sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Using evidence drawn from the *Philoctetes* of [End Page 297] 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> According to Polemo the Academic, "Homer was the epic Sophocles and Sophocles the tragic Homer."<sup>6</sup> Scholars have sometimes used evidence gleaned from Homer in the interpretation of Sophocles' plays, especially the *Ajax*.<sup>7</sup> I wish to reverse this process somewhat and use Sophocles in an attempt to understand Homer a little better.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> **[End Page 298]**

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 / Ἀργεῖοι, 2.724...

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ROBERT J. RABEL

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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 Goffin 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 coloring and its outcome."



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