

SETH L. SCHEIN

The Scene with the False Merchant in Sophokles' *Philoktetes*

The scene with the False Merchant in Sophokles' *Philoktetes* (541-627) constitutes the second main part of the play's extremely long first episode (220-675) and is one of the most complex scenes in surviving Attic tragedy. Scholars have debated its place and function in the overall economy of the play but reached no consensus: they tend to agree that the three-way dialogue of the False Merchant, Neoptolemos, and Philoktetes contributes little or nothing to the plot, but they differ as to what it actually accomplishes. Most interpreters have tried, as Hamlet says, "to pluck out the heart of [the] mystery" by offering a simple explanation focused on a single character, Philoktetes or Neoptolemos. In this paper, through close attention to language and dramatic action, I will try to clarify the effect of the Odysseus' intrigue on both characters and will suggest how Sophokles' audience in 409 BCE and modern audiences and readers might understand this 'triangular' exchange¹.

The scene with the False Merchant is especially challenging, because the False Merchant himself, like Neoptolemos, is an agent of Odysseus, a character performing in a play within the play scripted for him by the son of Laertes. Even more than in the case of Neoptolemos, it is not always clear where the False Merchant's 'script' ends and his own words begin, or how much of his story and its specific mythological details would have been considered 'true' by Sophokles' audience or how much 'false'. To what extent would they differ in their judgments from Philoktetes, who believes that the False Merchant is who and what he appears to be, and from Neoptolemos, who, like themselves, knows that the

¹ I borrow the term 'triangular' from KIRKWOOD 1957, pp. 57-58. Cf. the simpler 'triangular' scenes at *Trachiniae* 393-435, *Oidipous the King* 1119-1181.

False Merchant is a member of the ship's crew disguised as a merchant ship's captain²?

At 539-541, the Chorus announce that they see two men approaching, one a sailor from Neoptolemos' ship and the other a stranger. They themselves know (and the theater audience would immediately and rightly assume) that the stranger is the σκοπός (the "lookout") last seen in the Prologue. Odysseus had told Neoptolemos (126-129),

καὶ δεῦρ', ἐάν μοι τοῦ χρόνου δοκῆτέ τι
κατασχολάζειν, αὐθις ἐκπέμψω πάλιν
τοῦτον τὸν αὐτὸν ἄνδρα, ναυκλήρου τρόποις
μορφῆν δολώσας, ὡς ἂν ἀγνοία προσῆι.

If you seem to me to be taking too long,
I will send this same man back here again,
after disguising his form in the fashion of a merchant ship's
captain, so there may be non-recognition and ignorance³.

The False Merchant, however, is not played by the same actor who played the mute σκοπός in the Prologue, but by the tritagonist, who plays Odysseus in the Prologue and Herakles later in the play. Perhaps the tritagonist wears the same mask as the mute actor in the Prologue, in order to make the identification unmistakable for Neoptolemos and the theater audience, but his costume must have been different, to mark him as a merchant in the Philoktetes' eyes.

The False Merchant is, in effect, a false messenger, like Neoptolemos himself in 343-390⁴. Unlike most messengers in Attic

² The scene with False Merchant is the most conspicuous of the play's many self-referential and meta-theatrical elements. Cf. GREENGARD 1987, pp. 24-27; RINGER 1998, pp. 101-125, esp. 112-115; FALKNER 1998, LADA-RICHARDS 2009. Sophokles' ironic play with the dramatic medium is not gratuitous but directly related to major themes of the drama, such as friendship and betrayal, truth and falsehood, deception and persuasion, communication and non-communication, and ends and means.

³ I translate ἀγνοία as "non-recognition and ignorance", because both these qualities pervade the entire False Merchant scene. See BUDELMANN 2000, pp. 54-55. Here and elsewhere I cite and translate the Greek text in SCHEIN 2013.

⁴ Philoktetes actually refers to Neoptolemos as *his* messenger at 500-501, and the False Merchant speaks of himself as a messenger at 564.

tragedy, who convey information in a truthful speech that enables listeners to grasp a reality previously unknown to them, the False Merchant aims to deceive. Superficially, as a second messenger, following Neoptolemos, he resembles the messenger in Sophokles' *Women of Trachis* and the herdsman in *Oidipous the King*⁵. These 'second messengers', however, clarify and correct the dramatic situations that had been confused by the deceptive words of Lichas (in *Women of Trachis*) and the misleading report of the messenger from Corinth (in *Oidipous the King*)⁶. In contrast, the False Merchant adds to the deception practiced earlier in the play by Neoptolemos. He, like Neoptolemos, is following Odysseus' orders and uses language skillfully to "deceive the soul and steal the life of Philoktetes" (τὴν Φιλοκτῆτου σε δεῖ | ψυχὴν ὅπως λόγοισιν ἐκκλέψεις λέγων, 54-55)⁷. Both the False Merchant and Neoptolemos are, then, Odysseus' instruments in his sophistic intrigue against Philoktetes⁸. The only difference between them is that Neoptolemos is, as it were, a 'real' character, while the False Merchant is bogus, a counterfeit created by Odysseus.

This intra-dramatic spuriousness would have challenged at least some members of a fifth-century Athenian audience (as it challenges many viewers and readers today), to decide to what degree they can take at face value information from such a bogus character, whose words are really those of Odysseus. On the one hand, the False Merchant is no more or less likely to be lying or telling the truth than is Neoptolemos, earlier in the episode. Both offer Philoktetes a confusing combination of familiar and unfamiliar mythological details, though some features of the

⁵ Cf. PAYNE 2000, pp. 403, 412-418, BARRETT 2001, pp. 23-26. Cf. the Paidagogos in Sophokles' *Elektra* 680-763.

⁶ Cf. SEIDENSTICKER 1982, pp. 78-88, DI BENEDETTO 1983, pp. 145-146.

⁷ These orders recall the claim by the Sophist Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen* that "speech is what has persuaded and deceived the [her] mind" (λόγος ὁ πείσας καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπατήσας, *Hel.* 8). Cf. Gorgias, *Helen* 10 δόξης ἀπατήματα. Philoktetes says that Neoptolemos has "cheated" him (929 οἱ ἠπάτηκας, 949 ἠπάτημαι) and that Odysseus has stolen his bow by a similar deceit (cf. 1136 αἰσχρῶς ἀπάτας).

⁸ Cf. 14 σόφισμα, 77-78 σοφισθῆναι, κλοπεὺς | ὅπως γενήσῃ τῶν ἀνικήτων ὅπλων.

False Merchant's speech might seem to an audience to depart more obviously and provocatively from the mythological tradition: for example, his report that Phoinix and the sons of Theseus have gone in pursuit of Neoptolemos (561-562), while Odysseus and Diomedes are on their way to take Philoktetes and bring him back to Troy (570-571, 591-594). On the other hand, the False Merchant's account of Helenos' prophecy (604-613) might seem 'true' at first hearing, because Helenos' capture by Odysseus and his prophecy were part of the mythological tradition known from the *Little Iliad*, as were the 'facts' that Troy *did* fall to the Greeks and that Philoktetes and Neoptolemos played significant roles in the sack of the city⁹. Yet the crucial detail in the prophecy, that the Greeks will never sack Troy, unless they bring Philoktetes from Lemnos by means of persuasion (εἰ μὴ τόνδε πείσαντες λόγῳ | ἄγοιντο νήσου τῆσδ' ἐφ' ἧς ναίει τὰ νῦν, 612-613), seems to contradict Odysseus' categorical statement in the Prologue that Philoktetes cannot be persuaded, any more than he can be forced, to come to Troy (102-103). The False Merchant not only challenges Neoptolemos and Philoktetes to make sense of the information he provides; he invites audiences and readers to interpret the complex scene, while making it impossible for them to do so with any certainty¹⁰.

At comparable moments in *The Women of Trachis* and *Oidipous the King*, after one messenger has spoken and prior to the entrance of a second messenger, the Chorus sing a song of hopeful expectation, and the audience or reader might expect such a song, when Philoktetes and Neoptolemos go into the cave at 538. The Chorus, however, do not share Philoktetes' anxiety, uncertainty, and hopes, as the choruses in those two plays share the feelings of Deianeira and Oidipous, respectively. Instead, the Chorus participate in the intrigue against Philoktetes and help to deceive him. Their two lyric outbursts in the first episode (391-402, 507-518) are

⁹ Cf. *Ilias Parva, Argumentum*, BERNABÉ 1996², p. 74, *Ilii Excidium, Argumentum*, BERNABÉ 1996², p. 88.

¹⁰ Cf. ØSTERUD 1973, GREENGARD 1987, pp. 24-27, EASTERLING 1997, pp. 169-170, FALKNER 1998, pp. 435-436, 442, RINGER 1998, pp. 107-111, PAYNE 2000, pp. 412-418, BUDELMANN 2000, pp. 113-122.

a “direct intervention [...] in the deceiving of [Philoktetes]”, which “contributes significantly to the [play’s] all-encompassing atmosphere of deceit”¹¹. A song of hope following 538 would, therefore, be strikingly inappropriate.

What actually happens at 539 is that the Chorus Leader begins the False Merchant scene by using the dual form ἐπίσχετον (“Stop, the two of you”) to prevent Philoktetes and Neoptolemos from exiting, thus placing the two men on an equal footing. In this use of the dual, the Chorus Leader strategically follows Philoktetes’ example six lines earlier, where he uses the dual in referring to Neoptolemos and himself (προσκύσαντε τὴν ἔσω ἰαοικὸν εἰσοίκησιν (“after the two of us have done reverence within [the cave] to my place of dwelling that is not a dwelling”, 533-534). In 539, after ἐπίσχετον, the Chorus Leader shifts, with emphatic asyndeton, to the first person plural μάθωμεν (“let us learn”), thus seeming to associate the Chorus with Neoptolemos and Philoktetes, when they really are helping Neoptolemos and the False Merchant to take advantage of Philoktetes.

There is a similar effect at the end of the scene, when the False Merchant says, as he exits in 627, “May a god benefit you both in the best way possible” (σφῶν δ’ ὄπως ἄριστα συμφέροι θεός). He uses the dual σφῶν with apparent reference to Philoktetes and Neoptolemos, but his words actually have different meanings for the two characters: for Philoktetes the False Merchant’s συμφέροι (“benefit”) would imply, “by returning home”, while for Neoptolemos it would suggest, “by arranging for you to go to Troy to help sack the city”, and members of the audience or readers might differ in their understanding and even be aware of both meanings simultaneously. In addition, because συμφέροι is a word with Sophistic resonance and has already been associated with Odysseus’ intrigue at 131, when he tells Neoptolemos, δέχου τὰ συμφέροντα τῶν ἀεὶ λόγων (“receive what is expedient in the words [of the False Merchant] from moment to moment”), Neoptolemos could perhaps understand σφῶν as referring to himself and Odysseus rather than himself and Philoktetes, and

¹¹ PAYNE 2000, p. 415; cf. GARDINER 1987, pp. 23-26, SCHEIN 1988, pp. 199-200.

in that case ὄς ἄριστα would refer to the success of their intrigue against Philoktetes¹².

The kind of ambiguity inherent in the False Merchant's σφῶν in 627 contributes to the "ignorance" and "unrecognizability" with which Odysseus and Neoptolemos victimize Philoktetes. For example, in 589-590, after Neoptolemos proclaims himself to the False Merchant as an "enemy to the sons of Atreus" and insists that Philoktetes is his "greatest friend, because he hates [these enemies]", he tells the False Merchant to report openly everything he has heard about Philoktetes (585-588). When the False Merchant warns him, ὄρα τί ποιεῖς, παῖ ("Look what you are doing, my child", 589), Neoptolemos interrupts him in the middle of the line to say, σκοπῶ κἀγὼ πάλαι ("I have been considering it for a long time now"). When the False Merchant in turn replies, σὲ θήσομαι τῶνδ' αἴτιον ("I make you responsible for this", 590), Neoptolemos again interrupts him impatiently: ποιοῦ λέγων ("Do so, but speak"). The apparent excitement and urgency expressed by these successive *antilabai* are feigned: the False Merchant and Neoptolemos are playing their parts in a scenario designed to impress Philoktetes, and the effect is intensified in 589 by the word παῖ ("my child"), which concludes the False Merchant's warning with particular emphasis immediately after the caesura and at the exact mid-point of the line.

There are at least three levels of communication in the False Merchant's ὄρα τί ποιεῖς. Neoptolemos would hear it as a message from Odysseus as well as the False Merchant, warning him to play his part in the intrigue carefully; Philoktetes would hear it as a sign of danger but think, from Neoptolemos' reply, that the son of Achilles is on his side and willing to run risks for his sake;

¹² But as M. S. Mirto pointed out in her comment on this paper when it was presented orally, it is by no means certain that a dual can refer simultaneously both to Neoptolemos and Philoktetes, who are physically present in the scene, and to Neoptolemos and Odysseus, who are joined in the intrigue against Philoktetes but not by a shared physical presence. Elsewhere, Odysseus uses the dual of himself and Neoptolemos at 25 and 133, and Neoptolemos does the same at 1079. As I have already mentioned, Philoktetes uses the dual of himself and Neoptolemos at 533, as does Herakles, decisively, in 1436-1437, when he tells Philoktetes and Neoptolemos to "guard" one another, when they take Troy, like "two lions feeding in the same pasture".

the audience would hear it as a warning that Neoptolemos must “watch what [he is] doing” morally. Neoptolemos’ response, “I have been considering it for a long time” (σκοπῶ καὶ γὰρ πάλα), might mean, to the False Merchant, “I am doing what Odysseus told me to do and playing my part”, but Philoktetes would hear these words as a kind of defiance of the False Merchant’s warning, while the audience could take them as a sign that Neoptolemos feels some doubt and is ethically troubled by how he has treated Philoktetes – that watching the False Merchant deceive Philoktetes has given the son of Achilles a self-critical perspective on his own role in the deception¹³. It is, however, unclear whether Neoptolemos can see, as the audience or reader can, that the scene with the False Merchant imitates his own ‘mercantile bargaining about Philoktetes’ in the Prologue, where Odysseus successfully uses the profit-motive to draw Neoptolemos into the intrigue. Does the ‘noble’ Neoptolemos begin to understand that he resembles the lower class False Merchant in acting for personal profit, just as he resembles him in being the agent and instrument of Odysseus¹⁴? It is also unclear how the Chorus are affected and what they might be thinking, as the scene unfolds. They constitute a silent, internal audience from 541 through the end of the scene – indeed, through the end of the first episode – but because they have supported Neoptolemos through their lyric outbursts at 391-402 and 507-518, confirming his lying story that he was robbed of his armor by Odysseus and the sons of Atreus, and because they have made a crucial intervention at 522-523, they would presumably have some reaction to the False Merchant’s lying story and the responses of Neoptolemos and Philoktetes.

The False Merchant makes his lies effective in two main ways, which help to corroborate his identity and persuade Philoktetes to trust him. First, he hints at historical realities known to Sophokles’ fifth-century Athenian audience; second, his lan-

¹³ See EASTERLING 1997, p. 170. Cf. ALT 1961, p. 169, MASARACCHIA 1964, pp. 94-96.

¹⁴ Cf. ØSTERUD 1973, pp. 24-25. For Neoptolemos acting for the sake of κέρδος (“profit”), cf. 111-112; for the False Merchant’s similar motivation, cf. 583-584.

guage artfully alludes to the language and action of the *Iliad*, to other mythology familiar from the epic cycle, and to earlier dramatizations of the story of Philoktetes. Of course, as characters in the play, neither the false Merchant nor Philoktetes nor Neoptolemos could be familiar with these historical realities or actually make or recognize such allusions. The audience, however, would recognize some of what the False Merchant says as 'true', and this 'truth' would, however illogically, make what he tells Philoktetes seem persuasive.

For example, when the False Merchant says, at 548-549, that he is on his way home from Ilion to "Peparethos, rich in grapes", many members of the audience would know that this island (the modern Skopelos, c. 20 miles NE of Euboia and c. 40 miles NW of Skyros) was a relatively wealthy, tribute-paying ally of Athens in the fifth century, famous for wine (its legendary founder was Staphylos, son of Dionysos) and for other agricultural produce¹⁵. Their knowledge would make the False Merchant's claim seem plausible, and thus (in their eyes) it would seem plausible to Philoktetes. Similarly, those in the audience most familiar with the *Iliad* would recall 7.467-475, the account of the Greek army at Troy importing their wine from Lemnos. This is impossible in Sophokles' play, where Lemnos is uninhabited, but at the same time it would make sense to the audience that a merchant would be involved in such wine-importing¹⁶. Later in the scene, when the False Merchant reports that Phoinix and the sons of Theseus have gone in pursuit of Neoptolemos, he departs from the traditional story in the *Little Iliad*, that Odysseus brought Neoptolemos from Skyros to Troy. Yet his reference to Athamas and Demophon is not gratuitous, because it was part of the traditional myth that Neoptolemos' maternal grandfather, Lykomedes, killed Theseus in Skyros¹⁷, a detail that the False Merchant and Neoptolemos could not know, but which, for an Athenian audience, might

¹⁵ Cf. Eur. fr. 752a 1-2 Kn. [from *Hypsipyle*], Ovid. *Met.* 7.470, Pliny *HN* 14.76, Athenaios 1.29a.

¹⁶ The Iliadic echoes in the Paidagogos' story of the chariot race at *El.* 680-763 have a similar effect. Cf. EASTERLING 1997, p. 169.

¹⁷ Cf. Paus. 1.17.6.

make Theseus' sons appropriate enemies of Neoptolemos. Similarly, the story that Odysseus and Diomedes are on their way to Lemnos, "having sworn to bring [Philoktetes to Troy] by persuasion of speech or powerful constraint of force" (590-594), goes against the account in the *Little Iliad* that Diomedes alone accomplished this task, but it appeals to the audience's familiarity with Odysseus and Diomedes as partners in the night-spying in Book 10 of the *Iliad*, in the theft of the Palladion as told in the *Little Iliad*, and in forcefully persuading Philoktetes to come to Troy in Euripides' *Philoktetes*. In each case the False Merchant mentions some detail that neither he nor Philoktetes, as dramatic characters, could possibly know, but which the theater audience would recognize as familiar and hence 'true'; and in each case the familiarity of the detail would irrationally but effectively confirm his lying story, making it more persuasive.

On the other hand, some of the False Merchant's corroborative details are bound to affect the audience or reader differently, even though the False Merchant himself is unaware of their resonance. For example, at 598-602, Neoptolemos asks,

τίνος δ' Ἀτρεΐδαι τοῦδ' ἄγαν οὕτω χρόνῳ
 τοσῶιδ' ἐπεστρέφοντο πράγματος χάριν,
 ὃν γ' εἶχον ἤδη χρόνιον ἐκβεβληκότες; 600
 τίς ὁ πόθος αὐτοῦς ἴκετ'; ἢ θεῶν βία
 καὶ νέμεσις, οἴπερ ἔργ' ἀμύνουσιν κακά;

For what reason were the sons of Atreus
 so intent on this man, after so long a time,
 a man whom long ago they had already thrown away? 600
 What longing (πόθος) came over them? Was it the gods' violence
 and righteous anger, which punish evil deeds?

Because Neoptolemos is the speaker, his question, τίς ὁ πόθος αὐτοῦς ἴκετ'; ("what longing came over them?"), recalls *Il.* 1.240, spoken by Achilles: "truly, at some time a longing for Achilles will come over the sons of the Achaians" (ἢ ποτ' Ἀχιλλῆος ποθὴ ἴξεται υἱᾶς Ἀχαιῶν). This echo not only helps make the deception of Philoktetes more effective, but also enhances for the audience (and for readers) the disparity between Achilles, who speaks in

spontaneous fury, and Neoptolemos, whose words are calculatedly deceptive and almost seem designed to elicit the False Merchant's story of Helenos' prophecy and thus suggest the danger Odysseus poses for Philoktetes (603-621). The verbal echo also suggests that Philoktetes, for whom the sons of Atreus and the army now "long", is the real heroic parallel in the play to Achilles in the *Iliad*¹⁸. Neoptolemos, by comparison, is a "spurious Achilles", whose desire to live up to his father's standard is compromised by his readiness to lie in the service of Odysseus and the sons of Atreus¹⁹.

A similar contrast is evoked at 615-619 between Odysseus in the play and the Homeric Odysseus, when the False Merchant describes how, after hearing Helenos' prophecy, Odysseus

εὐθέως ὑπέσχετο
τὸν ἄνδρ' Ἀχαιοῖς τόνδε δηλώσειν ἄγων,
[...]
[...] καὶ τούτων κάρᾳ
τέμνειν ἐφεῖτο τῶι θέλοντι μὴ τυχών.

[...] quickly promised
to fetch this man and show him to the Achaians
[...]
[...] and if he failed in this,
he would allow whoever wished (to do so) to cut off his head.

In 618-619, the False Merchant makes Odysseus speak as he does in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; μηκέτ' ἔπειτ' Οδυσῆϊ κάρῃ ὤμοισιν ἐπεῖη ("no longer, then, may Odysseus' head be upon his shoulders [if he does not beat and drive off Thersites]"; *Il.* 2.259), and αὐτίκ' ἔπειτ' ἀπ' ἐμεῖο κάρῃ τάμοι ἀλλότριος φῶς

¹⁸ Cf. GREENGARD 1987, pp. 38-39, 66, 80. The parallel between Philoktetes and Achilles can be seen in the *Iliad* itself, which Sophokles may be recalling for his own poetic purposes: cf. 2.726, where the followers of Philoktetes "longed for their leader" (πόθειόν γε μὲν ἀρχόν) as the Greek army will for Achilles (1.240 Ἀχιλλῆος ποθῆ ἴξεται [...]); 2.724, where "[Philoktetes] lay there [sc. in Lemnos] grieving; but soon [the Greeks] were going to remember [him]" (ἐνθ' ὃ γε κείτ' ἀχέων τάχα δὲ μνήσεσθαι ἐμελλον [...]) ~ 2.694 "for her [sc. Briseis] he [sc. Achilles] lay grieving, but soon he was going to rise up" (τῆς ὃ γε κείτ' ἀχέων, τάχα δ' ἀνοστήσεσθαι ἐμελλεν). I owe these references to Maria Serena Mirto.

¹⁹ See KNOX 1964, p. 123.

("May some foreigner then cut off my head immediately [if I do not punish the Suitors]", *Od.* 16.102). No one else in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* uses such an expression, so the False Merchant's account is appropriate to, and in character for, Odysseus. Yet the main effect of this corroborative epic reminiscence, which at least some spectators (and readers) would surely recognize, is to call attention to the distance between Odysseus' epic heroism and his characterization in the play as a type of late fifth-century Athenian demagogue²⁰. This characterization was already evident in the False Merchant's description at 608-609 of how Odysseus "brought [Helenos] bound | and showed him to the Achaians publicly, a fine prey" (δέσμιόν τ' ἄγων | ἔδειξ' Ἀχαιοῖς ἐς μέσον, θήραν καλήν), where the political phrase ἐς μέσον ("in the middle"), which I have translated as "publicly", would have led some members of an Athenian audience to think of the Greek army in the play as a political community like their own, as they would have done at 385-386, when Neoptolemos speaks of τοὺς ἐν τέλει ("those in authority") and of a πόλις²¹.

There is a similar contrast, as Pietro Pucci has noted, between the high, epic style and the base action described in 593-594, διώμοτοι πλέουσιν ἢ μὴν ἢ λόγῳ | πείσαντες ἄξειν, ἢ πρὸς ἰσχύος κράτος ("Having sworn strongly and confidently, they sail to bring him back, | either when they have persuaded him by speech or by the compelling power of physical strength"). Perhaps too the False Merchant's unusual combination in 591 of a dual subject, ἄνδρε τῶδ' ("these two men") with a plural adjective and verb, διώμοτοι πλέουσιν ("they sail, having sworn"), reflects the False Merchant's own unease at his mythological innovation in 592, when he names Odysseus and the son of Tydeus (Diomedes) as already *en route* to capture Philoktetes.

The climax of the scene with the False Merchant is his account of Helenos' prophecy and Odysseus' response to it (603-621) – an account that Odysseus intends Philoktetes and Neoptolemos to

²⁰ Cf. Pucci 2003, p. 235.

²¹ Cf. 96-99 on the power of speech, with the Scholiast's comment that in these lines Sophokles "slanders (διαβάλλει) contemporary Athenian political leaders (ῥήτορας) as succeeding in all things through speech" (ὡς διὰ γλώσσης πάντα κατορθούντας).

hear. Odysseus, as I have already mentioned, had instructed Neoptolemos in the Prologue to “receive what is expedient in the words [of the False Merchant] from moment to moment, as he speaks artfully” (οὐ δῆτα, τέκνον, ποικίλως αὐδωμένου | δέχου τὰ συμφέροντα τῶν ἀεὶ λόγων, 130-131); it is, however, impossible to decide how much of what the False Merchant says about Helenos’ prophecy is a matter of artfulness and how much he reports accurately. Because ποικίλως (“artfully”) and its cognates are often associated with deception and outright lying in Greek poetic tradition²², and Odysseus has already convinced Neoptolemos to lie as part of the intrigue against Philoktetes, the audience would expect the False Merchant to lie to Philoktetes and perhaps to Neoptolemos as well.

The False Merchant’s artfulness colors his account of the prophecy (611-613), that “as for the towers above Troy, the Greeks would never | sack [them], unless they bring [Philoktetes] from this island on which he now dwells, | after persuading him by speech” (τὰπὶ Τροίαι πέργαμ’ ὡς οὐ μὴ ποτε | πέρσοιεν, εἰ μὴ τόνδε πείσαντες λόγῳ | ἄγοιντο νήσου τῆσδ’ ἐφ’ ἧς ναίει τὰ νῦν). On the face of it, this statement contradicts both the emphasis in the Prologue on the need for Philoktetes’ bow (78, 115-116) and Odysseus’ explicit statement in 103 that persuasion as well as force is impossible. It is, however, unclear whether the words πείσαντες λόγῳ should be understood as part of Helenos’ prophecy, accurately transmitted by the False Merchant, or if one or both words are Odysseus’ or the False Merchant’s version of what Helenos said; similarly, it is unclear whether 593-594 λόγῳ | πείσαντες ἄξειν (“to bring [Philoktetes], after persuading [him] by speech”) are Odysseus’ words carried over into indirect discourse, or if the False Merchant is summarizing in his own language what Odysseus said. In 614-615 ἤκουσ’ ὁ Λαέρτου τόκος | τὸν μάντιν εἰπόντ’ (“the offspring of Laertes heard | the seer speak”), the aorists are simultaneous and may imply that

²² E.g. Sappho 1.1-2 ποικιλόθρον’ (or -φρον’) ἀθανάτ’ Ἀφροδίτα | παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, Pind. *Ol.* 1.29 δεδαιδαλμένοι ψεύδεσι ποικίλοις ἑξαπατῶντι μῦθοι. Cf. WORMAN 2002, p. 31.

Odysseus heard the words directly from Helenos, but the main emphasis is on what Helenos said; this is in contrast to 595-596, where the emphasis is on Odysseus, whom "all the Achaians heard clearly as he was saying these things" (καὶ ταῦτ' Ἀχαιοὶ πάντες ἤκουον σαφῶς | Ὀδυσσέως λέγοντος). Neither passage makes clear to whom the word "persuaded" belongs.

Scholars have debated the purpose and effect of the scene with the False Merchant but have reached no consensus. Some think Odysseus aims to confuse Philoktetes by making him expect an effort at persuasion, rather than deception or force²³, while others argue that the scene definitively confirms for the audience that Philoktetes cannot be persuaded²⁴. Still others find the main significance of the scene in the False Merchant's account of Helenos' prophecy, either because the prophecy makes Philoktetes feel for the first time that he has a special, destined role in the fall of Troy²⁵, or because Helenos' reported words correspond to the theodicy sketched by Neoptolemos at 195-200 (though this theodicy is in fact self-serving and turns out to be mistaken in any straightforward sense)²⁶. Certainly one important effect of Helenos' (reported) words, delivered by the False Merchant but scripted by Odysseus, is to re-energize the intrigue and challenge an audience or reader to consider whether Odysseus' deception, motivated up to this point wholly in human terms, may in fact have divine backing, even though Odysseus at times seems prepared to act in a manner contrary to Helenos' words, for example, when he threatens to depart with the bow and leave Philoktetes on Lemnos (1054-1062). Odysseus himself never refers to the prophecy, not even when he claims to be acting as a servant of Zeus (989-990), although 113 ("this bow alone will take Troy") and 115 ("neither would you [be the one to take Troy] apart from (the bow) nor (the bow) apart from you") may allude to some special knowledge on his part that Philoktetes' bow, at least, is needed for the sack of the city. It is worth noting that in

²³ KNOX 1964, p. 128, BUXTON 1981, p. 217 n. 21.

²⁴ PERROTTA 1935, p. 431, ALT 1961, p. 151, GARVIE 1972, pp. 217-219.

²⁵ E.g. POHLENZ 1954, I, p. 328.

²⁶ Cf. PUCCI 2003, p. 233.

the False Merchant's account, Helenos' prophecy leads directly to Odysseus' actions and intrigue and might seem to justify them²⁷.

There is some truth in all of these interpretations, and it is impossible to resolve the scene's contradictions and uncertainties. The very multiplicity of possible interpretations is testimony to the ἀγνοία – the “non-recognition and ignorance” – that Odysseus cultivates, when he dispatches the disguised σκοπός (cf. 129). It also is true to the overall complexity of this problem play, in which it is constantly impossible to be sure of the ‘truth’, or even to decide if there is any ‘truth’ in the stories the characters allude to or tell²⁸. As a result, audiences and readers must work hard to understand what is actually happening in the dramatic action, and as they watch the scene with the False Merchant unfold, they are invited to think for themselves about means and ends, about the moral choices they are called on to make in their own lives, and about what is and is not ethically and politically desirable²⁹.

ABSTRACT

The scene with the False Merchant in Sophokles' *Philoctetes* (542-627) calls attention to its own contradictions and uncertainties and to the overall complexity of a drama in which it is impossible to be sure of the ‘truth’ – or even if there is any ‘truth’ – in the stories the characters allude to and tell. The scene does not resolve these contradiction and uncertainties or simplify the complexity of this ‘problem play’. Rather, the three-way dialogue of the False Merchant, Neoptolemos, and Philoktetes enhances the *agnoia* that Odysseus cultivates when he sends the disguised “Lookout” to assist Neoptolemos, and it challenges audiences and readers to think for themselves about some of the central themes of the play: means and ends, moral choices, deception and persuasion, and communication and non-communication.

²⁷ See Pucci 2003, p. 234.

²⁸ Cf. Greengard 1987, pp. 5-6, 23-27, 100-102.

²⁹ I would like to thank Maria Serena Mirto for the suggestions in notes 12 and 18 and for her helpful critique of an earlier draft of this paper, which improved it in form and substance.

KEYWORDS

Philoktetes, Odysseus, Neoptolemos, False Merchant, duals, allusion, sophistic intrigue, truth, ambiguity.

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