Philoctetes - A Short Introduction

By Paul Woodruff

Can the demands of war ruin the character of a young man? Can an old man who has been isolated by the wounds of war allow himself to rejoin the human race? These are the huge questions that drive the last play Sophocles produced, the Philoctetes. The plot pursues both questions across conflicts between our common humanity and the harsh duties imposed by war, through the twists and turns of two stories intertwined, the old man’s and the boy’s. Sophocles is too wise to answer either question definitively. The old man will rejoin his community, even though it is a community devoted to war. But his choice to do so comes at the last minute and in response to what may or may not be a miracle. The young man will waver between his human instincts and his cruel duty as a soldier, again until the very end. And even then we do not know for sure which way he has decided.

The story of Philoctetes is this: he is the finest archer of the Greeks, but he was wounded by a sacred snake and abandoned on a deserted promontory by his comrades. Here he has lived alone, with no human companionship, feeding himself by hunting with bow and arrow, living in a cave. After nine years he finds a group of men on his island, and they are speaking Greek. He is overjoyed at their presence, and, at the same time, fearful. He has no reason to trust them.

The Greeks are there because, after all these years, they realize they need the archer back in the army. The Greeks know the archer will not trust the men who abandoned him, so they have sent a new recruit to fetch him, Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, who has just reached military age. Because he is so young, they sent Odysseus to be the boy’s mentor behind the scenes. Odysseus is of all the Greeks the one Philoctetes hates the most, so he must stay in the background, instructing the boy but not revealing himself to Philoctetes.

Philoctetes will believe the boy’s lies, so trusts him to hold his famous bow while he sleeps. After the boy returns the bow, Philoctetes is almost persuaded to do as the boy says, and board ship to return to the army. But nothing the boy says will persuade the old archer to trust the boy’s older comrades, and he refuses to go. In a surprise move, the boy offers to take Philoctetes home instead, as Philoctetes has begged him to do. Is this another trick, we wonder? Odysseus, after all, is in command, and the ship will return to the army. But before they reach the ship, something strange happens.

The story of Neoptolemus is this: Because his father Achilles was famous for his blunt honesty, everyone assumes that the boy will be utterly trustworthy. And the boy believes this too. But to bring back the old archer, the boy will have to tell a series of lies. None of the Greeks is more skilled at lying than Odysseus, so he is the perfect tutor for the young soldier, who will have to learn to tell one big lie in order to win the war. After that, Odysseus tells him, he can be as honest as he likes. The boy quickly agrees to tell the lie; the glory of winning outweighs the value of staying true to what he believes is his nature. Sometimes, however, he follows the example of the chorus and feels compassion
for Philoctetes, but often he feels the pull of duty. At one point, when the old archer trusts him with the bow, we fear he will use the bow to force the man to board ship for the army. But compassion seems to win out when the boy offers to take Philoctetes home (though of course this may be another trick).

Just as the boy and the old archer turn toward the ship, a miracle occurs. Philoctetes’ best friend, Heracles, returns from the dead, flying in from the sky like a god on a machine. Heracles tells Philoctetes that he must return to the army, where he will be cured. His return will tip the balance of the Trojan War at last toward the Greeks, and he will win glory and booty in the sack of Troy. “But remember to be reverent,” Heracles advises the two soldiers young and old. So the play ends, but we know from the myth that the boy Neoptolemus will have grown into a soldier of monstrous cruelty by the time he sacks Troy. He will slaughter the frail king Priam as he clings to an altar over the screamed protests of his elderly wife.

Is victory worth the cost of war? Yes, says Heracles at the end, but only if the victory is carried out reverently. The play has brought home to us the cost of this war to the individuals who are sacrificed for its success. For the supposed good of all, the army must abandon an honored veteran. Once abandoned, the veteran loses trust in his fellow men and becomes isolated, literally and in his own mind. For the supposed good of the army, a wily old soldier must teach a youngster to sacrifice his moral scruples to the goal of victory. Is this leadership? Is subterfuge an essential element in the art of war?

Most writing about war dwells on death and dismemberment—the physical cost of war. This play dwells on the moral and psychological cost. It raises questions and leaves them hanging for us to answer. As a society we should ponder these questions as we continue to prepare for war, and especially before we enter a new war: Can we teach youngsters the arts of war, including subterfuge, without destroying their ethical character? Can we overcome the isolation of veterans who have been wounded in body and soul? Is victory important enough to warrant the whole cost of war?