Philoctetes is one of the very rare plays by Sophocles that can be dated precisely: it was first performed in Athens’ City Dionysia in 409 BC and won the first prize.

The myth staged in this play would have been familiar to the audience and can be related to the saga of the Trojan War. Before embarking with the Greeks for Troy, Philoctetes is linked to the legend of Heracles. Because Philoctetes had agreed to light the funeral pyre on which he wished to be burnt alive, Heracles gave Philoctetes his own bow, a special, almost magical, weapon: its arrows never miss their target. As the Greeks were sailing to Troy, they stopped to offer a sacrifice on the island of Chrysē (or to a deity called Chrysē), and Philoctetes was bitten on the foot by a water-snake during this stopover. The injury is so painful that Philoctetes’ cries of agony never stop and prevent the peaceful performing of the religious rites. The wound also emits a terrible smell. Odysseus and the Atreids thus decide to abandon Philoctetes on Lemnos and he is supposed to never come back. However, several years later, near the end of the Trojan War, the Greeks hear from Helenos, a Trojan seer, a prophecy saying that Troy could never be captured without Philoctetes and his bow.

We have evidence in visual art of representations of Philoctetes’ adventures from about 460 BC. Later writers mention a famous statue (Pliny, NH 34, 19, 59) as well as paintings, and we have depictions of the myth on coins, gems, and mirrors. Philoctetes also appears on vases and the most important elements of his story, linked to both Heracles and the Trojan saga, occur quite frequently until the 3rd century AD at least. Philoctetes’ story is also well-attested in literature before the time of Sophocles. The hero is mentioned in both the Iliad and the Odyssey, albeit briefly. Two poems of the Epic Cycle (which revolved around the story of the Trojan War), the Cypria and the Little Iliad, presented the myth of Philoctetes in more detail. Several versions of the same story were in circulation in Archaic and Classical times and Sophocles reflects elements of these, but also chose to depart from those versions for his own purposes. In the fifth century, the two other great Athenian tragedians, Aeschylus and Euripides, each also composed a Philoctetes, both performed before Sophocles’. Dio Chrysostom (1st century AD) gives summaries of the three plays in a short text in which he compares them. Unfortunately, the text is not well preserved but some useful information can still be extracted from it and gives insights about the differences between the three versions. Other minor tragic and comic poets also composed plays in which the character of Philoctetes was staged, but no more than some fragments remain.

In Sophocles’ Philoctetes, the stage is set on Lemnos, near the cave where Philoctetes has spent the last years alone after the Greeks had abandoned him. Odysseus and Neoptolemos (Achilles’ son) land on the island with the mission of bringing Philoctetes’ bow back to Troy. Because he was responsible for leaving him on the desert island, Odysseus cannot take the risk of being recognized by Philoctetes, who would certainly shoot one of his special arrows at him. He therefore persuade Neoptolemos to lie to Philoctetes to convince him to give him his bow. Odysseus himself will get back to the ships and, if the process seems to be taking too long, he will send back a sailor, in disguise. At first, Neoptolemos refuses to use Odysseus’ deceitful methods, but then agrees to the plan.

The chorus, one of the most active in Sophocles’ plays, composed of Neoptolemos’ sailors, enters the stage and sings about Philoctetes’ life on this uninhabited island. Although they pity the hero, the sailors make it clear that they are ready to side with Neoptolemos and lie to Philoctetes if the mission requires it.
Philoctetes enters the stage and is glad to meet human beings, and moreover Greeks, after so many years of complete loneliness. He explains to Neoptolemos why he is here on his own, wounded, and how he managed to survive. Following the plan devised by Odysseus, Neoptolemos then tells him his deceitful story: he is sailing back home because the Greeks have deprived him of his father’s weapons, which were supposed to be passed on to him, his son, at his death. The chorus confirms Neoptolemos’ false story and Philoctetes is convinced that it is the truth. He begs Neoptolemos to take him on board his ship and bring him back home too.

A false merchant, whom the audience must understand to be the sailor sent by Odysseus, or even Odysseus in disguise, as has been suggested by Roisman (2001), appears on stage and pretends that the Greeks are after Neoptolemos and Philoctetes and will soon land on the island. Philoctetes is even more impatient to board Neoptolemos’ ship and enters his cave to gather his meagre belongings.

After a choral interlude, where the sailors sing of the misery of Philoctetes, the wounded hero suffers several terrible attacks of pain and eventually falls asleep, after entrusting his bow to Neoptolemos. The chorus of sailors suggest that they leave with the bow before Philoctetes wakes up. Yet, the young son of Achilles cannot bring himself to deceive him. He is motivated both by sympathy and admiration for Philoctetes and also because he finally lets his true nature (as the son of a noble hero) resurface above what Odysseus had tried to teach him (the use of deceit). He also explains to the chorus that the oracle had said that both the bow and Philoctetes would be needed in Troy.

When Philoctetes wakes up, Neoptolemos tells him the truth and tries to encourage him to come willingly with him to Troy. Philoctetes is adamant in his refusal to follow and asks that his bow be returned to him.

As the young son of Achilles is about to give back the weapon to his owner, Odysseus enters the stage and prevents him to do so. He, too, fails to persuade Philoctetes, despite various threats. Finally, the chorus, in a lyric dialogue with the protagonist, tries to talk Philoctetes into coming to Troy, but in vain.

In the last scene, Neoptolemos gives back the bow to Philoctetes and begs him, once again, to let himself be persuaded to accompany them to Troy. The hero remains stubborn (a characteristic that has been highlighted as one of the most typical features of tragic heroes by Knox, 1964) and now threatens Odysseus with his arrows. Odysseus retires from the stage. Neoptolemos then explains the content of the prophecy to Philoctetes, and tells him that he will be healed if he agrees to come to Troy. After some hesitation, Philoctetes still refuses and convinces Neoptolemos to take him back home. As they are about to leave to go back to the ship, Heracles appears on stage as a *deus ex machina* (a divine figure that was probably brought on stage by some sort of crane and whose intervention solved an otherwise blocked situation) and tells Philoctetes that he must go to Troy to offer the victory to the Greeks and be healed. The hero yields to the god.

From many points of view, *Philoctetes* is a rich and complex play. The way in which Sophocles presents the internal turmoil of its characters is not paralleled in any other play. More specifically, the staging of the moral changes undergone by Neoptolemos during the play is a striking feature of this version of the story. Several layers of true and false stories narrated by different characters in the play make it difficult to disentangle what, especially in the words pronounced by Neoptolemos and the chorus, belongs to the plan to deceive Philoctetes and what corresponds to their true feelings: even for an attentive audience or readership, it is sometimes hard to tell who says the truth, a phenomenon that is strangely modern. As is often the case in ancient Greek tragedies, it is impossible to pinpoint what would have been the exact intended message of the play: there are certainly several of them, and often self-contradictory. The play no doubt elicited different reactions and reflections from different part of the audience, or even from each individual.

Three themes are frequently addressed in modern scholarship: the reference to the sophists, the treatment of religion, and the relationship with democracy.

That the play alludes to the activities of the sophists (teachers of rhetorical and philosophical techniques for the purpose of persuasion) has long been recognized. Rose (1976) has demonstrated that Sophocles not only alludes to this movement when he has Odysseus trying to convince Neoptolemos to deceive Philoctetes by means of a clever use of words, but that the whole description of life in a desert island, followed by the different stages of the relationships between the characters displayed on stage, referred to sophistic
philosophical beliefs. Neoptolemos’ internal debate between his true nature, as the son of a noble hero, and the new education he acquired from Odysseus also points to a contemporary debate that revolved around the teachings of the sophists, often accused of perverting the youth and teaching them how to use rhetorical skills to convince their audience of any point of view, however wrong it might be.

Sophocles’ play has also been perceived as staging a more conservative religious point of view. The fact that it is a god who solves the problem at the end of the play can be interpreted as showing the limits of human intelligence: oracles and prophecies are more powerful than human will. This emphasis on the limits of human ability to change individual destiny is also present in other Sophoclean plays, such as Oedipus Tyrannus, and seems here to be reaffirmed.

Despite the ongoing debate about the relationship between tragedy and democracy, it is clear that the performance of Philoctetes is, in one way or another, linked to the socio-historical context in which it took place. Sophocles’ play was performed shortly after the Athenian citizens collectively took what is known as ‘Demophantos’ oath’, in the context of the restoration of democracy after a political hiatus. Among other points, they had to swear that they would kill tyrants and oligarchs, i.e. élite citizens who wanted to restrict political participation to the top layer of Athenian society. The way in which Philoctetes stages the use of rhetorical skills (something that the Assembly of citizens had seen much used, for good and bad, in the last few years) and problematizes the articulation between the will of the heroic/aristocratic individual and the common good of the social group, must have elicited reflection from the Athenian citizens present in the audience. Does the fact that a god is needed to solve an inextricable situation shows the limits of democracy or on the contrary reinforces the idea that the common good is to be put before individual interests, perhaps at all costs and by any means? Spectators and readers of the play are left with the choice of finding their own interpretation.

While the myth of Philoctetes has certainly had a long life after the Classical period, it would be difficult to argue that all stories related to this figure were descendants of the play of Sophocles, and we have no extant evidence for ancient re-performances of this particular version of the play. In Roman times, the poet Accius (about 170-86 BC) composed a dramatic work on the theme of Philoctetes, which is known to us mainly through quotations in Cicero. Accius’ play seems to have been closer to Euripides’ version of the myth, but also had Sophoclean elements. One of the most important allusions to the story of Philoctetes in Latin literature is to be found in Ovid’s Metamorphoses (book 13).

In modern times, Philoctetes has not been as often re-performed as, for example, Antigone or Oedipus Tyrannus. However, the myth has been used in modern art and literature for its potential to address questions about education as well as in discussions of the aesthetics of pain. Some works can safely be considered as directly inspired by Sophocles’ work. In the 17th century, Fénelon follows the plot of Sophocles’ play quite closely when he writes about the story of Philoctetes in chapter 12 of his Adventures of Telemachus, Son of Ulysses. Odysseus, however, is put in a more positive light. In 18th-century Europe, a large number of adaptations of Sophocles’ play were performed in theatres. Jean-François de la Harpe’s Philoctète has no doubt been the most successful of those adaptations. After the French Revolution, the myth has also been used for its political connotations. More modern adaptations for the stage are less tied to the play of Sophocles, but the tragedian’s play remains one of the best ancient sources we have on the story of Philoctetes. Most recently, the play has sadly found new echoes in its depiction of pain and has been used to foster dialogue with veterans of war suffering from injuries (most notably in a programme for War veterans that is known as ‘The Philoctetes Project’).

Works cited