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THE HERO'S QUEST IN SOPHOCLES' *PHILOCTETES*

In a recent article Malcolm Davies has fruitfully identified and discussed a folk tale motif latent in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*¹. In this paper, I try to show that consideration of folk tale from a different perspective may shed further light upon this drama. And while the identification of folk tale influence is in itself a legitimate object of scholarly inquiry, I also hope to show how the recognition of such a pattern can help us appreciate Sophocles' artistic skill in altering and adapting it to suit his poetic purposes².

Davies's article identifies Philoctetes with the 'Wild Man'. This familiar folk tale figure is a solitary, animal-like being, who despite his marginal status possesses some secret information or magical object. He thus fits neatly into the schema set out by the pioneering work of Vladimir Propp on the hero's quest³. Propp laid great stress on the 'helper figure' encountered by the hero in the early stages of his quest, who provides him with some piece of knowledge or magical item which aids him to achieve his goal⁴. The ambivalent nature so often displayed by these 'helper figures'⁵ reinforces this connexion. For the 'Wild Man' is potentially both threatening and beneficent, and the hero must deal with him carefully to ensure that he derives profit, not harm, from the encounter.

Davies's discussion is based on a model of the *Philoctetes* in which the goal of Neoptolemus' quest is the sack of Troy. This constitutes the 'lack' identified by Propp as the impetus for the hero's quest⁶. Philoctetes fits into

¹ M. Davies, *Philoctetes: Wild Man and Helper Figure*, "PP" 58, 2003, 347-55. I am grateful to Dr Davies for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

² Cf. Davies's own emphasis (in the context of a different tale) on "the way in which folk tale motifs have been fashioned into poetry" ("CQ" n.s. 38, 1988, 277-8).

³ V. Propp, *Morfologiiia skazki* (Leningrad 1928). An English translation by L. Scott was published as *The Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington Indiana 1958); this was then revised and updated by L. A. Wagner to appear in a second edition (Austin Texas 1968). All page references are to the second edition of the English translation. Propp's work has been influential on classicists interested in folk tales. See for example M. Davies, *Stesichorus' Geryoneis and its Folk-Tale Origins*, "CQ" n.s. 38, 1988, 277-90 and *The Folk-Tale Origins of the Iliad and Odyssey*, "WS" 115, 2002, 5-43. My debt to Davies's work in applying Proppian analysis to classical literature will be obvious in the notes which follow. See also W. Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread. A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (London and Ithaca 2002), an excellent account of folk tale analogues to classical myths.

⁴ See Propp (n. 3), pp. 39-50.

⁵ See e.g. Davies, "Prometheus" 28, 2002, 4-5; "WS" 115, 2002, 12-13.

⁶ See Propp (n. 3), pp. 35-8.

the schema as the ‘ambivalent helper’, who through his magical bow enables Neoptolemus to achieve his ultimate aim. Yet it is just as legitimate – and, I hope, just as stimulating – to apply the pattern of the quest to the drama in a modified form. For although the taking of Troy *is* indeed Neoptolemus’ final goal (at least to start off with)⁷, in another sense this capture lies outside the time frame of Sophocles’ play, which is focussed on the capture of the bow, not the city⁸. This, after all, is the real challenge which the hero must face. There is no suggestion that the subsequent sack of the city will be a task of comparable difficulty. We can thus see the recovery of the bow as itself a quest, or a quest within a quest if that formulation is preferred. The remainder of this article has the following, two-fold aim: first, to show how the basic form of the drama corresponds to the structure of a quest with the bow as its objective, and second, to show how Sophocles controls, adapts and reverses the quest form, particularly in the latter part of the play, to emphasise some particularly important aspects of his drama.

We begin with the object of Neoptolemus’ quest. The magic bow is a common item in folk tale⁹. Sometimes it possesses a deadly accuracy¹⁰, sometimes it causes its owner to lose his strength when it is taken away from him¹¹; sometimes it is required to conquer enemies who cannot be defeated without it¹². Philoctetes’ bow displays all of these qualities. It thus makes a highly appropriate target for a quest, since quests are often aimed at a weapon which is magical or special in some other way¹³. It might be objected that Neoptolemus’ goal is not the bow itself, but the bow *and* its owner, Philoctetes: both of these, together with Neoptolemus, are required for the sack of Troy (so Odysseus declares at *Phil.* 113-15). Yet as is recognised from the

⁷ Cf. e.g. lines 68-9, 113 etc.

⁸ So too the *Iliad* deals with events which precede (and lead to) the capture of Troy without describing the sack itself.

⁹ Cf. Thompson D1091 = ii. 139 (also vi. 90). References here and elsewhere are to the classificatory system of S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature: a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*² (6 vols., Copenhagen 1955-8). For the convenience of the reader I cite this work by both its classificatory numbers (e.g. D1339.2) and its volume and page numbers (e.g. iv. 342).

¹⁰ Cf. Thompson (n. 9) D1653.1.4 = ii. 300; *Phil.* 105.

¹¹ Cf. Thompson (n. 9) D1336.10 (mis-cited as D1338.10 in D1091 = ii. 139) = ii. 284; *Phil.* 931 etc. (Even though the bow does not literally nourish Philoctetes by his mere holding it, his weakness becomes so acute in its absence that it is fair to see a reflection of this motif here.)

¹² Cf. Thompson (n. 9), D1400.1 = ii. 216-18; *Phil.* 68-9, 113 etc.

¹³ Cf. Thompson (n. 9), H1337, 1337.1, 1338, 1345 etc. = iii. 495. Cf. also Propp (n. 3), 35, who points out that the ‘lack’ which leads to the quest can be of a magical item.

beginning of the play, Philoctetes' unwillingness to go to Troy means that the bow will have to be taken from him in order to counter any resistance on his part. Hence Odysseus commands Neoptolemus (*Phil.* 77-8) ἀλλ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο δεῖ σοφισθῆναι, κλοπεὺς / ὅπως γενήσῃ τῶν ἀνικῆτῶν ὅπλων: he must trick Philoctetes out of his weapon, so that both weapon and Philoctetes go to Troy. It is the capture of the weapon on which all of this hangs, and on which Odysseus lays his emphasis¹⁴.

Furthermore, as the play progresses, the intriguing possibility is raised that only the bow is required for the sack, and once it is acquired from Philoctetes, Odysseus and Neoptolemus can sail off without him. The chorus implies this when it urges a hasty getaway with the bow when Philoctetes is unconscious after his fit (836-8). Neoptolemus immediately counters that Philoctetes is needed too (839-42): but later on Odysseus is happy to depart with the bow alone (1054-62), telling its hapless owner that either Teucer or Odysseus himself will now gain the glory intended for him (1056-9). So as the play progresses the bow becomes more and more important, and its status as a quest object becomes steadily clearer.

The location of this bow is also significant. A quest often involves a long preliminary journey which can only be accomplished by magical means¹⁵. At first sight this does not apply to our play, since Lemnos was not some liminal place at the edge of the known world, but an island in the Aegean well-known to an Athenian audience. But although Sophocles could not change the fundamental mythical *datum* of Philoctetes' location (for which cf. e.g. *Il.* 2.721-5), he did alter one basic characteristic of the island. For unlike Aeschylus and Euripides in their handlings of the Philoctetes myth¹⁶, Sophocles presents Lemnos as a *deserted* island (cf. 2 βροτοῖς ἄστιπτος οὐδ' οἰκουμένη): a detail contrary to the island's status in both myth (cf. *Il.* 1.593-4) and contemporary 5th century Greece. So while the island may not 'lie far away'¹⁷, it is well removed from the normal world of human interaction. Hence the location, as well as the identity, of the desired object neatly fits the quest schema.

¹⁴ Cf. F. Budelmann, *The Language of Sophocles: Communitarity, Communication and Involvement* (Cambridge 2000), 110.

¹⁵ Cf. Propp (n. 3), pp. 50-1.

¹⁶ Cf. Dio Chrys. 52.7 ἄμφω (sc. Aeschylus and Euripides) γὰρ ἐκ τῶν Λημνίων ἐποίησαν τὸν χορὸν in S. Radt (ed.), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, vol. iii. *Aeschylus* (Göttingen 1985), p. 353 = R. Kannicht (ed.), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, vol. 5 *Euripides* (Göttingen 2004), part ii. p. 830 test. iv d = C. W. Müller (ed., comm., transl.), *Euripides: Philoktet. Testimonien und Fragmente* (Berlin and New York 2000), p. 152, lines 50-1.

¹⁷ Propp (n. 3), p. 50 (on the location of the object of the quest).

The encounter with a ‘helper figure’ (see nn. 4 and 5 above) is an especially important aspect of the quest form as set out by Propp, and was the focus of Davies’s original analysis (see n. 1 above). There Philoctetes acted as the ambivalent helper through whose assistance Neoptolemus could capture Troy. But now that the bow, not Troy, forms the focus of the quest, the characters of the play must also undergo an interpretative realignment. The title of helper figure must now be applied not to Philoctetes, but to Odysseus. This may seem surprising at first sight. After all, such helpers are typically mysterious, other-worldly figures, first encountered in deserted and isolated landscapes¹⁸. The natural habitat of the sophisticated Odysseus is the diametric opposite: significantly, at the end of the prologue he invokes the aid of Ἰθάκη πολιάς, as if to stress his status as an intruder from the world of civilised settlement. And in contrast to many helper figures¹⁹, Odysseus does not possess a magic object to give to Neoptolemus to assist him. Closer consideration, however, allows us to see how Odysseus is eminently suited for the rôle which this schema applies to him.

The key point lies in the traditional *ambivalence* of the helper (see n. 5 above). The figure whose function it is to provide assistance to the hero is also in some sense a threat to him. He may begin by harming the hero and have to be forced to lend him aid; or he can appear helpful at first and only later show his true colours. The help which Odysseus offers to Neoptolemus consists not in a magic item (such an object could only detract from the uniquely magical powers of the bow), but in the advice which he gives to Neoptolemus so that the latter can overcome the guardian of the quest object²⁰. His authority to offer advice is stressed from the beginning of the play. He is intimately familiar both with the location of the quest object and with the character of its guardian (cf. 1-25). He can interpret the details of his new situation and come to conclusions about Philoctetes’ likely movements (26-47). In all this he contrasts with his companion Neoptolemus, who has no experience of Lemnos, Philoctetes or the bow, and who passively supplies Odysseus with the information that he needs (26-39).

With his credentials as an advisor now established, Odysseus can set out the strategy which Neoptolemus must follow: namely, the use of δόλος to win over Philoctetes and his bow. And this advice is speciously attractive. Odysseus himself cannot come into contact with Philoctetes (70-6), so

¹⁸ See M. Davies, *Landscape and Life-choice: Wilderness and Epiphany in Classical Literature*, forthcoming in “Rh. Mus.”.

¹⁹ See Propp (n. 3), p. 43 (“The Hero acquires the use of a magical agent”).

²⁰ According to Propp (n. 3), p. 39, the assistance given by the helper figure to the hero consists in “some agent (usually magical) which permits the eventual liquidation of misfortune”. This definition is capacious enough to include advice.

Neoptolemus must encounter him alone. Persuasion is useless (103), and so is force (103-5): trickery is thus the only means available. All this is factually true, as we will see as the play progresses. Its utility to Neoptolemus is undeniable: without it he would have attempted to overpower Philoctetes through force of arms (90-2), which would have resulted in his own death (103-5). Its ambiguity only becomes apparent when it is considered from a moral perspective. For there is something ethically repulsive about using δόλος in the way which Odysseus advises. Neoptolemus realises this from the outset (cf. e.g. 86-7, 100, 108). His dealings with Odysseus here can be represented as a kind of ethical test or temptation, such as frequently occurs during the interactions of hero and ambivalent helper²¹. Neoptolemus fails this test by giving in to the lure of κέρδος. By doing so, he not only consents to an act which he knows is wrong, but also goes against the ethical principles inherited from his father Achilles (cf. 88-9). Soon enough he will be wracked by guilt at what he is doing (895, 902-3, 906 etc.), guilt which does not go away until he finally restores the bow to its rightful owner. In short, Odysseus' advice, for all its apparent utility, cannot be acted on without a corrosive effect on Neoptolemus' character. And so this most 'civilised' of helper figures actually turns out to be as savage as the worst of them.

The status of Philoctetes as guardian of the quest object is easy to appreciate. He guards the bow as his most precious possession, and must therefore be defeated for the quest to be a success. The wildness which, according to Davies, points towards Philoctetes' status as a 'Wild Man' helper figure²² can just as easily be used to characterise him in terms of the animal or monster whom the hero of folk tale must defeat in order to gain the object which he desires. In the event, just as we see that the sophisticated Odysseus lacks a proper appreciation of civilised morality, so too we see that the Philoctetes whose wild, threatening nature is stressed early on is a real human being with a character of his own²³.

Finally, we must consider the method by which Neoptolemus intends to capture the bow. The strategy of δόλος fits one quest pattern identified by Propp (n. 3, p. 52), whereby the hero "wins with the help of cleverness". It is also paralleled by the various deceptive techniques found in folk tales which concern the acquisition of a desired object. There are many such techniques in folk tale, which indicates just how common a story pattern this

²¹ As stressed by Davies (n. 2), p. 34.

²² See Davies (n. 1), pp. 348-9.

²³ Compare the remarks of Davies (n. 2), p. 286 on the paradoxical similarity between the initial helper and the climactic adversary.

is. Neoptolemus' basic approach closely corresponds to the motif "hypocrite pretends friendship but attacks"²⁴. But several other strategies with folk tale parallels are either attempted or considered during the course of Sophocles' play. So we can see resonances of "thief trusted to guard good"²⁵ and "goods stolen while owner sleeps"²⁶, since the chorus explicitly urge Neoptolemus to do just that during the sleep induced by Philoctetes' fit (835-7). So too the motif "one thief steals, the other relates the situation, in the form of a tale, to the gentleman who is being robbed"²⁷ provides a nice parallel with the speech of the False Merchant (603-21). He describes the attempt by the Greeks to capture Philoctetes and his bow even as Neoptolemus is following Odysseus' orders to that end. Lastly, the strategy "unique weapon got by misrepresenting to guardian use to which it is to be put"²⁸ well corresponds to the general ethos of Neoptolemus' behaviour, in which misrepresentation of the bow's final destination forms a crucial rôle. One or other of these strategies will, it seems, lead to the hero capturing the magic object from its guardian.

By now I hope that the quest pattern advocated above has been adequately demonstrated. The hero arrives in an isolated land, where he receives assistance from an ambiguous helper figure. Armed with this advice, he confronts the mighty guardian of the object which forms the goal of his quest, and through his cleverness manages to win it from him. Yet even as the quest appears to have reached a successful conclusion, the pattern begins to break down. The conclusion of the quest is met not with rejoicing from the hero and his companions, but with a mixture of distraught exclamations (cf. 895, 908), blank admissions of desperation (cf. 897, 974) and stunned silence (cf. 976-1073 with e.g. 951). Neoptolemus' ethical objections to δόλος have resurfaced with a vengeance, and lead him to reveal his strategy to his opponent. Yet even so, he departs carrying the bow, accompanied by Odysseus. Philoctetes' subsequent lament ends ἔτ' οὐδέν εἶμι (1217), upon which he withdraws into his cave to die. This appears to be the conclusion of the play²⁹: the quest, however inglorious and ethically disreputable, seems to have been accomplished.

The sudden return of Neoptolemus with Odysseus not only restores the forward motion of the drama – it also begins an extended unravelling of the

²⁴ Thompson (n. 9), K2010 = iv. 457-9.

²⁵ Thompson (n. 9), K346 = iv. 279.

²⁶ Thompson (n. 9), K331.1-5 = iv. 270.

²⁷ Thompson (n. 9), K341.20 = iv. 277.

²⁸ Thompson (n. 9), K362.0.1 = iv. 282.

²⁹ Cf. O. P. Taplin, *Significant Actions in Sophocles' Philoctetes*, "GRBS" 12, 1971, 25-44 (at pp. 35-6).

quest motifs identified and discussed above. Whereas before Odysseus had provided ambiguous assistance to Neoptolemus as the latter made his way to encounter Philoctetes, he now attempts to hinder his return to the same, this time in no ambiguous terms. Neoptolemus no longer needs advice or information to enable him to confront Philoctetes successfully: the overwhelming moral imperative weighing upon him makes all too clear what he must now do. The hero who has gained the object of his quest will normally escape as quickly as possible, often after a perilous pursuit from the guardian whom he has overcome³⁰. Yet here he advances to meet the individual whom he has robbed of his precious possession. Last and most striking of all, he presents the guardian with the very object which he has expended so much effort to win.

This final section of the play might thus be designated an 'anti-quest', whose motifs correspond with and yet also reverse those found in the previous part of the drama³¹. This prolonged reversal of quest motifs emphasises the change in Neoptolemus' attitude. The self-aggrandising ways of the traditional hero have been judged and found wanting. Neoptolemus consequently rejects them, and instead shows his respect for Philoctetes' individual autonomy even at the expense of the wider community (as represented by the Greek army) and his own potential glory (in the sack of Troy). The gaining of the quest object caused him not joy, but grief and pain: here the abandonment of the same object reasserts the hero's moral status and restores him to the ways of his father Achilles (cf. 1310-13). Yet this abandonment is not the result of cowardice or unmanliness. Because of the very real threats to which it exposes Neoptolemus (cf. 1257-8, 1404-5), and because of the full and frank admission of wrongdoing which it forces on him, it rather constitutes an act of physical and moral bravery that far surpasses the inglorious victory of the earlier, regular quest pattern³².

We do not need to understand the quest form to realise that the handing back of the bow to Philoctetes forms a climax in the drama. But such under-

³⁰ Cf. Propp (n. 3), 56-8.

³¹ This forms part of a broader tendency of the last part of the *Philoctetes* to reverse patterns and motifs found in the first part of the play: cf. Taplin (n. 29), p. 36 ("the dialogue 1222ff is, in effect, a reversal and refutation of the prologue... [at 1291-6 Odysseus] intervenes exactly as before [sc. 971-7]: but... the balance of power has been reversed", and so on).

³² For a *comparandum* for the idea of the 'anti-quest' cf. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which exploits many of the motifs of the quest form (a journey to a distant, isolated land; Boromir, Galadriel, Gollum *et al.* as 'ambivalent helpers' etc.) with a crucial difference. That is, the magic item is to found not in the distant, isolated land, but on the very person of the hero; and the goal of the quest is not to acquire it, but to throw it away.

standing nevertheless underlines the essentially paradoxical nature of the act, and enables us to see more clearly just what a reversal of Neoptolemus' former behaviour it constitutes. The hero's true triumph arises from the negation, not the completion, of his intended quest. In the event Neoptolemus and Philoctetes will go on to sack Troy through the intervention of Heracles as a *deus ex machina*: but the real interest of the piece lies not in this, but in the moral choices which Neoptolemus must make, and where his true heroism is properly exhibited³³.

The above account is intended not as a replacement but as a complement to Davies's analysis. It is, perhaps, testimony to the heuristic value of applying folk tale structures to classical texts that this method opens up new and varying perspectives on the same work, perspectives which can help us to appreciate Sophocles' innovatory use of traditional patterns and structures.

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³³ So in e.g. the *Iliad* our focus is not so much on the eventual sack of the city (important though that undeniably is), but on the decisions taken by Achilles and their consequences.