

## BOOK REVIEW

*Sophocles: Philoctetes*. Translated with notes by PETER MEINECK; introduction by PAUL WOODRUFF. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014. Pp. xxx + 80. Paperback, \$10.00. ISBN 978-1-62466-122-8.

**P***hiloctetes* has a strong claim to be Sophocles' crowning achievement as a dramatist, but it is, at the same time, one of the most difficult of his plays. He largely eschews action in favor of an intricate battle of arguments; the basic struggle is not one for survival or riches, but for the soul of the young Neoptolemus, caught between Philoctetes' bluntness and Odysseus' sophistic manipulations. If students lack the historical context to understand the issues at stake, or if the translation they read lacks verve, they may easily become bogged down and lose interest. It is thus very much to Peter Meineck's credit that he has given us a superbly vivid rendering of the play, informed throughout by his practical experience in the theater. His is a *Philoctetes* that is supremely alive, from start to finish.

Meineck's translation, originally produced for the Aquila Theater Company, was previously available in Hackett's *Sophocles: Four Tragedies*. Now it appears on its own, in a slim but well-prepared volume ideal for classroom use, accompanied by a new and thoughtful introduction from philosopher and classicist Paul Woodruff. Woodruff anchors the play in the complex web of fears and anxieties of 409 BCE, as both Sophocles' life and Athens' imperial heyday drew to a close. He draws attention to the moral ambiguity at the drama's heart; even Neoptolemus, he argues, may have ultimately resorted to sophistry to achieve his goals, since he never explicitly promises to take Philoctetes home, only to "where he needs to go" (xviii–xix).

In addition, within a brief compass Woodruff sketches the essentials of Athenian stagecraft, and notes how skillfully Sophocles manipulates the physical space of the stage—a point not always adequately addressed in commentaries that treat the play purely as a text. There are occasional minor errors of fact in Woodruff's treatment—for example, he claims that Philoctetes has not "seen a human face" in his time on Lemnos (xiii), while Philoctetes himself notes that he has encountered other wayfarers before—but these are quibbles when weighed against his critical acumen and explanatory skill.

As for the translation itself, Meineck strives for vigor and directness above all—a wise choice. He is firmly convinced of *Philoctetes*' continuing relevance, especially in this age when war and its accompanying damage, both physical and psychological, are constants in American life (xxviii–xxix). It thus comes as no surprise that Meineck has cast the text into thoroughly contemporary language, allowing the personalities of the characters to shine through in every line. The verbal exchanges are charged with power and passion, helped by the flexibility of Meineck's free verse and his carefully controlled use of alliteration. Rarely has Philoctetes sounded so raw, or so pained, as he does here: "I can feel the black blood boiling up again, / Bursting from my wound. There's worse to come ... Odysseus! If only you could feel this pain/Feel your frame split in two and your guts/Wrench in your chest!" (782–784; 791–793) This is the rare translation that can hope to make something of the same impact on its readers that Sophocles' original must have had on the war-weary Athenian audience of 409 BCE.

The text is liberally sprinkled with explanatory footnotes, which address both problems of staging and the mythological background of the events on stage. Meineck strikes a nice balance here, giving enough supplementary material to clarify the text's obscurities without overwhelming the reader; longer comments are relegated to a brief "Endnotes" section (73–74). The comprehensive bibliography he provides (75–80) will be of use both to the casual student and to those who wish to delve more deeply into modern scholarship on the play.

Errors are relatively few, and chiefly confined to the footnotes (e.g. page 27 n. 48: Skyros is called "Philoctetes' home" rather than "Neoptolemus' home"; page 21 n. 35: Lydia is called a "Phrygian kingdom"). Most of the mistakes in the text proper are minor typographical errors, although line 322 is incorrectly attributed (it should be given to Philoctetes, rather than the Chorus).

No matter. Meineck and Woodruff's *Philoctetes* will find a home in many college classrooms, and deservedly so. This is an exceptionally fine work of translation and scholarship that will go far toward demolishing dismissals of the play as inaccessible or unengaging for the contemporary reader. Sophocles, Meineck and Woodruff eloquently remind us, speaks to every age, not least our own.

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