

PHILOCTETES

by

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Philoctetes

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

ULYSSES, King of Ithaca

NEOPTOLEMUS, son of Achilles

PHILOCTETES, son of Poeas and Companion of HERCULES

A SPY

HERCULES

CHORUS, composed of the companions of ULYSSES and NEOPTOLEMUS

SCENE:- A lonely region on the shore of Lemnos,
before a steep cliff in which is the entrance to PHILOCTETES' cave.
ULYSSES, NEOPTOLEMUS and an attendant enter.

ULYSSES

At length, my noble friend, thou bravest son
Of a brave father- father of us all,
The great Achilles- we have reached the shore
Of sea-girt Lemnos, desert and forlorn,
Where never tread of human step is seen,
Or voice of mortal heard, save his alone,
Poor Philoctetes, Poeas' wretched son,
Whom here I left; for such were my commands
From Grecia's chiefs, when by his fatal wound
Oppressed, his groans and execrations dreadful
Alarmed our hosts, our sacred rites profaned,
And interrupted holy sacrifice.
But why should I repeat the tale? The time
Admits not of delay. We must not linger,
Lest he discover our arrival here,
And all our purposed fraud to draw him hence
Be ineffectual. Lend me then thy aid.
Surveying round thee, canst thou see a rock
With double entrance- to the sun's warm rays
In winter open, and in summer's heat
Giving free passage to the welcome breeze?
A little to the left there is a fountain
Of living water, where, if yet he breathes,
He slakes his thirst. If aught thou seest of this

Inform me; so shall each to each impart
Counsel most fit, and serve our common cause.

NEOPTOLEMUS (leaving ULYSSES a little behind him)
If I mistake not, I behold a cave,
E'en such as thou describst.

ULYSSES
Dost thou? which way?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Yonder it is; but no path leading thither,
Or trace of human footstep.

ULYSSES
In his cell
A chance but he hath lain down to rest:
Look if he hath not.

NEOPTOLEMUS (advancing to the cave)
Not a creature there.

ULYSSES
Nor food, nor mark of household preparation?

NEOPTOLEMUS
A rustic bed of scattered leaves.

ULYSSES
What more?

NEOPTOLEMUS
A wooden bowl, the work of some rude hand,
With a few sticks for fuel.

ULYSSES
This is all
His little treasure here.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Unhappy man!
Some linen for his wounds.

ULYSSES
This must be then
His place of habitation; far from hence

He cannot roam; distempered as he is,
It were impossible. He is but gone
A little way for needful food, or herb
Of power to 'suage and mitigate his pain,
Wherefore despatch this servant to some place
Of observation, whence he may espy
His every motion, lest he rush upon us.
There's not a Grecian whom his soul so much
Could wish to crush beneath him as Ulysses.
(He makes a signal to the Attendant. who retires.)

NEOPTOLEMUS

He's gone to guard each avenue; and now,
If thou hast aught of moment to impart
Touching our purpose, say it; I attend.

ULYSSES

Son of Achilles, mark me well! Remember,
What we are doing not on strength alone,
Or courage, but oil conduct will depend;
Therefore if aught uncommon be proposed,
Strange to thy ears and adverse to thy nature,
Reflect that 'tis thy duty to comply,
And act conjunctive with me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, what is it?

ULYSSES

We must deceive this Philoctetes; that
Will be thy task. When he shall ask thee who
And what thou art, Achilles'son reply-
Thus far within the verge of truth, no more.
Add that resentment fired thee to forsake
The Grecian fleet, and seek thy native soil,
Unkindly used by those who long with vows
Had sought thy aid to humble haughty Troy,
And when thou cam'st, ungrateful as they were.
The arms of great Achilles, thy just right,
Gave to Ulysses. Here thy bitter taunts
And sharp invectives liberally bestow
On me. Say what thou wilt, I shall forgive,
And Greece will not forgive thee if thou dost not;
For against Troy thy efforts are all vain
Without his arrows. Safely thou mayst hold
Friendship and converse with him, but I cannot.

Thou wert not with us when the war began,
Nor bound by solemn oath to join our host,
As I was; me he knows, and if he find
That I am with thee, we are both undone.
They must be ours then, these all-conquering arms;
Remember that. I know thy noble nature
Abhors the thought of treachery or fraud.
But what a glorious prize is victory!
Therefore be bold; we will be just hereafter.
Give to deceit and me a little portion
Of one short day, and for thy future life
Be called the holiest, worthiest, best of men.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What but to hear alarms my conscious soul,
Son of Laertes, I shall never practise.
I was not born to flatter or betray;
Nor I, nor he- the voice of fame reports-
Who gave me birth. What open arms can do
Behold me prompt to act, but ne'er to fraud
Will I descend. Sure we can more than match
In strength a foe thus lame and impotent.
I came to be a helpmate to thee, not
A base betrayer; and, O king! believe me,
Rather, much rather would I fall by virtue
Than rise by guilt to certain victory.

ULYSSES

O noble youth! and worthy of thy sire!
When I like thee was young, like thee of strength
And courage boastful, little did I deem
Of human policy; but long experience
Hath taught me, son, 'tis not the powerful arm,
But soft enchanting tongue that governs all.

NEOPTOLEMUS

And thou wouldst have me tell an odious falsehood?

ULYSSES

He must be gained by fraud.

NEOPTOLEMUS

By fraud? And why
Not by persuasion?

ULYSSES

He'll not listen to it;
And force were vainer still.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What mighty power
Hath he to boast?

ULYSSES

His arrows winged with death
Inevitable.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Then it were not safe
E'en to approach him.

ULYSSES

No; unless by fraud
He be secured.

NEOPTOLEMUS

And thinkst thou 'tis not base
To tell a lie then?

ULYSSES

Not if on that lie
Depends our safety.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Who shall dare to tell it
Without a blush?

ULYSSES

We need not blush at aught
That may promote our interest and success.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But where's the interest that should bias me?
Come he or not to Troy, imports it aught
To Neoptolemus?

ULYSSES

Troy cannot fall
Without his arrows.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Saidst thou not that I
Was destined to destroy her?

ULYSSES

Without them
Naught canst thou do, and they without thee nothing.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Then I must have them.

ULYSSES

When thou hast, remember
A double prize awaits thee.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What, Ulysses?

ULYSSES

The glorious names of valiant and of wise.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Away! I'll do it. Thoughts of guilt or shame
No more appal me.

ULYSSES

Wilt thou do it then?
Wilt thou remember what I told thee of?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Depend on 't; I have promised- that's sufficient.

ULYSSES

Here then remain thou; I must not be seen.
If thou stay long, I'll send a faithful spy,
Who in a sailor's habit well disguised
May pass unknown; of him, from time to time,
What best may suit our purpose thou shalt know.
I'll to the ship. Farewell! and may the god
Who brought us here, the fraudulent Mercury,
And great Minerva, guardian of our country,
And ever kind to me, protect us still!

(ULYSSES goes out as the CHORUS enters. The following lines are chanted responsively between NEOPTOLEMUS and the CHORUS.)

CHORUS

strophe 1

Master, instruct us, strangers as we are,
What we may utter, what we must conceal.
Doubtless the man we seek will entertain
Suspicion of us; how are we to act?
To those alone belongs the art to rule
Who bear the sceptre from the hand of Jove;
To thee of right devolves the power supreme,
From thy great ancestors delivered down;
Speak then, our royal lord, and we obey.

NEOPTOLEMUS

systema 1

If you would penetrate yon deep recess
To seek the cave where Philoctetes lies,
Go forward; but remember to return
When the poor wanderer comes this way, prepared
To aid our purpose here if need require.

CHORUS

antistrophe 1

O king! we ever meant to fix our eyes
On thee, and wait attentive to thy will;
But, tell us, in what part is he concealed?
'Tis fit we know the place, lest unobserved
He rush upon us. Which way doth it lie?
Seest thou his footsteps leading from the cave,
Or hither bent?

NEOPTOLEMUS (advancing towards the cave)

systema 2

Behold the double door
Of his poor dwelling, and the flinty bed.

CHORUS

And whither is its wretched master gone?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Doubtless in search of food, and not far off,
For such his manner is; accustomed here,
So fame reports, to pierce with winged arrows
His savage prey for daily sustenance,
His wound still painful, and no hope of cure.

CHORUS

strophe 2

Alas! I pity him. Without a friend,
Without a fellow-sufferer, left alone,
Deprived of all the mutual joys that flow
From sweet society- distempered too!
How can he bear it? O unhappy race
Of mortal man! doomed to an endless round
Of sorrows, and immeasurable woe!

antistrophe 2

Second to none in fair nobility
Was Philoctetes, of illustrious race;
Yet here he lies, from every human aid
Far off removed, in dreadful solitude,
And mingles with the wild and savage herd;
With them in famine and in misery
Consumes his days, and weeps their common fate,
Unheeded, save when babbling echo mourns
In bitterest notes responsive to his woe.

NEOPTOLEMUS

systema 3

And yet I wonder not; for if aright
I judge, from angry heaven the sentence came,
And Chrysa was the cruel source of all;
Nor doth this sad disease inflict him still
Incurable, without assenting gods?
For so they have decreed, lest Troy should fall
Beneath his arrows ere the' appointed time
Of its destruction come.

CHORUS

strophe 3

No more, my son!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What sayst thou?

CHORUS

Sure I heard a dismal groan

Of some afflicted wretch.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Which way?

CHORUS

E'en now

I hear it, and the sound as of some step

Slow-moving this way. He is not far from us.

His plaints are louder now.

antistrophe 3

Prepare, my son!

NEOPTOLEMUS

For what?

CHORUS

New troubles; for behold he comes!

Not like the shepherd with his rural pipe

And cheerful song, but groaning heavily.

Either his wounded foot against some thorn

Hath struck, and pains him sorely, or perchance

He hath espied from far some ship attempting

To enter this inhospitable port,

And hence his cries to save it from destruction.

(PHILOCTETES enters, clad in rags. He moves with difficulty and is obviously suffering pain from his injured foot.)

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