

HOMILY

Do not despair-- many are happy much of the time; more eat than starve, more are healthy than sick, more curable than dying, not so many dying as dead; and one of the thieves was saved. Hell's bells and all's well-- half the world is at peace with itself, and so is the other half; vast areas are unpolluted; millions of children grow up without suffering deprivation, and millions, while deprived, grow up without suffering cruelties, and millions, while deprived and cruelly treated, nonetheless grow up. No laughter is sad and many tears are joyful. At the graveside the undertaker doffs his top hat and impregnates the prettiest mourner. Wham, bam, thank you Sam.

-- Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers*

PHILOCTETES

Odysseus: Neoptolemus, son of Greece's stoutest hero, on this very shoreline, here on sea-girt Lemnos, a desert island, quite uninhabited, I once abandoned the son of Poias of Malia. The army's two commanders had ordered it – the man had a running sore on his leg which was eating it away, and we couldn't pour a libation or offer up a sacrifice without his filling the ears of the entire army with his wild cries of pain, his moaning, his groaning. But what can I say? Now is not the time for a long story – he must not learn of my arrival and confound my plan to snare him. It's now your job to scout out the sort of pierced rock which, in winter, affords two sun-porches and, in summer, a breeze which allows sleep. You might see, a little beneath it and to the left, a refreshing fountain (if it's still there). Get up close in silence and let me know if it's still the man's abode or if he's gone elsewhere. Then I'll tell you the rest of the story and we will act in concert.

Neoptolemus: Lord Odysseus, our goal is near at hand. I think I see the very cave you mean.

Odysseus: Above or below? I can't tell.

Neoptolemus: Above. No footprints.

Odysseus: Check to see if he's asleep in there.

Neoptolemus: It's empty. No-one here.

Odysseus: No signs of habitation?

Neoptolemus: There are some flattened leaves. Someone must be living here.

Odysseus: But otherwise the place is empty?

Neoptolemus: There's a wooden cup, obviously carved by an amateur. And a pile of kindling.

Odysseus: His little store of possessions.

Neoptolemus: Oh! There are also some rags hung up to dry. They smell strongly of severe infection.

Odysseus: Clearly this is his bailiwick. He can't be far. After all, how far can a man walk with a chronic disease of the leg? He's off either in search of food or some soothing plant he's discovered somewhere. Send this fellow here to scout him out before he can make a sneak attack on me. He would rather take me prisoner than any other Greek.

Neoptolemus: He's on his way. He'll look for footprints. You can tell me the next part of your plan, if you'd like.

Odysseus: Son of Achilles, this mission calls for you to be true to your heritage, and not just in bodily strength. If you hear anything from me you've not heard before, you are still here to assist me.

Neoptolemus: What do you want me to do?

Odysseus: Outwit Philoctetes with words. When he asks you who you are and whence you came, say "Achilles' son". No deception there. You're sailing home, separate from the Greek army, towards whom you owe a huge grudge – they begged you to leave your home, their sole hope of capturing Troy, it seemed, but when you arrived and asked for Achilles' arms, as was your due, they denied you them and gave them instead to Odysseus. Say what you like about me – the worst of the worst – it won't bother me. But if you don't do this, you will wound the whole of Greece. If we can't get our hands on his bow, you'll never lay waste the Trojan land.

Let me tell you why I cannot do this, while you may communicate with him freely without arousing his suspicion. You have sailed under oath to no-one, but of your own free will, and you were not part of the original expedition to Troy – I deny none of this. So if he recognizes me while still in possession of his bow, I am a dead man, and so are you. Your specific plan must be this – steal that invincible bow. I know, my boy, that such words and stratagems are not in your nature, but have patience – victory is sweet and in the end we will prove honourable. So now, for a fraction of one day, allow yourself this dishonesty, then for evermore you may be known as the most righteous of men.

Neoptolemus: Son of Laertes, it grieves me to hear your instructions – to carry them out would be hateful. Neither I nor (so they say) the man who begat me were cut out to effect a fraudulent project. I would be more prepared to manage him by force than deception. And with only one good leg he would be no match for the likes of us. However, since I came here as your accomplice, I shrink from the name of traitor. Still, lord, I would prefer to fail in an honourable action than succeed in a dishonourable one.

Odysseus: Your father was indeed an honourable man. You know, when I was a young man, I was slow to speak but quick to act, but now, when put to the test I see that words, not deeds, decide all things.

Neoptolemus: You order me to say nothing but untruths.

Odysseus: I want you to take Philoctetes by trickery.

Neoptolemus: Why trickery and not persuasion?

Odysseus: He won't be persuaded. And you won't take him by force.

Neoptolemus: Why? Is he such a tower of strength?

Odysseus: Yes, while he has in his possession inexorable, death-dealing arrows.

Neoptolemus: So one shouldn't attempt to tangle with him?

Odysseus: Only with trickery, as I said.

Neoptolemus: Is it not shameful to lie?

Odysseus: Not if it leads to salvation.

Neoptolemus: How can one school one's face when one lies?

Odysseus: When profit is your goal, you mustn't back off.

Neoptolemus: What profit do I gain if he goes to Troy?

Odysseus: Troy's destruction depends on this bow alone.

Neoptolemus: Was it not said that I would conquer Troy?

Odysseus: Not without the bow; nor will the bow without you.

Neoptolemus: If that is the case, let the hunt begin.

Odysseus: Your success will win you two gifts.

Neoptolemus: What gifts? Tell me – then I may not oppose the deed.

Odysseus: You will be renowned as both wise and skillful.

Neoptolemus: Alright. I will do it, scruples be damned.

Odysseus: Do you remember my instructions?

Neoptolemus: Yes. My mind is made up.

Odysseus: Right, stay here and wait for him. I'm off – he mustn't catch me with you – our scout I'll return to the ship. If you seem to be taking some time, I'll send him back here disguised as a shipowner – that'll fool him. And you must take advantage of whatever verbal subterfuge he uses. I'm going. I leave it in your hands. May Hermes, Protector and Trickster, and Victory, Guardian of the City (my constant saviour) be your guides.

Chorus: Sir, we are strangers in a strange land. What tricks must we use? What do we say to this dubious character? Tell us. Now a different skill is needed, and the judgment which Zeus' holy scepter dispenses. All the power of the gods devolves on you, child. Tell me what to do.

Neoptolemus: Doubtless you will want to see his dwelling at the shore's edge. Take a look, don't be afraid. When this strange man comes back from wherever he is, go where my hand signals direct you and do your best to solve this current problem of ours.

Chorus: You have always said, lord, that my duty is to watch out for you. What sort of abode has he here? THAT I need to know, otherwise he might fall on me. Where's the footpath? Is he in or out?

Neoptolemus: You see his dwelling here – with the two entrances – this rocky hollow.

Chorus: Where, then, is the poor wretch if he's not here?

Neoptolemus: Clearly he is nearby – hobbling along in search of food. I believe this is the way he lives, bringing down wild beasts with those winged arrows – a man in great pain, with no access to a cure for his wound.

Chorus: I pity the man – no-one to care for him, nurse him, poor wretch, always alone, grievously injured and constantly in despair over every need.

How can he possibly hold out, poor devil? Oh, the wicked contrivances of men, the wretched lives of mortals – intolerable!

Second to none, he is descended from a noble house, but now ekes out a life in total isolation among the deer and the goats. Pitiably in his pain and hunger he howls out his unbearable torment, and the far, babbling echo of his sharp cries is flung back at him.

Neoptolemus: None of his surprises me. If I am correct, his troubles come from above, compounded by savage Chryse. He has no protector in his suffering. Nor may he direct

his divine, invincible weapons at Troy without the god's help, not until the time appointed to crush her.

Chorus: Silence, child!

Neoptolemus: Why? What is it?

Chorus: I heard a noise, like the habitual cry of a man in distress. Over there! Or there! Yes, yes, the very voice of one who is walking in pain. No mistaking! He is a way off yet but that is the dejected voice of a weary man. The cries are quite distinct. Look sharp, child!

Neoptolemus: What?

Chorus: Quick! He's back, he's here, not piping the music of the flute, as a goatherd would – no, that's the far-off cry of a man in pain as he stumbles along, gazing out at the inhospitable harbour. A terrible cry!

Philoctetes: Ahh! Strangers, you have put ashore on a desolate and rocky island. Who are you? To whom might I be talking? Of what country, what parentage? I am very pleased to see you are wearing Greek clothes but I'd like to hear you speak. Don't shrink from me, don't be afraid of my uncivilized appearance. No, rather pity a wretched, solitary outcast, unloved, abused. Speak if you are friends.

Reply. It is not right that we fail to acknowledge each others' questions.

Neoptolemus: My friend, to your first question – we are Greeks.

Philoctetes: Oh, the sweetest sound! Such a long time since I was greeted thus. Child, for what purpose did you put in here? What was your impulse? What dearest of winds brought you? This above all – who are you?

Neoptolemus: I am a native of Skyros Island. I am sailing home. I am Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. Now you know all.

Philoctetes: Son of an excellent father, denizen of a fair land, descendant of old Lycomedes, what mission brings you to this place? Where have you come from?

Neoptolemus: Straight from Troy I've sailed.

Philoctetes: What?? You did not sail with us at the beginning of the Trojan expedition.

Neoptolemus: Did you too take part in the conflict?

Philoctetes: Oh child, do you not recognize me?

Neoptolemus: How can I recognize someone I've never seen before?

Philoctetes: You've never heard my name mentioned, or the story of my downfall?

Neoptolemus: Believe me, I know nothing of what you ask.

Philoctetes: Oh, the gods despise me in my degradation! No news of my fate ever reached my home or indeed anywhere in Greece. Those wicked men who left me here must be laughing behind my back. Meanwhile my sickness has continued to grow and flourish. Child, Achilles' son, you may have heard of the owner of Heracles' armour. I am he, Philoctetes, son of Poias. The joint generals and the lord of Kephallenia, to their shame, cast me here all alone, enfeebled by a malignant wound caused by the vicious bite of a murderous snake. Because of this, boy, they abandoned me on their expedition from Chryse. Then, when they perceived that I had fallen asleep, in a vaulted cave on these high cliffs, exhausted from a rough crossing, they were content to leave me, tossing me some thin rags (God help me!) and a few scraps of food they had to spare. Imagine, child, what sort of awakening I had then, my companions gone? What tears, what cries I gave vent to? The ships, with which I had sailed, all vanished, no-one left to lend me a hand, to help nurse a poor cripple. Child, looking around I saw nothing but distress in abundance.

Day followed day, and in my little shelter I had to make do as best I could. This bow provided sustenance – I brought down doves on the wing. Pathetically, I would crawl to what my arrows had pierced, dragging my useless leg. If I needed to take a drink, there was an active spring nearby, or if I needed to chop some wood in winter, I would crawl forth and perform these tasks. If the fire had gone out, I would rub stone on stone and finally a spark would appear, and once more I would be saved. So my heated quarters provided everything except a cure for my wound.

Come, boy, let me tell you about the island. No traveler approaches it willingly. There's no harbour, no opportunity for commerce or hospitality. Wise men avoid this place. Occasionally people did come here by accident (much can happen in a man's long lifetime). Child, when this happened, they would give voice to their compassion and perhaps give me some food or a tunic, but, at my prompting, they were unwilling to take me back to my home. So I waste away here (it's been nearly ten years), while hunger and misfortune fuel my ravaging sickness. And this, child, is the work of the sons of Atreus and of Odysseus. The gods of Olympus requite them for my suffering!

Chorus: Son of Poias, I pity you as much as your other visitors.

Neoptolemus: I can swear your words are true. I too have felt the rough edge of the sons of Atreus and of Odysseus.

Philoctetes: So you too have a grudge against the sons of Atreus? Don't your injuries make you angry?

Neoptolemus: Yes. My rage must fuel my revenge. Then Mycenae and Sparta will know Skyros to be the breeder of warriors.

Philoctetes: Well said, boy. What is the reason for the great wrath you have turned against them?

Neoptolemus: Son of Poias, I'll tell you (it will not be easy) what outrageous treatment I received from them in Troy. When Fate took a hand in Achilles' death –

Philoctetes: Oh no! Stop there! First tell me this – is Peleus' son dead?

Neoptolemus: He is. No mortal is responsible for his death. No, it was a god. They say he was vanquished by Archer Apollo.

Philoctetes: Noble of mind both, slayer and slain. Child, I am torn. Do I first inquire about your misfortune or grieve Achilles' death?

Neoptolemus: Poor man, surely your own suffering is enough for you. No need to grieve those of your fellow-creatures.

Philoctetes: You are quite right. So tell me your troubles once more. How did they abuse you?

Neoptolemus: Godlike Achilles and my foster-father came for me in a ship with an intricately-carved prow. Though I cannot say that they were telling the truth or not, they said that, with my father dead, it was not right for anyone other than myself to take Troy. When they said that they couldn't long prevent me from making a swift departure, chiefly out of love for my dead father. I wished to see him before they buried him, as I had never laid eyes on him before. But their words were also seductive – I might actually take the walls of Troy. On my second day at sea, and with a favouring wind, I came to Sigeion (unhappy place). At once the entire army gathered round me in greeting and declared it was as though they were seeing the dead Achilles once again. My father lay in state, and after I had shed sad tears for him, I next went to the sons of Atreus (my friends, I thought) and requested my father's armour and his other possessions. They spoke (God

help me!) in the most arrogant terms: "Spawn of Achilles, you are entitled to everything Achilles owned except the armour you crave – that belongs to another – Laertes' son. At once I leapt up (I was in tears and deeply angry), and spoke through my pain:" You villains, how dare you give MY arms to another, with never a word to me?" Odysseus was nearby and he replied:"Boy, the decision to give the arms to me is a just one – I rescued them, and Achilles too." In my anger I bombarded them with every possible insult (I left nothing out) for depriving me of the armour. He came up to me and, though not quick-tempered by Nature, he was stung by what he had heard answered : "You weren't there. I was. You weren't where you should have been. You and your insolent tongue! You'll never take those arms back to Skyros." At this, mortified beyond belief, I sailed home, cheated of what was mine by that wicked man with his wicked ancestry – Odysseus. But my chief censure is for the army's leaders. After all, the entire city, the entire army hinges on the leaders. Those who cause offense in this world are those who have been corrupted by their mentors' instructions.

My tale is now complete. He who despises the sons of Atreus is my friend, and loved of the gods.

Chorus: Earth, breeder of mountains, feeder of us all, mother of Zeus Himself, who rules mighty Pactolus, rich in gold, we invoke you. Insolence has so infected the sons of Atreus that they have given away a father's armour to Laertes' son, o blessed one, seated on your bull-slaughtering lions, majesty in the highest.

Philoctetes: Strangers, it seems you have sailed here with manifest proof that you share my grief. Your recognition of the quality of the deeds of the sons of Atreus and of Odysseus chimes with my own. I know he will resort to any ill remark, any piece of wickedness to achieve his vicious will. No surprises there. But if great Ajax were here to see this and did nothing, THAT would surprise me.

Neoptolemus: He is no more, friend. Were he alive I never would have been stripped of my father's armour.

Philoctetes: What? He too is gone?

Neoptolemus: Consider him no longer among the living.

Philoctetes: Oh no! But the spawn of Tydeus, and Sisyphus' son, traded to Laertes, they are not dead. They should never have lived.

Neoptolemus: True. They thrive and flourish in the Argive army.

Philoctetes: And what of my good, stalwart friend Nestor of Pylos? He could put a stop to their evil ways – a clever counselor.

Neoptolemus: He is in a bad way – his son Antilochus lies dead.

Philoctetes: O God! You have named two men who were the last people on earth I hoped would be killed. What can we expect when those two are gone? Yet Odysseus is still among us – a man we would willingly have take their place.

Neoptolemus: A clever adversary, that one. But, Philoctetes, sharp minds are frequently thwarted.

Philoctetes: I beg you, tell me where Patroklos was during all this? He was very close to your father.

Neoptolemus: He, too, is dead. I'll tell you the details in a few words. Warfare is never keen to take the wicked, but always takes the best of men.

Philoctetes: I can attest to that. Speaking of which, I must ask about one worthless man, a silver-tongued, clever devil.

Neoptolemus: You must mean Odysseus.

Philoctetes: No, not him. There was one Thersites, who loved to talk all the time – no-one could stop him. Is he living?

Neoptolemus: I never saw him, but I heard he is alive still.

Philoctetes: He would be. Wickedness doesn't get destroyed. No, the gods keep it secure. The vile, the devious, these they relish deflecting from Hades – the good, the worthy they constantly dispatch thither. How can we judge such things, how can we approve when we find that the gods we worship are wicked?

Neoptolemus: Son of Oitaian Poias, from now on I will steer well clear of Troy and the sons of Atreus. When the bad man is stronger than the good, when decency wanes and wickedness flourishes, I will never feel any affection for those two men. From now on rocky Skyros will be my refuge and my home.

I will now return to the ship. Son of Poias, a thousand farewells. The gods grant your wish and heal your sickness! We must be off. We will weigh anchor when the gods grant us a wind.

Philoctetes: You are leaving, child?

Neoptolemus: Yes, the best way is to look for a fair wind close at hand, not far away.

Philoctetes; Child, in the name of your father, your mother, all that you hold dear, I implore you, don't leave me here alone, desolate in the misery you see before you, the overwhelming hardships you have heard from my lips. Assign me something. My passage would cause considerable trouble, I know.. Yet have patience. To men of nobility baseness is vile, goodness pleasing. Your refusal would bring you base shame but your consent, child, to take me, living, to Oita, would accord you the wonderful gift of great renown. Come. Your discomfort will last less than one day. Take heart! Stow me wherever you like, the hold, the prow, the stern, wherever I will cause my fellow-passengers the least trouble. For the love of Protector Zeus Himself, consent, child, heed my words. On my knees I beg you, wretched as I am in my halting frailty. Don't cast me out, isolated so far from man's life. Rescue me – either take me home with you or escort me to Euboia. From there it is not far to Oita and rocky Trachis, by the broad river Spercheios, There might you reunite me with my dear father – I never expected to see the old man again. Frequently I would send him messengers via those who came to this place, urgently begging him to send someone to rescue me and take me home. But either he is dead or his minions, caring but little for my plight, merely took off home again.

I entreat you, as both my escort and my messenger, save me, pity me! See how full of danger is a mortal life, how fine the razor's edge separating success and failure. One must regard the vicissitudes of life and, when things are going well, examine one's existence lest death take you unawares.

Chorus: He has my sympathy, lord. The distress he speaks of, the unbearable pain! May none of those dear to me suffer so. If you despise the spiteful sons of Atreus, why not turn their evil to his gain and take him in our swift and well-equipped vessel to the home he desperately yearns for? Thus will we escape the fury of the gods.

Neoptolemus: Don't be so easygoing! After close proximity to that festering wound, you'll change your tune.

Chorus: Not so! You'll not be able to cast this reproach in my teeth!

Neoptolemus: Well, it would be shameful to show myself less prompt in making an effort when a friend needs my help. Therefore, let's set sail. Weigh anchor now! The ship will be his conveyer, that's for sure. May the gods get us off this place and allow us to reach our destination.

Philoctetes: O dearest of days, o kindest of men, o my nautical friends, how can I show my appreciation! Come, boy, let us kiss the earth of this inhospitable home of mine. See how I have lived, what strength of mind I needed to survive. I don't think anyone else but I could have endured even the sight of it. Early on I learned perforce to embrace misfortune.

Chorus: Hold! What's this? Two men, one from your ship, the other a foreigner. Let's go and hear their news before we embark.

Merchant: Son of Achilles, I gave instructions to my companion here, who was standing guard on your ship with two others, to tell me where you were. I didn't expect to meet up with you but by chance I dropped anchor at this very place. I was sailing, as a captain of a lightly-equipped ship, from Troy to the wine country of Peparethos, my homeland, when I heard the sailors saying they were shipmates of yours. I decided not to continue on till I had spoken to you so you could share the news I have. You are unaware of the new plans the Greeks have for you – indeed, not just plans. Things are actually being done, no longer merely contemplated.

Neoptolemus: Stranger, I would be unworthy if I did not show my gratitude for your kindness. Illuminate me – what plans do the Greeks have for me?

Merchant: Old Phoenix and Theseus' sons are at sea in pursuit of you.

Neoptolemus: Will they take me back by force or reason?

Merchant: I don't know. That, however, is my news.

Neoptolemus: Are Phoenix and his fellow-passengers exerting so much energy for the Greeks?

Merchant: The enterprise has been set in motion, it's no longer mere intent.

Neoptolemus: So how is it that Odysseus couldn't be his own messenger? Or does some fear hamper him?

Merchant: He and Tydeus' son were setting off in search of another man as I was putting to sea myself.

Neoptolemus: Who might that be?

Merchant: It was - Wait! Who is that? Swiftly, tell me.

Neoptolemus: Famed Philoctetes, sir.

Merchant: Tell me no more. Just take yourself off with all speed. Leave this island.

Philoctetes: What's he saying, boy? What sort of clandestine bargain is that seafarer making with you?

Neoptolemus: I've yet to find out what he's saying but whatever it is, you and I and these fellows must hear it clearly from his lips.

Merchant: Son of Achilles, please don't reproach me for speaking out of turn to our people. I have received much kindness for my services to them. And I am a poor man.

Merchant: Be careful what you do, boy. Neoptolemus: I have long been on my guard.

Merchant: I call you to account, then. Neoptolemus: For what?

Merchant: This. These two I mentioned, Tydeus' son and Odysseus, are on their way here for this very man, bound by oath to coax him or take him by force. All the Greeks heard Odysseus say this quite clearly - he had more stomach for the deed than his partner.

Neoptolemus: Why have the sons of Atreus spent so much effort in pursuit of someone they exiled long ago? What are they after? Or are they plagued by a violent fury from the gods, those guardians against evil?

Merchant: It seems you haven't heard – I'll tell you everything. There was a nobleman and prophet, a son of Priam called Helenos. Odysseus (the recipient of many a vile insult) ambushed him one night when on a solo patrol. He bound him and showed him to all the Greeks, a fine catch. Among other predictions, Helenos prophesied that Troy's walls would not fall unless they coaxed this man from this island where he now abides. When he heard this, the son of Laertes promised then and there that he would bring them this man. He thought to take him willingly but, should he refuse, he would do it by force. If he were to fail in this mission, he exhorted anyone who was so inclined to chop off his head. There you have it, boy. I urge you and him, and anyone else you care about, to waste no time in leaving.

Philoctetes: O no! The author of all my pain, did he swear to deliver me to the Greeks? He might as well have me return from Hades, like his father.

Merchant: I wouldn't know. I'm off to my ship. God's blessing on you both!

Philoctetes: Is it not, boy, a dreadful thing that Laertes' son hopes that with honeyed words he can ship me hence and present me to the Greek army? Well, he can't. I would sooner listen to the snake (I detest snakes!) which rendered me lame. Let's go, boy, and put many sea-miles between ourselves and Odysseus's hip. Come. Timely haste brings sweet rest when tribulation's past.

Neoptolemus: When the wind off the prow abates, we'll weigh anchor. At the moment it's contrary.

Philoctetes: Fleeing trouble always makes for an auspicious voyage.

Neoptolemus: No. This wind hinders our enemy also.

Philoctetes: As long as pirates can rob and pillage, they'll never have a contrary wind.

Neoptolemus: Well alright. Come, let's stow aboard your particular wants and needs.

Philoctetes: There are some necessities I have, though not much.

Neoptolemus: What do you have that my ship can't provide?

Philoctetes: A herb that I apply to my wound – a great comfort.

Neoptolemus: Fetch it. Anything else you want?

Philoctetes: There may be some arrows that I have let slip out of their quiver. I must not let anyone get his hands on them.

Neoptolemus: Is that the famed bow you have there?

Philoctetes: It is – no other.

Neoptolemus: May I see it close up? And hold it? I'd like to do it reverence.

Philoctetes: Child, this and anything else of mine you need are at your disposal.

Neoptolemus: I have a strong desire to handle it. If that is allowed, please let me.

Otherwise, leave it be.

Philoctetes: Child, anything you ask is allowed. You alone have given me light and life, the chance to see again Oita, my homeland, my aged father, my friends. And you have set me beyond the reach of my enemies. Come, you may touch it. Now let me have it back. Be aware that, thanks to your goodness, you are the only man to have laid hands on it.

Neoptolemus: It is a pleasure to have met you and professed you a friend. He who can return a favour is the greatest friend of all. Go in.

Chorus: I have heard the tale (though seen it not) –

When Ixion approached the cot
Where Hera slept, the mighty heir
Of Kronos bound him, then and there,
Fast 'gainst an ever-moving wheel.
No other mortal yet did feel
Such pain as THIS man – cruel fate –
A man who had incurred no hate
By force or theft, a man like me,
To suffer so unworthily.
This wondrous tale holds me in thrall
That he, the most forlorn of all,
Must hearken to the crashing strife
Of waves, a miserable life.
And he lived, crippled, alone,
With none nearby to hear him moan
His nagging pain, to scour the fields
To find the plant which comfort yields,
And to apply it to the limb
Whose angry wound afflicted him.
And so he shuffled here and there,
A child without its nurse's care –
No-one to aid his halting pace,
While gnawing doom displayed its face.
No crops come from this holy soil,
No harvest of a farmer's toil.
The only sustenance in sight
Was won by his swift arrows' flight.
A ten-year dearth, poor wretched lord,
Of all the joy wine can afford.
The only means he had to slake
His thirst was from some standing lake.
But now this most illustrious boy
Restores him to his former joy.
He'll take him back across the foam
To where the Melian nymphs call home,
Where still the river Spercheius sees
Fiery, bronze-shielded Heracles.

Neoptolemus: Come then. Why this strange silence? It's as though you have been struck dumb.

Philoctetes: Ahhh!

Neoptolemus: What's the matter? Philoctetes: It's nothing. Let's go, boy.

Neoptolemus: Is your wound giving you pain?

Philoctetes: No. Ah, I think it's gone now. Oh gods!

Neoptolemus: Why do you cry out to the gods?

Philoctetes: To be my gracious saviours. Ahhh!

Neoptolemus: What ails you? Tell me! Don't hold back! You must be in some discomfort.

Philoctetes: I'm in agony, boy. I can't keep it from you. Ahh! The pain is shooting through me. O god! The pain, boy. It's like a knife. Ahhhhh! For the love of God, take your blade (you have it there?) – cut off my foot. Quick, kill me! Let me die. Come, boy.

Neoptolemus: This is something new. What is it? Why such great lamentation?

Philoctetes: Don't you know, child? Neoptolemus: What is it? Philoctetes: Don't you know, child?

Neoptolemus: What's the matter with you? No, I don't know. Philoctetes: How could you not? Ahhhh!

Neoptolemus: The affliction has taken a new turn.

Philoctetes: And it's unspeakably painful. Have pity!

Neoptolemus: What must I do? Philoctetes: Don't be afraid! Don't leave me! It comes in fits and starts from time to time, then, when it's had its fill, it leaves me.

Neoptolemus: Poor wretch! You have suffered terribly. Do you want me to ease the pain in some way?

Philoctetes: No. Hold my bow (you asked me for it not long ago) till this present bout of pain subsides. I can't sleep till it does. Please, let me sleep and I'll be refreshed. If they return now, I charge you in the name of the gods not to give it up to any of them, whatever tricks they try. If you do, you will be killing both yourself and me, your suppliant.

Neoptolemus: Have no fear. I will take care of it. No-one will have it but you and I. Give it me – we will prevail.

Philoctetes: There it is, boy. Take it. But revere the jealousy of the gods lest what befell myself and its previous owner may befall you also.

Neoptolemus: Gods, may we succeed. Grant us a fair and prosperous voyage wherever the gods decree and whatever our mission affords us.

Philoctetes: I fear, child, our prayer will not be fulfilled. Still the dark blood trickles, bubbles from deep within me. I fear there will be more pain. AHH! What troubles you have caused me, wretched foot. It's coming, closer, closer. O god! You know my history. Don't desert me, please.

Kephalenian Odysseus, I wish this agony could pierce your heart. Ahh! More pain! Twin generals, Agamemnon, Menelaus, how do you think YOU would deal with this pain all this while? Ah, Death, I call upon you every day but you don't come! Noble boy, here on Lemnos, I beg you, take me and commit me to flames. I duly performed this same task for Zeus' son Heracles, for which I was awarded that weapon you hold in your hand.

What do you say, boy? Silent? Where are you, child?

Neoptolemus: I am in agony over your wretchedness – I have been since we met.

Philoctetes: Courage, boy. This pain comes in sharp jabs and just as quickly it leaves me. I beg of you, don't leave me behind.

Neoptolemus: I shall stay, I promise. Philoctetes: You will? Neoptolemus: Count on it.

Philoctetes: Child, it would be wrong to bind you by oath.

Neoptolemus: I cannot in conscience leave without you.

Philoctetes: Give me your hand. Swear! Neoptolemus: I swear.

Philoctetes: There...I must...there. Neoptolemus: Where? Philoctetes: Up!

Neoptolemus: You are delirious. Why are you gazing on the sky?

Philoctetes: Leave me.

Neoptolemus: Where? Philoctetes: Just leave me.

Neoptolemus: I can't do that. Philoctetes: Your touch alone will destroy me.

Neoptolemus: Then I let you go, if you think you can cope.

Philoctetes: O earth, take me. I am near death. My sickness will no longer let me stand.

Neoptolemus: He will sleep soon, I think – his head is sinking to his chest. Sweat pours from his body. Dark blood is pouring angrily from his foot. Let him alone, friends, let sleep take him.

Chorus: Sleep, sleep, who knows no pain, no grief, favour us with your presence, o happy, happy lord. Focus the sun's light on his eyes as it now diffuses over them. Child, consider your position, your next move. See, he's asleep. What must we do? Opportunity holds sway over all judgment and can snatch great advantage in a twinkling.

Neoptolemus: He can hear nothing now, but it's clear that our quest for his bow is fruitless if we sail without him. The victory must go to him – the god said to take him with us. It would be a shame and a disgrace to congratulate ourselves on a job half-done and tainted with lies.

Chorus: God will see to that. Child, answer me softly – softly! In sickness sleep is never truly sleep – it could be that he sees everything quite clearly. As far as possible, be cautious in outlining your plan to me. You know my meaning. If you agree with him, I predict we will have major difficulties.

We have a fair wind, child, a fair wind. There the man lies, sightless, helpless, just as he does each night – fast asleep in the sun – with no command of his hands, his feet, any part of him, like one who is dead. The time is ripe, is it not? Child, it is clear that we must steel ourselves. And act!

Neoptolemus: Sh! Have some sense! His eyes are opening, he's raising his hand.

Philoctetes: O light, aftermath to sleep! O my friends – still keeping watch over me – miraculous! Never would I have expected you so to pity me as to stay and assist me in my plight. Those good leaders, the Atreidai, wouldn't have undertaken this enterprise with such patience. Child, you have a noble nature – to undergo all this, the cries of pain, the foul smell of my sickness. There is a lull in my pain, child – help me up, child, assist me, let us be off while I am free of the pain, let's delay no longer.

Neoptolemus: What an unexpected joy to behold you still living and breathing. Your symptoms seemed to point to your imminent death. Get up! Or, if you like, these fellows will carry you. I am more than willing to face all difficulties now that we are both bent on action.

Philoctetes: Well done, child. Get me up then! Don't burden your companions with my stench – they will be plagued enough in close quarters on board ship.

Neoptolemus: Very well. Up you get. Give me your hand.

Philoctetes; Fear not! I will stand unaided – as always.

Neoptolemus: Ah! What am I to do now?

Philoctetes; What is it, child? What do you mean?

Neoptolemus: Zeus, what must I do? Stand guilty a second time? Conceal my true intentions and say words that will be to my lasting shame?

Philoctetes: Unless I am a bad judge of behaviour, this man has betrayed me. He'll take ship without me!

Neoptolemus: No, I won't! This has tormented me from the start but I am taking you with me and it could cost you dear.

Philoctetes: What are you saying, boy? I am at a loss!

Neoptolemus: I'll hold nothing back. You are bound for the Greek army in Troy. The sons of Atreus need you.

Philoctetes: Oh no! You don't mean it! Neoptolemus: Hold back your tears till you have heard all.

Philoctetes: Heard what? What are your plans for me?

Neoptolemus: First to rescue you from your plight. Then you and I will go and ravage the plains of Troy.

Philoctetes: That's your plan?? Neoptolemus: Strong forces were at work. Don't be angry.

Philoctetes: Betrayed! I'm as good as dead! What have you done to me, man? Give me back my bow this instant.

Neoptolemus: I can't! I have to listen to my superiors – it's the right thing to do and it'll be to our advantage.

Philoctetes: You raging, terrifying, foul deceiver, look what you've done, the treachery of it. How can you face me, you wretch? I was your suppliant, I was at your mercy. You take my life when you take my bow. Give it back, I beg you, please give it back, please, lad! By the gods of my people, give me back my bow. O God help me! He will no longer talk to me...he was never going to save me...he's looking the other way.

Harbours, escarpments, mountain-beasts who are my companions, craggy rocks, it is to you (I can speak to no other!), my habitual confederates, that I bewail my fate at the hands of this son of Achilles. He promised to take me home only to drag me to Troy instead. Gave me his right hand, and now he has my bow, the sacred bow of Heracles son of Zeus, and intends to tell the Greeks he took a vigorous man by force and brought him to Troy. Doesn't he know he is killing a corpse, a wisp of smoke, a mere shadow? If I'd had my strength he never would have taken me. Even as it is, he had to resort to guile. Guile was my downfall. What can I do? Give it back. You can still return to your true self! Yes? Nothing! Then I am doomed.

My little two-door rocky home, back I come once more, defenceless, hungry. Here shall I wither away, alone; I'll not even be able to bring down a bird or a mountain-beast. My wretched body will be food for those on whom I fed myself. The prey will now become the hunters. Blood for blood – that's my penalty, thanks to a man who seemed incapable of any evil. Perish! Wait! Will you change your mind? No? Then die a foul death!

Chorus: What do we do? Sir, it's your decision – do we sail or do we heed this man's words?

Neoptolemus: I have immense pity for him – I always did.

Philoctetes: For God's sake, pity me, boy, don't let your deception bring shame to you.

Neoptolemus: God, what am I to do? I wish we'd never left Skyros – this situation overwhelms me.

Philoctetes: You're not a bad man. You are here, it seems, on the foul advice of bad men. Leave others to their own business, give me back my bow and sail away.

Neoptolemus: What should we do, fellows? Odysseus: You traitor, what are you up to? You were supposed to give the bow to me.

Philoctetes: Who's this? Is that Odysseus' voice?

Odysseus: It is, be assured. You see me in the flesh.

Philoctetes: Oh no! Bought and sold! This is the man who had me seized, this is the man who robbed me of my bow!

Odysseus: You are right. Who else?

Philoctetes: Boy, take my bow from him, give it me. Odysseus: He won't, whether he wants to or not. You are to go with these men, or they'll make you go.

Philoctetes: Foulest of the foul, wicked beyond belief, they'll force me?? Odysseus: If you refuse, yes.

Philoctetes: Land of Lemnos, almighty volcano of Hephaistos, it is unbearable to be hauled off, away from you.

Odysseus: Zeus decides these things, Zeus, Zeus, our country's ruler. I serve him.

Philoctetes: You hateful man, what skulduggery you come up with! You use gods as your pretext, yet make them out to be liars.

Odysseus: I do not – they are truthful. There lies your way.

Philoctetes: I refuse. Odysseus: And I insist. Give in!

Philoctetes: O no! God created us to be slaves, not free men.

Odysseus: Not so. We are at one with those noble men with whom you are to capture and overthrow Troy.

Philoctetes: Never! I won't do it, whatever hardships I must suffer. Not while this rocky cliff is my home.

Odysseus: What are you up to? Philoctetes: I shall leap from rocky height to rocky depth and dash out my brains below.

Odysseus: Grab him. Don't let him stand there.

Philoctetes: Hands, the things you have undertaken in partnership with my beloved bowstring! Now this fellow has hunted us down. Foul, base man, you tricked me, tracked me down with this boy, a stranger to me, as your scapegoat. He is too good for you, but truly worthy of MY friendship. He was merely following orders. Clearly his wrongdoing and my pain have caused him much grief. But your black heart, forever peeping into murky corners, schooled him well, unschooled (unwilling!) as he was, in his apprenticeship of evil. Wretch, now you have me tethered you plan to take me from the cliff-top where you once cast me, friendless, helpless, stateless, a living corpse. Ahhh! Die! How often I have preyed for your death. But the gods will grant me no boon, and you will live on and thrive, while I am bitterly distressed, living, as I do, amid countless miseries. The twin leaders, those sons of Atreus, mock me – and so do you, their lackey. Yet you sailed alongside them under the yoke of fraud and compulsion I, however (God help me!), sailed a free man in my seven-ship flotilla only to be discarded without honour. You say they did this, they say it was you!

And now what are you doing to me? Why are you taking me off the island? I who am a cipher, one who has been dead to you for many a year. You hateful, godless thing, am I not still halting, malodorous? If I sail with you, how can you burn sacrifices to the gods? Or offer libations? Those things were your very excuse for ditching me. Ah, may a foul death take you! You will perish for your iniquities to me, if there is any justice in heaven. I know there is – you wouldn't have sent after a poor, beleaguered man if some divine stimulus had not driven you on.

My native land, you gods who watch over us, I beg for justice, justice on them all (it's never too late!), if you pity me at all. My life is pitiable, but if I see them dead I'll feel free at last of this sickness.

Chorus: A bitter tale from a bitter man, Odysseus – he won't give way!

Odysseus: I could say much in reply, if circumstances permitted. One thing, however, I will say – I am self-sufficient. Where truth and goodness are held in the balance, you'll find none more righteous than I. Victory must be mine always – except now. I yield this victory to you.

Let him go and leave him be. He can stay. We have no need of you now we have your bow. Teucer's with us, a fine archer, and I suspect I can master it and will handle it no worse than you. So why do we need you? Farewell – I leave you to your Lemnos. Let's be off. Perhaps I shall be awarded the prize you were offered.

Philoctetes: God! What can I do? So, you intend to swagger before the Greeks, brandishing my bow?

Odysseus: Not a word from you! I'm going.

Philoctetes: Achilles' child, am I to be deprived of your presence? Are you leaving too?

Odysseus: Go! Don't even look at him, eminent though you are. You mustn't squander our advantage.

Philoctetes: Gentlemen, you mean to leave me to my desolation, shed no tear?

Chorus: This lad is our captain. We concur with his words.

Neoptolemus: I shall be chided as a merciful man where he is concerned but... Stay, if he lets you, until such time as the sailors prepare the vessel and offer up the necessary prayers. Perhaps he will have a change of heart. Let us two set off, and you men, join us with all speed when we call.

Philoctetes: O my rocky cave, cozy in winter, icy in summer, I never expected to bid you farewell. No, I thought you would witness even my death. Oh! oh! Oh! You soak up all my misfortune! How shall I live from day to day? Whence shall I obtain my sustenance? But he will doubtless hunt ME down through the whistling winds. I no longer have my strength.

Chorus: The blame lies with you, your fate issues from no greater man yourself! You could have listened to a greater power, but no! you chose to make an inferior decision.

Philoctetes: O the harshness of this life! The insults I bear! From this day on I am doomed to a living death, here on this island, unable to forage as before when my powerful arms plied the winged arrows. Cryptic words born of a conniving heart were my downfall. Let me see him – the man who planned it all and in the same second condemned me to tragedy.

Chorus: It was Fate that caused all this, no trick of my devising. Turn your curse elsewhere – I don't want you to reject my friendship.

Philoctetes: God! He's doubtless sitting on the shore of the murky sea and laughing at me, brandishing the means of my livelihood, the bow no other man has ever held. Sweet bow, wrenched from my hands, do you see me, do you feel my pain? Heracles' prize, no longer my weapon but fallen now into the hands of a sly and deceitful wretch, you see how I've been foully deceived, you see the wicked fellow who has concocted such countless ills to plague me.

Chorus: A man should speak honestly and justly, he should refrain from hateful words born of envy. This man was specifically chosen and sent to provide succour for his friends.

Philoctetes: Winged creatures, fierce mountain-fed beasts, you need no longer flee me here – I do not have my weapon, that former source of all my strength. I am a cipher now! This place is now your playground, no danger anymore. Come, take pleasure in

revenge – feed on MY discoloured flesh! I will be dead forthwith – there is nothing to sustain me. Who can live on air when deprived of all this life-giving land provides?

Chorus: If you possess any reverence at all, approach the stranger – he is here to do you nothing but good. Listen, you can escape death. Why should you feed on calamity and dwell among countless woes?

Philoctetes: My dear, dear friend, again you recall me to that ancient grief. Why do you condemn me? What have you done to me...

Chorus: What?

Philoctetes: ...in planning to transport me to detested Troy?

Chorus: It is all for the best.

Philoctetes: Let me stay here.

Chorus: Sweet words. I'll comply. Let's go – the ship is ready.

Philoctetes: Almighty God, don't go, please. Chorus: Calm yourself. Philoctetes: Friends, stay, by all that's holy. Chorus: What are you saying?

Philoctetes: Oh! God! I'm nothing! How will a cripple like me survive now? Friends, come back.

Chorus: For what? Have you changed your mind?

Philoctetes: Don't be angry. I am out of my mind with this vicious pain.

Chorus: Go with us, then, poor man, as we exhorted you.

Philoctetes: No! Get this clear! Never, never. Not even if fire-dealing, lightning-wielding Zeus were to come down and assail me with flame. To hell with Troy, and to hell with all those warriors who had the temerity to abandon a helpless man! But, friends, grant me this one wish.

Chorus: Which is? Philoctetes: Send me, if you can, a sword or an axe – some weapon or other.

Chorus: What mischief are you planning?

Philoctetes: My own destruction – my head, my limbs. I have most bloody thoughts.

Chorus: What? Philoctetes: I wish to see my father.

Chorus: In what country does he dwell? Philoctetes: In Hades. He no longer looks upon the light of day. O my native city, is it possible I will see you again? I left your sacred spring to aid the hated Greeks. I no longer live.

Chorus: I would have been long gone to sea with you, but look! Here come Odysseus and Achilles' son back again.

Odysseus: Will you not tell me the reason for your hasty return here?

Neoptolemus: To undo my earlier offences.

Odysseus: You're mad! What offences?

Neoptolemus: Those spurred by you and the entire army...

Odysseus: What did you do that was wrong?

Neoptolemus: I took the man prisoner by vile trickery and deceit.

Odysseus: Him? O lord, you don't have a fresh plan, surely?

Neoptolemus: Nothing fresh, but to Poias' son...

Odysseus: What will you do? Fear steals over me.

Neoptolemus: ...from whom I took this bow, once more...

Odysseus: God, what are you on the point of saying? You'll give it back???

Neoptolemus: I have it under false pretenses, and vile ones too.

Odysseus: God, you are in jest, are you not?

Neoptolemus: If jesting means speaking the truth, yes.

Odysseus: What are you saying, Achilles' child? What?

Neoptolemus: Shall I say it again, and yet again?

Odysseus: Once is too much.

Neoptolemus: Now you know everything.

Odysseus: Well, there is one who will hinder you.

Neoptolemus: Whom do you mean? Who will hinder me?

Odysseus: The whole Greek army, and I among them.

Neoptolemus: Foolish words for a wise man!

Odysseus: Not only are your words foolish – your threats are too.

Neoptolemus: If my words are just, though, they transcend wise ones.

Odysseus: And how is it just to relinquish what you took on my orders?

Neoptolemus: I plan to rectify the error I made.

Odysseus: Don't you fear the consequences for the Greek army?

Neoptolemus: With right on my side, I have no fear of you.

Odysseus: ...

Neoptolemus: I'll not listen to you.

Odysseus: It's not the Trojans I'll fight, but you.

Neoptolemus: Go ahead. Odysseus: My hand is at my sword. See? Neoptolemus: I too am for action – no more dawdling.

Odysseus: Enough! I'm off to tell the army – they'll administer your punishment.

Neoptolemus: You have come to your senses. If you continue thus, you may avoid misfortune. Son of Poias, Philoctetes, come out, leave your rocky home.

Philoctetes: What's the hubbub outside my cave? Who calls? What do you want, friends? O what a wretched state I'm already in. Are you here to inflict yet more suffering on me?

Neoptolemus: Courage! Hear me! Philoctetes: You frighten me. I listened to your honeyed words once before and behold the painful results.

Neoptolemus: Is it not possible to change one's mind?

Philoctetes: When you stole my bow, your words smacked of honesty but hid your evil intent.

Neoptolemus: But no longer! Listen! Then decide whether to continue to endure a solitary life or sail with us. Philoctetes: Stop there! Your words will be wasted on me.

Neoptolemus: You have decided to stay? Philoctetes: Words cannot express my feelings adequately. Yes, I have.

Neoptolemus: I had hoped to convince you, but if I can say nothing to change your mind, I have done. Philoctetes: Yes, it'll all be in vain. You will not win me round – you tricked me out of my bow, then you upbraided me, you, the base son of an excellent father. To hell with you all, the sons of Atreus in particular, then Laertes' son – then you.

Neoptolemus: No more curses! Here is your bow. Take it.

Philoctetes: What? Another trick?

Neoptolemus: No, I swear it by the highest of divinities, Zeus Himself.

Philoctetes: Sweet words – if true.

Neoptolemus: The act itself will confirm that they are. Hold out your hand and once more possess your bow.

Odysseus: The gods be my witnesses, I forbid this! In me you hear the voice of the sons of Atreus and the entire army.

Philoctetes: Child, was that Odysseus I heard? Odysseus: It was indeed. The man who will MAKE you go to Troy, whether Achilles' son approves or no.

Philoctetes: If my arrow shoot true, you'll regret those words.

Neoptolemus: No, please, for God's sake, don't use your weapons on him.

Philoctetes: Dearest child, let me go!

Neoptolemus: No, I won't. Philoctetes: You would prevent me from killing my worst enemy?

Neoptolemus: Yes, it will serve neither of us well.

Philoctetes: Let me tell you this much – the army's leaders, that duplicitous pair, are cowards in the field and braggarts in their talk.

Neoptolemus: Let it be. You have your bow – no need to turn anger or recrimination in my direction.

Philoctetes: I agree. Child, you have shown your true, innate goodness – Sisyphus did not father you. No, it was Achilles, a man who, while he lived, had praise heaped on him, and is still likewise honoured in death.

Neoptolemus: My heart leaps to hear you singing his praises, and my own. Hear my fond hopes for you. Men must endure the fate the gods send them, but it is wrong to offer sympathetic indulgence to those who, like you, put themselves into harm's way willingly. You're full of anger, you refuse counsel, and, if someone gives you a kindly reprimand, you throw it back at him and consider him a bitter enemy. But let me tell you something (and Zeus be my witness). Hear me and inscribe the words on your heart. Your sickness is heaven-sent because of your brush with the guardian of Chryse, the serpent which hides in the sacred precinct and protects it. The grievous sickness will not leave you until the sun has risen and set once more, until you go to Troy of your own free will. There we will meet the sons of Asklepius who will relieve your pain and cure you, and with the help of your bow and myself you will destroy the walls of Troy. All this will happen, I know – a man we took captive, a top-class prophet called Helenos, told us in unambiguous terms that it is destined to occur. Furthermore, he says, Troy will fall this very summer. He stakes his life on the veracity of his words. Knowing this, give your assent. A triumph out of the blue! One remarkable Greek, chosen by his people to be healed by the arts of medicine and then to vanquish grieving Troy to his great and lasting fame.

Philoctetes: Why does my insufferable life insist on keeping me here on earth? Why may I not be released into Hades? What am I to do? How can I doubt the words of this man with his friendly advice? But should I submit? Shall this wretched man perform the deed and then return to society? Whom am I to meet? How shall these eyes of mine endure the sight of the sons of Atreus, my destroyers? Not to mention that foul trickster, Laertes' son? My former grief doesn't sting me but I can almost see the suffering I am to endure at their hands. Those whose minds foster evil will forever harbour evil in their souls. You amaze me here – you shouldn't have gone to Troy yourself, and you should stop me from doing the same thing. They treated you shamefully, they deprived you of your father's arms, and now you are going to aid them in their quest and force me to do likewise? No, boy! Send me back home – you agreed to that – then go to Skyros, YOUR home, and let these vile men go hang! Both my father and myself shall give you double thanks for this. By refusing aid to the unworthy you will prove your own worthiness.

Neoptolemus: Reasonable words. Still, please trust the gods and listen to me. I am your friend – come with me, leave this island.

Philoctetes: For Troy? To meet that foul son of Atreus? With this festering foot?

Neoptolemus: To meet the man who will take away the pain from that festering foot and cure you.

Philoctetes: Your counsel is dire! What are you saying?

Neoptolemus: What I say is best for us both.

Philoctetes: Are you not ashamed?

Neoptolemus: Is it shameful to aid one's fellow-man?

Philoctetes: Aid the sons of Atreus, or me?

Neoptolemus: I'm YOUR friend. You heard me say so.

Philoctetes: Really? And yet you are ready to betray me to my enemies!

Neoptolemus: My friend, curb your rashness in the midst of adversity.

Philoctetes: Your advice will destroy me, I know.

Neoptolemus: Not true! You're not listening to me!

Philoctetes: The sons of Atreus abandoned me!

Neoptolemus: True, but now they will redeem you. You'll see.

Philoctetes: I'll never lay eyes on Troy if I can help it.

Neoptolemus: Then we can do nothing – our words have failed to convince you. It's simplicity itself to cease talking and leave you to exist as before – without any hope of salvation.

Philoctetes: Leave me to my destined path. You took my hand and promised to take me home. Do that, child, without delay. And think no more of Troy. I have lamented enough.

Neoptolemus: Then let us go. Philoctetes: Brave words!

Neoptolemus: Best foot forward! Philoctetes: THAT I can do.

Neoptolemus: How will I escape the Greeks' approach? Neoptolemus: Don't think about it!

Philoctetes: What if they follow us to your native land? Neoptolemus: I'll be at your side.

Neoptolemus: And what will you be able to do? Philoctetes: Heracles' bow,...

Neoptolemus: Huh? Philoctetes: ...will prevent their approach to your home.

Neoptolemus: Well then, if you abide by your words, greet your homeland once more.

Heracles: Not until you have heard me, son of Poias. Listen to the words of Heracles, gaze upon him. I have left my heavenly abode on your behalf. Hear Zeus' edict. You must delay your journey. Hear me! First, hear what befell ME, the pain and grief I endured on the way to a warrior's immortality. You two are destined for this – a luminous life in exchange for your suffering. With this man you will travel to the city of Troy. There you will first be cured of your grievous sickness, and then you will be judged the army's prime warrior. Paris, the cause of all this torment, you will sunder from life, Troy you will sack, its spoils you will transport to your own halls, the army's mead of valour. Your native Oita and your father shall share in this booty. The army's spoils you must bring to my funeral pyre as a memorial to my bow. Now I address you, Achilles' son. You cannot take Troy without this man, nor he without you. Like a lion and his mate, you protect each other. I shall send you Asklepius to cure your sickness. Then must take Troy with the help of my bow. But remember – when you ravage that land, you must revere the

gods. Father Zeus measures all things secondary to reverence. It does not perish like mortal men; they live, they die, but reverence is eternal.

Philoctetes: At long last I hear your voice, see your face – I will not let you down.

Neoptolemus: Nor I.

Heracles: No delay, then. Now is the time to sail – get aboard.

Philoctetes: Now I am on my way, I shall call upon this island. Farewell, my cave of many a sleepless night, nymphs of the watery meadows, mighty sea crashing against this headland, where even in my cave my head has been assailed by the rainy buffets of the south wind, and many a time Mt. Hermes has sent me back my cries of pain in rebounding echo. Springs, Lykian stream, I leave you now, though I never thought I would. Speed me on my way – I am destined for greatness, thanks to my friends and the almighty deity who has brought all these things to pass.

Chorus: Let us all go together and let us pray to the Nymphs of the Sea for a safe return.