Sophokles, *Philoktetes*

Background on Sophokles and the *Philoktetes*:
As the Greek army makes its way to Troy, the warrior Philoktetes is bitten in the foot by a poisonous snake in the precinct of the goddess Chryse. His screams of agony and the smell of his festering foot wound compel the Achaeans to leave him on the island of Lemnos. Ten years later, the Greeks have still not won the Trojan War, and an oracle proclaims that they will only win if they have the magical bow of Philoktetes. The bow originally belonged to Herakles and has been passed down the male line in Philoktetes’ family. Odysseus leads an expedition to the island to retrieve the bow, accompanied by Neoptolemos (his name means “new-to-war” or “new war”), Achilles’ young son.

Sophokles depicts the island of Lemnos as a deserted, wild place. Philoktetes lives in a cave-like structure, alone in the middle of the woods, and has been surviving only on wild animals as food. The action of the play centers on Neoptolemos’ attempts to befriend and/or trick Philoktetes into surrendering his bow. Over the course of the narrative, the relationship between Neoptolemos and Philoktetes undergoes several changes; in particular, the pity felt by Neoptolemos for the agony of Philoktetes leads him to question his duplicitous role. The play ends with the sudden appearance of Herakles in an attempt to resolve the crisis.

The *Philoktetes* was performed in 409, and is thus one of Sophokles’ last plays. At that time, Athens had witnessed the most devastating years of the Peloponnesian War, including the plague in Athens, the disastrous Sicilian expedition, and the oligarchic coup of 411. It is unclear what other plays were included with the trilogy, but we might imagine a Trojan War theme.

Study questions and issues for discussion:

1. This play is fundamentally about pain – physical, emotional, psychological, and social. How has Philoktetes’ pain stigmatized him? How does he describe his pain and what are its ramifications?

2. How does Sophokles treat the issue of deception? Consider Neoptolemos’ actions and Philoktetes’ history with the Greek army. What is the role of trust and trickery? How does deception work for Sophokles? What is Odysseus’ role in all this?

3. Consider the debate between *logos* (words) and *ergon* (deeds). At the time this play was produced, this word/deed dialectic was a major issue in Athenian society, as the Athenians weighed the values and problems of oratorical skill, military command, and persuasion. How can we interpret Odysseus’ actions in the play within this framework?

4. Nature vs. civilization. How is the setting of the play described? How has the setting of the play affected the figure of Philoktetes over the past 10 years? How can Philoktetes be reintegrated into civilization, and is it even possible?