

THE BODY IN MIND: MEDICAL IMAGERY IN SOPHOCLES

ABSTRACT: This article analyses the depiction of mental and physical pain in Sophoclean tragedy, showing how Sophocles uses medical imagery to explore fundamental problems in the personality and behaviour of his protagonists. It argues that the concentration of medical language at certain moments in particular plays not only makes the scenes more graphic and credible, but also articulates the causes and consequences of the characters' predicament. Particular attention is given to Ajax's delusions and maddening shame, Heracles' agony and Deianeira's mistake, and Philoctetes' intransigence and resentment. Sophocles' sustained and detailed engagement with medical language and thought reveals him to be (no less than Aeschylus or Euripides) deeply interested in the wider intellectual and scientific issues of his time.

The aim of this article is to investigate the depiction of pain (both mental and physical) in Sophoclean tragedy,¹ focusing in particular on how Sophocles deploys contemporary medical language and imagery in order to articulate the suffering of his protagonists and their responses to it.² Though all the surviving plays and fragments will be considered, our discussion will concentrate on the three plays which foreground with particular vividness the physical and mental agonies of their central figures, namely Ajax and Philoctetes in their name plays and Heracles in *Trachiniae*. I hope to show that a fuller consideration of physical and mental suffering, and especially of the medically charged concepts of pain and disease, can help us to gain not only a better understanding of the dramas themselves, but also of how fifth-century Greeks thought about the body and its importance to the individual's sense of self.

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¹ For an overview of previous studies of Sophocles' presentation of physical suffering, and an illuminating discussion of the reception of *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes* from the perspective of physical pain, see BUDELMANN (2007).

² For Sophocles and medical language, see LONG (1968) 56–7, 132–5; CLARKE KOSAK (1999), (2006); CESCHI (2002–3), (2005), (2009); CRAIK (2003); MITCHELL-BOYASK (2012). On medicine and tragedy more generally, see MILLER (1944); COLLINGE (1962); FERRINI (1978); PADEL (1992); GUARDASOLE (2000); CRAIK (2001); CLARKE KOSAK (2004), (2005); MITCHELL-BOYASK (2008); HOLMES (2008), (2010) 228–74. The fullest study of Sophocles thus far (CESCHI (2009)) is particularly strong on technical aspects of vocabulary (for example, words shared with the Hippocratic corpus), but more remains to be said about the dramatic impact of physical and mental pain and the use of contemporary medical language to describe it.

I: Ancient Medicine and Ancient Thought

But before we turn to the plays themselves, let us start by briefly considering the relationship between ancient Greek medicine and literature more generally. Although ancient medicine has been an area of increasing interest in recent years, scholarship tends to focus on technical medical treatises, written by and for ancient medical practitioners.³ Yet the way we think about our bodies, how they work, and what goes wrong with them, influences the way we perceive the broader world, and the kinds of ideas and metaphors we use to describe other experiences.⁴ So, in addition to the technical material on medicine, we must also look at ancient Greek literature as a whole, which is written neither for nor by medical experts but for ordinary people, and investigate how contemporary beliefs about the body and medicine affect the way that ancient writers use medical or physical language to describe both the world around them and the behaviour of individuals within it.⁵

With the exception of Thucydidean scholarship (especially RECHENAUER (1991)), work on Greek literature's interaction with medicine tends to focus on the Hellenistic period (for example, the role of 'melancholy' in Hellenistic poetry)⁶ and, in particular, on late antiquity, under the influence of the large surviving corpus of

³ KRUG (1985); RIHLL (1999) 118–31; NUTTON (2004); LEVEN (2005); VAN DER EIJK (2005) 1–42; BROCKMANN et al. (2009) offer insightful discussions of recent work on ancient medicine. On doctors writing for doctors, see KOLLESCH (1991).

⁴ On body and mind in contemporary debates about cognition and consciousness, see JOHNSON (1987); LAKOFF and JOHNSON (1999); GALLAGHER (2005); ROWLANDS (2008). For ancient models of the self, see NUSSBAUM (1986); OSTENFELD (1987); WILLIAMS (1993); GILL (1995) 5–19, (1996a); CLARKE (1999); CAIRNS (1993), (2008). LLOYD (1987) 172–214 discusses the pervasiveness of metaphor in ancient Greek language and thought, both popular and scientific; cf. also SKODA (1988). A Sophoclean example: Tecmessa describes Ajax's madness as a 'turbulent storm' of sickness: Αἶας θολερός / κείται χεῖμωνι νοσήσας (*Ajax* 206–7). The metaphors used to describe both the body and the mind are culturally specific and often change in line with technological developments: thus the ancient view of the heart as a furnace (used by Aristotle among others) was eventually replaced by the model of the heart as a kind of pump (the pump, invented in the 16th century, being unknown to ancient thinkers); similarly, our model of the brain has changed from one of clockwork (in the time of Newton) to the computer (in the later 20th century) and now to multiple interconnected computers or processors (i.e. neural networks in the brain). For the evolution of ideas about the brain, see FINGER (2001), ROLLS (2012). Diseases too are described in ways that reflect current ideas: PADEL (1992) 50 n. 2 points to, for example, 'images of tuberculosis as "spiritualized" romantic consciousness, "aestheticized" death, and of cancer as an alien, mutant nonself in self. Each expressed culturally determined fears, patterned by contemporary psychology and technology.'

⁵ AS FREDE (1987) 225 observes, 'Throughout antiquity the relation between philosophy and medicine was very close'; on these links, cf. also EDELSTEIN (1987); LONGRIGG (1993) 6–103; HANKINSON (1998b) 50; VAN DER EIJK (2008). By contrast, I focus here on popular ideas about medicine and the body, and how these ideas feature in tragedy, a genre of mass public entertainment, rather than the more rarefied world of philosophy.

⁶ On melancholy, TOOHEY (2004) takes a broader chronological view; cf. also VAN DER EIJK (2005) 139–168 for the influence of Aristotle's ideas about melancholy.

Galen's medical works.⁷ As a result the role of medical thought in earlier literature is comparatively neglected.⁸ Yet the literature of the archaic and classical period was of unique importance for the shaping of Greek thought, including scientific and medical thought.⁹ Moreover, epic and tragedy are genres which deal above all with human suffering, and thus with both physical and mental pain. So by looking more closely at the depiction of pain in Sophoclean tragedy, we can better understand how medical ideas and the physicality of Greek thought are fundamental not only to the shaping of ancient Greek literary works but also to the response of contemporary audiences to them.

As recent research in the cognitive sciences has shown (n. 4 above), and as the ancient Greeks already knew, the body and the mind are not separate entities, but are deeply interconnected.¹⁰ The Greeks saw no dualism between the physical and the mental: they were pre-Cartesian and all the better for it. The author of *On the Sacred Disease*, for example, uses the acknowledged interconnectedness of body and mind to support his novel argument that mental illnesses, including epilepsy, have physical causes:

Ἀλλὰ γὰρ αἴτιος ὁ ἐγκέφαλος τούτου τοῦ πάθεος, ὥσπερ καὶ
τῶν ἄλλων νοσημάτων τῶν μεγίστων· ὅτέω δὲ τρῶπι καὶ ἐξ οἷς
προφάσιος γίνεται, ἐγὼ φράσω σαφέως.

The fact is that the brain is the cause of this affliction, as it is of other very serious diseases. How this comes about and the reason for it I will now clearly explain.

(*On the Sacred Disease*, 6)¹¹

⁷ On Galen's conception of medicine and nature, see e.g. FRENCH (1994) 184–95; NUTTON (2004) 216–47.

⁸ MITCHELL-BOYASK (2008), (2012) and HOLMES (2010) are notable exceptions, though the latter focuses on Euripides rather than Sophocles in her discussion of tragedy, stating that (233–4) 'Sophocles' relationship to the new medicine remains controversial.' One goal of this paper, therefore, is to stress the extent to which Sophocles is no less ready than Euripides (or Aeschylus) to engage with contemporary medical ideas, using them (as do his fellow tragedians) to make the pain suffered by his characters all the more realistic and vivid for his audience.

⁹ On the narrative qualities of ancient diagnosis, for example, see PEARCY (1992).

¹⁰ For Greek medical models of the mind, and the mind's connection with physical processes, see HANKINSON (1991); cf. SCHOFIELD (1991) 33 on Heraclitus' theory of the soul: 'Certainly the talk of fire, water and earth will no longer do. But otherwise, I submit, Heraclitus is near enough right and (as important) obviously right. Our selves, if not bodies, are very much functions of our bodies; and the crucial fact about them is that they are continually subject to opposite processes of psychological and (like everything else in the physical world) physical transformation.' As FREDE (1987) 227 observes, it would be a mistake to see ancient philosophers engaging in therapy of the soul while doctors do therapy of the body: 'Both philosophers and physicians tended to assume that an interest in the soul was an interest in the various life-functions, like procreation, growth and nutrition, respiration, perception, thought – and both had an interest in all these functions.' See also WRIGHT and POTTER (2000); PIGEAUD (2006).

¹¹ The author of *On the Sacred Disease* does not reject religion (or as LLOYD (1979) 26 neatly puts it, 'Indeed his view is not that no disease is divine, but that all are: all are divine and all are

Similarly, as HANKINSON points out, Galen believed that what we now call the philosophy of mind must be based on neurology – a notion strikingly close to modern ideas about the physical brain as the basis for the study of behaviour.¹² Thus, the way one sees reality, the Greeks recognized, was shaped by physical processes, so that, for example, an illness could be linked to a state of mind such as depression, or as a fragment of Sophocles puts it, τίκτουσι γάρ τοι καὶ νόσους δυσθυμῖαι (‘For diseases too are caused by depressions’, Soph. *Tyro* fr. 663 R)

Moreover, as much recent work on Greek ethics and the emotions has shown, a particular culture’s understanding of the body and the self, though based on universal physical and neurophysiological processes, is crucially shaped by higher-level judgements and social interactions and therefore varies with the norms and values of that culture.¹³ In other words, we have to try to relate the physical and mental suffering of Sophocles’ characters to ideas about disease, pain, and the vulnerability of the human self current in the fifth century BC. So when a character says, πικρὰν πικρῷ κλύζουσι φαρμάκῳ χολήν (‘They wash away bitter bile with bitter medicines’, Soph. fr. 854 R), Sophocles is drawing on the contemporary notion of the humours (yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm – familiar from Hippocratic medicine), and on the idea (also found in the Hippocratics, e. g. *Nature of Man* 4, *Ancient Medicine* 14) that health consists of a proper balance or harmony between the body’s different elements, including its humours.¹⁴

II: Fifth-Century Medicine and the Tragic Audience

During Sophocles’ long life the new scientific discipline of medicine was asserting its authority in competition with traditional ways of understanding the human body, such as those of root-cutters, midwives, wandering healers, practitioners of

natural’), but his focus on physical cause and explanation does mark a crucial break with older views where the supernatural element is paramount. For the combination of religious and rational elements in the Hippocratic corpus, see HANKINSON (1998a); JOUANA (1999) 181–209; LASKARIS (2002).

¹² HANKINSON (1991) 216. Cf. also SINGER (1997) xxxix, 150–76 on Galen’s treatise *The Soul’s Dependence on the Body*.

¹³ Thus, as the body and mind are interconnected, so too are emotions and the mind, since emotion requires cognition (after all, something without a brain cannot have even the most basic of emotions, e. g. fear of a predator). The belief-based character of emotion continues to be explored by the cognitive and affective sciences (e. g. ROLLS (2005)), but was also known to the Greeks, as when Aristotle argues that *pathē* (emotions) play a basic role in *phronēsis* (practical wisdom): cf. FORTENBAUGH (1975); KONSTAN (2006); KRISTJÁNSSON (2007) 17–19; PAKALUK and PEARSON (2011) (with further bibliography).

¹⁴ For the balance of powers in the body, and its overlap with fifth-century political discussions of *isonomia*, see MITCHELL-BOYASK (2012) 318–19.

‘temple medicine’, and magicians.¹⁵ We can see this competition reflected in the plays themselves, as when Ajax opposes proper medicine to mere magic:

οὐ πρὸς ἱατροῦ σοφοῦ
θρηνεῖν ἐπὶ δ᾽ αὖ πρὸς τομῶντι πῆματι.

AJAX: It is not the way of a wise doctor
to wail incantations over a pain that needs surgery.

(*Ajax* 581–2)

The increasing authority of the *iatros* is reflected in the so-called Ode to Man, the first stasimon of *Antigone*, where medicine is listed as the final item, rounding off a catalogue of skills (including language, thought, and social organization) that characterize human progress (similarly Prometheus in [Aesch.] *PV* 477–83):

καὶ φθέγμα καὶ ἀνεμόεν
φρόνημα καὶ ἀστυνόμους
ὁργὰς ἐδιδάξατο καὶ δυσαύλων
πάγων ὑπαίθρεια καὶ
δύσομβρα φεύγειν βέλη
παντοπόρος· ἄπορος ἐπ’ οὐδὲν ἔρχεται
τὸ μέλλον· Αἶδα μόνον
φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξετα·
νόσων δ’ ἀμηχάνων φυγὰς
ξυμπέφραστα.

And he taught himself speech
and wind-quick thought
and the temper for civic order,
and how to escape exposure to inhospitable frosts
and the harsh shafts of rain –
resourceful in all! Resourceless he meets nothing
that might occur. Only from Hades
will he procure no escape;
but escape from irresistible diseases
he has devised.

(*Ant.* 354–64)

The Chorus acknowledge that medicine cannot defeat death, but their emphasis is on its wondrous ability to prolong human life in the face of disease.

Tragedy was a form of mass entertainment, and so we might ask how much knowledge of medicine the dramatists could expect in their audiences. First, the gap between expert and lay knowledge of medicine was likely to be smaller in the ancient world than it is now.¹⁶ And second, since tragedy, as a form of popular art, had to be readily intelligible to its audience and could not afford to be obscure, the fact that tragedy (as we shall see) is full of medical language and imagery suggests

¹⁵ AMUNDSEN (1977); LLOYD (1979) 38–9; CORDES (1994); NUTTON (2004) 63; VAN DER ELK (2005) 20.

¹⁶ Several Hippocratic treatises are addressed to a general audience (e.g. *Breaths*, *The Science of Medicine*, *The Nature of Man*), while Aristotle speaks of the man ‘who has studied medicine as part of his general education’ but does not practise it (*Pol.* 1282a3–8).

widespread audience familiarity with contemporary medical ideas – perhaps not in great technical detail, but at least in outline.¹⁷ Moreover, when Teucer describes Ajax's corpse using the word σύριγγες in the medical sense of 'ducts or channels in the body',¹⁸ or when Neoptolemus speaks of the 'vein of black blood' bursting from Philoctetes' foot,¹⁹ using a phrase (αἰμορροαγῆς φλέψ) that is attested elsewhere only in the Hippocratic corpus,²⁰ perhaps this suggests that many apparently technical ideas were more or less common knowledge.²¹ In any case, since most doctors were itinerant, they were hard to hold to account, and so a patient would be responsible for his own health and it was in his own interests to have a basic understanding of the body, its illnesses and its cures.²²

Just as the disciplinary boundaries between doctors and other types of healer were flexible (so that Hippocratic authors could borrow from the 'folk medicine' of drugsellers, rootcutters, and the like), so there was no fixed boundary between genres of medical and non-medical writing or thought, and thus medical ideas could influence authors in a variety of other genres: Plato's *Timaeus* (81e–82a), for example, presents the body as composed of earth, fire, water, and air (a version of the four element theory clearest in Empedocles (DK 31B96, 31B98) but also found in the Hippocratics), while Thucydides' description of the plague in Athens shows awareness of contemporary medical ideas such as that overcrowding can lead to disease and that sickness can be spread by contagion (2.47–54).²³

In the case of tragedy, its connection to medicine is even stronger, since both are concerned first and foremost with the problem of human suffering and its causes.²⁴ Tragedy's depiction of physical and mental agony exploits the visceral

¹⁷ For medical language in Attic Old Comedy, another genre of popular entertainment, see MILLER (1945); BYL (1990); RODRÍGUEZ ALFAGEME (1995); FOLEY (2000).

¹⁸ ἔτι γὰρ θερμοὶ / σύριγγες ἄνω φυσῶσι μέλαν / μένος ('For still the warm channels are spouting upwards his black might', *Ajax* 1411–13); FINGLASS (2011) 523 compares the 'white(?) might' of Archil. fr. 196a.52 W.

¹⁹ ἰδρώς γέ τοί νιν πᾶν καταστάζει δέμας, / μέλαινά τ' ἄκρου τις παρέρρωγεν ποδὸς / αἰμορροαγῆς φλέψ ('Sweat is drenching his whole body and a vein of black blood has burst out from his heel', *Phil.* 823–5).

²⁰ Cf. CESCHI (2009) 89–91.

²¹ 'Black blood' (nn. 18–19) is in itself a familiar idea from Homer onwards (e.g. *Il.* 4.149), suggesting that the role of colour in scientific humoral theory (black and yellow bile) has its roots in popular thought, where naturally colour plays a role in physical description; cf. the 'white brains' (λευκὸν μυελὸν) of *Trach.* 781 and the χλωρὸν αἷμα ('fresh blood', but calling to mind colour too) of *Trach.* 1055 (both discussed below).

²² For evidence of charlatanism (i.e. unqualified people pretending to be doctors), see DEAN-JONES (2003).

²³ Cf. PARRY (1969); RECHENAUER (1991); CLARKE KOSAK (2000) 51; JOUANNA (2005). On demographic density and disease in the ancient Mediterranean, see GRMEK (1991) 95–9.

²⁴ As PADEL (1992) 98 observes of mental trauma, 'Tragedy, like medicine, is needed because something within goes wrong. Both exist to explore the casualties and consequences of things going wrong inside.' Cf. also PARKER (1983) 243–8; PADEL (1995); GILL (1996b).

fascination of viewing pain in order to encourage the audience to think about the meaning of the heroes' suffering.²⁵ The effect on the audience is manifold: the spectator is prompted to fear the effects of disease, be revolted by it, and (most of all) feel pity for the sufferer, as is perhaps clearest in the case of *Philoctetes*, where Neoptolemus' marked sympathy for the hero's pain guides that of the audience. The tragedians may go beyond the medical writers in their search for psychological, moral, religious, and philosophical reasons *why* humans suffer, but their focus on such influences as fate, chance, and the gods has an ironic and bracing effect: for while tragedy can exploit medical language to pinpoint pain and its causes, it also shows characters who cannot overcome disease and suffering (Ajax and Heracles die, while Philoctetes' cure is possible only with divine assistance).

There has been much scholarly work in recent years on 'the body', especially the female body, in ancient thought.²⁶ My focus here is more on the male body,²⁷ or rather on the suffering of three particular men, since to speak abstractly of 'the body'²⁸ risks obscuring the fact that what is of interest in tragedy is not bodies *per se*, but people, and the relationships they have with other people. Moreover, to focus solely on 'the body' would obscure the fact that physical pain is always bound up with mental suffering. So when the pain of others is communicated to us by their gestures, facial expressions, and (most of all) words, we imaginatively recreate their condition by drawing on our own experience of physical and mental discomfort.

Like any other ancient Greek genre, tragedy displays both cohesion and variety. Each of the three major tragedians has a distinct style, yet there is more to unite them than to set them apart,²⁹ and this is equally true of their transformation of medical material. All three use medical language in a variety of ways, whether to describe a particular character's pain (for example, Orestes' fear that Apollo will inflict a horrible skin-disease on him if he fails to avenge his father)³⁰ or to apply the imagery of disease to social breakdown, as when in Euripides' *Heracles* Thebes is repeatedly said to be 'sick with *stasis*'.³¹

²⁵ On the pleasurable experience of tragedy, see HALLIWELL (2011) 222–32.

²⁶ E.g. LLOYD (1983) 58–111; DEAN-JONES (1994); KING (1998); FLEMMING (2000).

²⁷ For detailed analysis of the male body in tragedy, see HAWLEY (1998); HOLMES (2008); MITCHELL-BOYASK (2008), (2012).

²⁸ As does CAWTHORN (2008).

²⁹ See most recently RUTHERFORD (2012) 399–411.

³⁰ σαρκῶν ἐπαμβατήρας, ἀγρίαις γνώθοις / λειχήνας ἐξέσθοντας ἀρχαίαν φύσιν, / λεύκας δὲ κόρσας τήνδ' ἐπαντέλλειν νόσῳ ('[The oracle predicted sicknesses] that invade the flesh, ulcers eating away its natural condition with savage jaws, and white hairs sprouting forth on this disease', Aesch. *Cho.* 280–2); for the medical language here, see GARVIE (1986) 114–15; FOWLER (2007) 310; cf. also STANFORD (1942) 54–7 and DUMORTIER (1975).

³¹ στάσει νοσοῦσαν τήνδ' ἐπεσπεσὼν πόλιν ('He [Lycus] attacked this city when it was sick with civil strife', *Her.* 34; also 272, 542); cf. BROCK (2000).

Though Aeschylus and Euripides regularly depict both madness and physical pain,³² Sophocles is notable for the way he relates the disorders afflicting Ajax, Heracles, and Philoctetes to their specific characters; or, to put it in more medical terms, madness (in the case of Ajax) and physical agony (in the case of Heracles and Philoctetes) are the symptoms of heroic suffering, whose cause is the very nature (or *physis*) of the patient himself. These heroes' diseases are beyond human medicine, not so much because they are caused by the gods (as with the delusions imposed by Athena upon Ajax), but because to overcome them would mean 'curing' the heroes of their own character.

III: The Plays

In the *Ajax* Athena drives the hero mad not only to prevent him from killing the Achaean leaders, but also to punish him for his attempt. Athena gloats over Ajax's νόσος of madness³³ and imputes to Odysseus a natural fear of mad people: μεμηνότ' ἄνδρα περιφανῶς ὀκνεῖς ἰδεῖν; ('Do you shrink from seeing a man who is manifestly mad?', *Ajax* 81). Ajax's madness is itself a form of punishment since it is a shameful state, or at least one likely to result in shameful acts. Strikingly, however, as the play progresses, the language of disease is transferred from Ajax's madness to his sense of shame.

Tecmessa speaks of the νέον ἄλγος afflicting Ajax as he realizes what he has done, and she observes how the νόσος of madness has been replaced by new agonies:

καὶ νῦν φρόνιμος νέον ἄλγος ἔχει·
τὸ γὰρ ἐσλεύσσειν οἰκεία πάθη,
μηδενὸς ἄλλου παραπράξαντος,
μεγάλας ὀδύνας ὑποτείνει.

TECMESSA: And now, though sane, he has fresh pain;
for to look upon self-inflicted sufferings,
when no one else has contributed to them,
lays before one great agonies.

(*Ajax* 259–62)³⁴

³² E. g. the madness of Orestes (Aesch. *Eum.*, Eur. *IT*, *Or.*: cf. SMITH (1967)), Heracles (*Her.*), and Agave (*Bacchae*), or the agonies of Creon and his daughter (*Medea*).

³³ ἐγὼ δὲ φοιτῶντ' ἄνδρα μανιάσιν νόσοις / ὥτρυνον, εἰσέβαλλον εἰς ἔρκη κακά ('But as the man wandered in maddening sickness, I urged him on and cast him into the nets of disaster', *Ajax* 59–60); δεῖξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανή νόσον, / ὥς πᾶσιν Ἀργείοισιν εἰσιδὼν θροῆς ('I shall show you too this disease in full view, so that you may tell all the Argives what you have seen, *Ajax* 66–7). On the opening scene's contrast between Athena's actual attitude to Ajax (made clear to Odysseus) and Ajax's deluded view of her loyalty and support (cf. 91–117), see NOOTER (2012) 32–4.

³⁴ For Ajax's madness now replaced by a new 'sickness', cf. 274–6, 279–80, 337–8.

As we saw earlier in our discussion of lines 581–2 (οὐ πρὸς ἰατροῦ σοφοῦ / θρηγνέιν ἐπωδᾶς πρὸς τομῶντι πῆματι), Ajax himself applies the idea of surgery to his shame, as if the only possible cure were suicide (cutting out the shame from his body with the sword): Ajax is, by implication, the ‘clever doctor’, but one who paradoxically takes a life (his own). The Chorus react to Ajax’s personal diagnosis (suicide is the only solution) by calling him δυσθεράπευτος (‘hard to cure’):

καί μοι δυσθεράπευτος Αἴας
ξύνεστιν ἔφεδρος, ὦμοι μοι,
θεῖα μανία ξύναιλος·

CHORUS: And Ajax, hard to cure,
is here beside me, a fresh wrestler for me to compete against³⁵ – oh! oh! –
living with a god-sent madness.

(*Ajax* 609–11)³⁶

Yet both of Ajax’s sicknesses (his madness and his suicidal shame) are tied to fundamental traits of his character, namely his desire for due honour (which he feels has been denied him) and his refusal to yield or change his mind. When Ajax makes his great speech about change and alternation (646–83), the audience know that he would have to change his very nature to continue living. In other words, Ajax *is* his sickness, and the tragedy resides in his inability to be anyone else.³⁷

In contrast to the *Ajax*, both *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes* focus much more intensely on sheer physical pain rather than madness or the mental agony of shame, and both plays associate the sickness of the hero with his being ‘wild’ or ‘bestial’, though they do it in different ways. When Deianeira asks if Heracles is still alive, Lichas replies ‘I left him alive and strong, flourishing, and not afflicted by any disease’ (ἐγὼ γέ τοί σφ’ ἔλειπον ἰσχύοντά τε / καὶ ζῶντα καὶ θάλλοντα κοῦ νόσῳ βαρύν, *Trach.* 234–5), a reply which prepares for the depiction of Heracles’ body and its destruction later in the play.³⁸

As the paragon of male strength and physical force, Heracles is the ideal figure in whom to witness the wasting and pain of disease. Hyllus’ eye-witness account of his father’s reaction to the poisoned garment is presented in strikingly medical

³⁵ The metaphor is taken from wrestling, where an ἔφεδρος denotes someone who waits to take on the winner of a contest (cf. GARVIE (1986) 283 on Aesch. *Cho.* 866–8). Since the Chorus are far less powerful than their ruler, the image foreshadows their failure to prevent Ajax’s suicide.

³⁶ For other terms of pathology and therapy applied to Ajax, cf. παραπλήκτω χειρὶ (230), φρένες διάστροφοι (447), οὐκέτι συντρόφοις / ὀργαῖς ἔμπεδος (639–40), ξὺν ἀσφαδάστω καὶ ταχεῖ πηδήματι (833), δυστράπελος (913); also n. 18 above.

³⁷ As SIMON (1978) 130 observes, ‘The poet has simultaneously portrayed a sickness that has no simple cure and a hero who must die because he can accept nothing less than a definitive cure.’

³⁸ A similarly ironic preparation for Heracles’ pain is given by the repeated references to ‘paean’ (a genre associated with healing, among other things) in the Chorus’ song at 205–24, which also uses hymeneal language to celebrate the return of Heracles to his marital home; cf. SWIFT (2010) 65, 253. The Chorus’ optimistic combination of healing and marriage foreshadows the imminent destruction of Heracles by his wife and because of his lust.

terms. Heracles suffers a ‘convulsive pain, biting into his bones’ (ἦλθε δ’ ὁστέων / ὀδαγμὸς ἀντίσπαστος, *Trach.* 769–70), and then:

κάκεινος ὥς ἤκουσε καὶ διώδυνος
 σπαραγμὸς αὐτοῦ πλευμόνων ἀνθήψατο,
 μάρψας ποδὸς νιν, ἄρθρον ἧ λυγίζεται,
 ῥίπτει πρὸς ἀμφίκλυστον ἐκ πόντου πέτραν·
 κόμης δὲ λευκὸν μυελὸν ἐκραίνει, μέσου
 κρατὸς διασπαρέντος αἵματός θ’ ὁμοῦ.

HYLLUS: When Heracles heard this [i.e. Lichas’ report of Deianeira’s gift], and a painful spasm seized his lungs,
 he grabbed him by the foot, where the joint bends in the socket,
 and hurled him onto the sea-washed rock;
 and the white brains dripped from his hair,
 as his skull was shattered and blood spattered everywhere. (*Trach.* 777–82)

The physical detail (lungs in spasm, joint and socket, dripping brains) is graphic.

Once onstage Heracles suffers a number of agonizing attacks (964ff.), and describes the poison’s effect with no less clinical precision:

πλευραῖσι γὰρ προσμαχθὲν ἐκ μὲν ἐσχάτας
 βέβρωκε σάρκας, πλεῦμονός τ’ ἀρτηρίας
 ῥοφεῖ ξυνοικοῦν· ἐκ δὲ χλωρὸν αἷμά μου
 πέπωκεν ἥδη, καὶ διέφθαγμα δέμας
 τὸ πᾶν, ἀφράστῳ τῇδε χειρωθεὶς πέδη.

HERACLES: Plastered to my sides,
 it has devoured my inmost flesh, and living within me
 it drains my bronchial tubes. It has already drunk my fresh blood,
 and my whole body is wasted,
 as I am mastered by these unspeakable shackles. (*Trach.* 1053–7)³⁹

Heracles’ lament ‘my whole body is wasted’ (1056–7) sums up the catastrophic reversal he has suffered: once the strongest of men, he is now unable to resist the pain and begs to be killed (1013–16, 1041–3, 1085–8). His complaint that the illness has made him a woman⁴⁰ not only underlines his powerlessness, but also stresses the disastrous impact of his own masculinity (or hyper-masculinity). For Deianeira had

³⁹ Further medical echoes: μελάγχολος (573, the Hydra’s poison), θρομβώδεις ἀφροί (702, the poison’s effect), διάστροφον / ὀφθαλμὸν (794–5, Heracles’ eyes roll in pain and frenzy), ἐσπάτο (786), σπασμοῖσι (805), σπασμὸς (1082, Heracles’ convulsions), ἐν δυσσπαλλάκτοις ὀδύναις (959, his inescapable pain), διήξε πλευρῶν (1083), ἦνθηκεν (1089, the growing disease), ἀναρθρος (1103, Heracles’ unhinged joints).

⁴⁰ ἴθ’, ὦ τέκνον, τόλμησον· οἰκτιρὸν τέ με / πολλοῖσιν οἰκτρὸν, ὅστις ὥστε παρθένος / βέβρυχα κλαίων, καὶ τόδ’ οὐδ’ ἂν εἰς ποτε / τόνδ’ ἄνδρα φαίη πρόσθ’ ἰδεῖν δεδρακότα, / ἀλλ’ ἀστένακτος αἰὲν εἰχόμεν κακοῖς. / νῦν δ’ ἐκ τοιούτου θήλυς ἡρῆμαι τάλας (‘Pity me, who am pitiable in the eyes of many, I who am roaring and crying like a woman, and no one could say he ever saw this man do such a thing before, for I always endured my sufferings without groaning. But now, instead, I’m found to be a pathetic woman’, *Trach.* 1070–5).

seen herself as curing Heracles from the ‘sickness’ (*nosos*) of his desire for Iole (cf. 445, 544, 553–4),⁴¹ but the man who had killed the beast-like river god Achelous (9–21) and the Centaur Nessus (562–8) because of his desire for Deianeira, and destroyed Iole’s city to possess her (351–68), is undone by his own lust, tortured by poison disguised as a love philtre, which Deianeira unwittingly applies to the robe. Heracles calls for a ‘chanter’ or ‘skilled surgeon’ to ‘charm away’ his pain (τίς γὰρ αἰοιδός, τίς ὁ χειροτέχνας / ἰατορίας, ὅς τάνδ’ ἄταν / χωρὶς Ζηνὸς κατακληθήσει;, 1000–2), but is destroyed by the ‘charm’ (κηλητήριον, 575) of Nessus, who proves to be a lethal *φαρμακεύς* (1140).⁴²

Again, as with Ajax, the hero’s sickness embodies his character: the lustful and violent Heracles, who like Achelous and Nessus combines elements of the divine (son of Zeus, civilizing hero) and the bestial (ruled by physical urges), is struck by ‘wild’ pain and disease.⁴³ The Old Man warns Hyllus:

σίγα, τέκνον, μὴ κινήσης
ἀγρίαν ὀδύνην πατρὸς ὠμόφρονος.

OLD MAN: Quiet, my son, do not stir
the wild pain of your fierce father!

(*Trach.* 974–5)

And Heracles himself cries:

θρόσκει δ’ αἶ, θρόσκει δειλαία
διολοῦσ’ ἡμᾶς
ἀποτίβατος ἀγρία νόσος.

HERACLES: It leaps up again, it leaps up
to destroy me, this miserable,
unapproachable, wild disease!

(*Trach.* 1027–30)

Disgusted by his ‘womanish tears’ (n. 40), Heracles reasserts his authority and brutal masculinity in the end, forcing Hyllus to marry Iole or else endure a paternal curse (1216–51).⁴⁴ Though Hyllus points to Iole’s part in the deaths of both his parents, Heracles’ sexual possessiveness wins out.⁴⁵ Heracles dies in agony, but

⁴¹ Deianeira claims that she will not succumb to the ‘sickness’ (*nosos*) of jealousy (491), but she is deceiving herself. ‘Has not one man, Heracles, slept with many women?’, she asks (459–60), pretending not to care, but this is the first time he has brought a conquest back to their marital home. On Deianeira’s rash decision-making and its consequences, see HALL (2009).

⁴² This point is well made by SEGAL (1981) 92–3, who discusses the ‘nightmarish inversion of real medicine’ here; cf. also GOLDHILL (2012) 16–17 on the ambiguity of *pharmaka* as both poison and cure in tragedy.

⁴³ As BIGGS (1966) 228 remarks, ‘The disease of Heracles represents the intensification of the lust inherent in his nature.’

⁴⁴ So extreme is Heracles’ demand, Hyllus wonders if he is not also afflicted by the *nosos* of madness (1230–1, 1235–6, 1241).

⁴⁵ μηδ’ ἄλλος ἀνδρῶν τοῖς ἐμοῖς πλευροῖς ὁμοῦ / κλιθεῖσαν αὐτὴν ἀντὶ σοῦ λάβῃ ποτέ, / ἄλλ’ αὐτός, ὦ παῖ, τοῦτο κήδευσον λέχος (‘Let no other man but you take the woman who

the play's closing allusions to his apotheosis (1191–1215, 1252–63)⁴⁶ suggest a consolation for his suffering and a cure beyond human medicine, thus proving his own diagnosis right, but in an unexpected way:

τίς γὰρ αἰοιδός, τίς ὁ χειροτέχνας
 ἰατροίας, ὃς τάνδ' ἄταν
 χωρὶς Ζηνὸς κατακληήσει;

HERACLES: What singer of incantations, what skilled practitioner
 of medicine will cast a spell
 over this affliction apart from Zeus?

(*Trach.* 1000–2)⁴⁷

Unlike Heracles' affliction, Philoctetes' disease is there from the start and pervades the entire play. Equally insistent is the physical realism of Philoctetes' condition: Odysseus reports that the hero was abandoned on Lemnos because 'his foot was dripping from a flesh-eating disease' (νόσῳ καταστάζοντα διαβόρῳ πόδα, *Phil.* 7), and graphic descriptions of Philoctetes' spasms and the smelly, suppurating pus oozing from his foot encourage us to share Neoptolemus' pity for him.⁴⁸ These descriptions are full of medical language:

οὐδ' ὅς θερμοτάταν αἰμάδα κηκιομένην ἐλκέων
 ἐνθήρου ποδὸς ἥπιοισι φύλλοις
 κατευνάσειε, <σπασμὸς> εἴ τις ἐμπέσοι,
 φορβάδος τι γὰς ἐλών·

CHORUS: [He had] no one to lull to sleep with gentle herbs
 the hot flux oozing from the ulcers of his infested foot,
 if a spasm should attack,
 gathering something from the nurturing earth.

(*Phil.* 696–700)⁴⁹

Philoctetes' condition also plays a fundamental role in shaping the plot, since a major attack of the disease prompts him to entrust his bow to Neoptolemus (762–81), forcing the young hero to confront his deception and tell Philoctetes the true destination of their voyage (to Troy, not back to Greece: 895–916).

has lain close to my side: make this marriage yourself, my son!', *Trach.* 1225–7); cf. ORMAND (1999) 36–59.

⁴⁶ STINTON (1990) 479–90; ALTMAYER (2001) 85–6; LEVETT (2004) 108–13 (with further bibliography).

⁴⁷ Cf. also Hyllus' words ψαύω μὲν ἔγωγε, / λαθίπονον δ' ὀδύναν οὔτ' ἐνδοθεν οὔτε θύραθεν / ἔστι μοι ἐξανύσαι βίотου· τοιαῦτα νέμει Ζεὺς (1020–2), κοῦδὲν τούτων ὅ τι μὴ Ζεὺς (1278).

⁴⁸ E. g. 38–9 (rags used as bandages, full of pus), 876, 890–1 (the evil smell of Philoctetes' sores), 1378–9 (the festering wound: using ἔμπυος, a technical word for an abscess); cf. WOMAN (2000).

⁴⁹ Cf. ἀπόπληκτος (731, Philoctetes paralysed by pain), κουφίζειν (735, the pain abates temporarily), αἰμορραγὴς φλέψ (825, blood bursting from a vein – discussed above), ἀνώδυνον (the attack is over), συμβόλαια (884, symptoms of disease), ἄρθρον (1202, 1208, limbs), νόσου μαλαχθῆς τῆσδε (1334, pain relief).

As with Ajax and Heracles, Philoctetes' disease and his response to it illuminate important aspects of his character, both positive and negative. Thus, we witness his admirable endurance of acute pain (e. g. 534–5, 1397) and his ingenuity in treating himself, making his own bandages and herbal balms to dull the agony (38–9, 649–50). But when Philoctetes refuses to go to Troy, despite being told that it is the only way to cure his disease (1329–35), we see how his hatred of the Achaeans feeds the sickness itself,⁵⁰ as if his suppurating foot were an embodiment of his festering resentment.⁵¹ And whereas the 'wildness' of Heracles' disease expressed his violence and bestiality, that of Philoctetes' underlines his isolation from his fellow Achaeans:

δύστανος, μόνος αἰεῖ,
νοσεῖ μὲν νόσον ἀγρίαν

CHORUS: miserable, always alone,
he is sick with a savage disease

(*Phil.* 172–3)

ὃν οἱ
δισσοὶ στρατηγοὶ χά' Κεφαλλήνων ἀναξ
ἔρριψαν αἰσχροῦς ὡδ' ἐρήμων, ἀγρία
νόσῳ καταφθίνοντα, τῆς ἀνδροφθόρου
πληγέντ' ἐχίδνης ἀγρίῳ χαράγματι·

PHILOCTETES: [I am Philoctetes,] whom the
two generals and the king of the Cephallenians
shamefully cast into this desolation,
wasting away with a savage disease,
struck by the savage bite of a murderous snake.

(*Phil.* 264–7)

It is therefore fitting that Philoctetes' cure and glory at Troy are associated with sociability and comradeship, as he accepts the orders of his friend Heracles to rejoin the mission and is told that neither he nor his new friend Neoptolemus can succeed without the other:

ἐλθὼν δὲ σὺν τῷδ' ἀνδρὶ πρὸς τὸ Τρωικὸν
πόλισμα πρῶτον μὲν νόσου παύσῃ λυγρᾶς,
...

καὶ σοὶ ταῦτ', Ἀχιλλέως τέκνον,
παρήνεις· οὔτε γὰρ σὺ τοῦδ' ἄτερ σθένεις
ἐλεῖν τὸ Τροίας πεδῖον οὔθ' οὔτος σέθεν·
ἀλλ' ὥς λέοντε συννόμῳ φυλάσσετον
οὔτος σὲ καὶ σὺ τόνδ'.

HERACLES: You will go with this man to the city of Troy
and first be cured of your painful sickness

...

⁵⁰ On both occasions that Philoctetes speaks of 'feeding' his insatiable sickness, he also mentions the Atreidae (313–16, 793–5).

⁵¹ Indeed, Philoctetes himself links the two ideas (disease and resentment) when he says that if he could only see his enemies destroyed, it would be like escaping the disease: ὥς ζῶ μὲν οἰκτρῶς, εἰ δ' ἴδοιμ' ὀλωλότας / τούτους, δοχοῖμ' ἂν τῆς νόσου πεφευγένας (1043–4).

And to you, son of Achilles, I give the same advice:
 for you do not have the strength to conquer the land of Troy
 without him, nor does he without you;
 no, guard each other like two lions prowling together,
 he you and you him. (Phil. 1423–4, 1433–7)⁵²

Unlike Ajax and Heracles, Philoctetes survives, but his cure requires divine intervention and the healing of Asclepius himself.⁵³

IV: Conclusion

In conclusion, Sophocles uses the language of disease to underline fundamental problems in the personality and behaviour of his protagonists.⁵⁴ Given the nature of the genre and its plots, it is not a surprise if Greek tragedy contains a lot of words for pain and disease, both mental and physical, but the concentration of medical

⁵² CLARKE KOSAK (1999) 130 argues that the reintegration of Philoctetes is also marked in the stage action by Neoptolemus supporting and touching Philoctetes at 1403ff., in contrast to 761–2, where Philoctetes refuses to be held by Neoptolemus.

⁵³ Philoctetes is just as stubborn as Ajax, and the inflexibility of both heroes is simultaneously awesome and potentially disastrous: Ajax's leads to his suicide (a calamity offset to some extent by the hero's usefulness in death, via hero-cult: cf. BURLAN (1972); HENRICH (1993)), while Philoctetes' threatens to derail the Trojan War. If Philoctetes were able to 'cure' himself by yielding to Neoptolemus' arguments, he might seem paltry and unheroic, so both his character and situation require a miraculous cure. Sophocles squares the circle by introducing Heracles as the *deus ex machina*, thereby allowing Philoctetes' heroic intransigence and concern with honour to be combined with restored solidarity among the Achaeans, ensuring the fall of Troy.

⁵⁴ The pattern is also present in *OT* and *Antigone*: the former is full of paeanic references to healing (e.g. 149–50; see SWIFT (2010) 74–90), and the disease affecting the city is eventually found to have its origins in Oedipus himself (note the grim irony of e.g. 59–61 εὖ γὰρ οἶδ' ὅτι / νοσεῖτε πάντες· καὶ νοσοῦντες, ὡς ἐγὼ / οὐκ ἔστιν ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐξ ἴσου νοσεῖ, or 216–18 ἂ δ' αἰτεῖς, τᾶμ' ἐὰν θέλῃς ἔπη / κλύων δέχεσθαι τῇ νόσῳ θ' ὑπηρετεῖν, / ἀλλήν λάβοις ἂν κἀνακούφισιν κακῶν); cf. BUDELMANN (2000) 206–31; CAIRNS (2013). In *Antigone*, Teiresias tells Creon καὶ ταῦτα τῆς σῆς ἐκ φρενὸς νοσεῖ πόλις ('The city suffers this disease as a result of your policies [lit. 'your mind']', 1015) and ταύτης σὺ μέντοι τῆς νόσου πλήρης ἔφυς ('But that [i.e. foolishness] is the disease that afflicts you', 1052), judgements which can be seen as a riposte to Creon's earlier diagnosis of a 'diseased' Antigone: οὐχ ἦδε γὰρ τοιᾶδ' ἐπεύληπται νόσῳ; ('Is not she infected with that disease? [i.e. of honouring the wicked]'), he asks Haemon (732). Commenting on the Chorus' vision of λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν Ἑρινύς ('folly of reason and a Fury of the mind', *Ant.* 603), PADEL (1992) 87 well remarks 'The immediate point here is the misfortune of Antigone's family, the Labdacids. But the fullest attention is given to the inner conditions in that family: their *phrenes*.' On *phrēn* in *Antigone* cf. also SULLIVAN (1999) 89–120. In *Electra*, the whole house is 'sick', as the Chorus diagnose: τὰ μὲν ἐκ δόμων νοσεῖται (1070; FINGLASS (2007) 430 favours ERFURDT's νοσώδη).

language at certain moments in particular plays is no accident.⁵⁵ The medical terms make the narrative more graphic, credible, and realistic, and emphasize the seriousness of the characters' predicament, whether Ajax's delusions and maddening shame, Heracles' agony and Deianeira's mistake, or Philoctetes' intransigence and resentment. The ancient *Life of Sophocles* (ch. 11) claims that he was the priest of an otherwise unknown healing hero called Halon, who was a companion of Asclepius, while other traditions link him even more closely to the god himself (*TrGF* 4 T 67–73 RADT). The connection to healing is a neat one for our purposes, but is too good to be true and almost certainly derives from Hellenistic biographical invention, partly inspired by Sophocles' composition of a paean to Asclepius (fr. 737 PMG).⁵⁶ There is, however, an undeniable and more significant connection to disease and healing in the tragedies themselves. For as we have seen, several of the surviving plays display a sustained and detailed engagement with medical language and thought, and show Sophocles (no less than Aeschylus or Euripides) to be deeply interested in the wider intellectual and scientific issues of his time.⁵⁷

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⁵⁵ *Contra* CESCHI (2002–3), (2005), (2009), Sophocles need not intend his audience to see a specific medical condition at work: thus, for example, the language of 'spasms' and 'lungs' at *Trachiniae* 777–82 and 1053–7 does not have to refer to a specific pulmonary disease (recognized by the audience) in order to have dramatic effect. Nor should we necessarily think of Sophocles or his fellow tragedians taking their medical language from a specific Hippocratic text; rather they are picking up on general cultural debates in a period when medicine is not strictly separated from philosophy or intellectual enquiry in general (cf. nn. 5 and 16 above).

⁵⁶ CONNOLLY (1998); FURLEY and BREMER (2001) 1.261–2, 2.219–21; MITCHELL-BOYASK (2012) 316–17. For the cult of Asclepius and its role in Athenian politics, see WICKKISER (2008).

⁵⁷ For Aeschylus and Euripides, see POLI-PALLADINI (2001); CLARKE KOSAK (2004); HOLMES (2010); nn. 2 and 30 above. The scientific and wider intellectual interests of Sophocles (and Aeschylus) have often been obscured by critical fixation on the 'intellectualism' of Euripides: cf. n. 8 above and ALLAN (2005).

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University College, Oxford

WILLIAM ALLAN