Ellwood Wiggins, Seattle/Washington

Cold War Compassion: The Politics of Pity in Tom Stoppard's *Neutral Ground* and Heiner Müller's *Philoktet*

At the same time on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain, two avant-garde playwrights decided to remake a 2400-year-old tragedy. Heiner Müller (1929-1996) and Tom Stoppard (1937-) are widely regarded as two of the most innovative dramatists of East Germany and Great Britain and respectively. In 1965, Stoppard submitted a script for a spy thriller to Granada TV and Müller published his first play since being banned from the East German Writers' Association in 1961. Though unbeknownst to each other and writing for drastically different purposes, media, and audiences, they both lit upon Sophocles' *Philoctetes* as the appropriate vehicle for their work. Sympathy has been recognized as central to tragedy since Aristotle's *Poetics*, and *Philoctetes* is the ultimate drama of compassion. The story of the wounded Philoctetes is an *Ur-scene* for pity in the same way that Ajax's slaughter of the sheep in his madness is a primal scene for indignation, or Orpheus' descent to the underworld, for grief. In finding their way to Philoctetes, Stoppard and Müller grapple with a fundamental problem of theatrical art.

Surprisingly, however, the two playwrights both arrive at this central crux of dramatic pity by way of detours in their theatrical careers. For Stoppard, writing for television was hack work that he undertook while he waited for a chance to write for the stage.[1] Between delivering the teleplay to Granada in 1965 and its ultimate broadcast on Thames TV in 1968, in fact, Stoppard enjoyed his first breakaway stage success with the playfully absurdist *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.* Originally commissioned as part of a longer series reimagining myths and legends, Stoppard's teleplay was the only one that eventually made it to air. Hence, though it critically examines a vital issue in theatrical theory, *Neutral Ground* was an aberrant dead-end in its medium, genre, and mythological subject.

Heiner Müller, too, saw his principal purpose in working directly with directors and theater-makers as they collaboratively revised and produced his texts for the stage. Müller felt most engaged when grappling with the urgent political and social issues of the day. In 1961, just one month after the erection of the Berlin Wall, the production of his comedy *Die Umsiedlerin* ("The Resettler"), which offered a humorous if critical portrayal of GDR farmers experiencing agrarian reform and collectivization, was canceled after the opening night. Müller's work was deemed unfit for the promotion of socialist culture, and he was effectively banned from working in East German theaters for many years. Müller's detour away from overtly political and topical material was hence largely enforced from without. It would be unfair to claim that Müller was

1 See Elissa S. Guralnick: "Stoppard's Radio and Television Plays." In: *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard.* Ed. Katherine Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68-83. This particular teleplay of Stoppard's has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. See also *The Plays of Tom Stoppard for Stage, Radio, TV, and Film.* Ed. Terry Hodgson (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001), 46-49.

banished, like Philoctetes on Lemnos, to work with mythological subjects, for he had been drawn to the Sophoclean material for over a decade. Yet Müller was certainly out of his element when *Philoktet* premiered on stage in West Germany in 1967, where he had little influence over the actualization of his ideas, and where he found the critics' and audience's enthusiastic response largely bewildering. Despite the circuitous trajectory of the play's genesis and production, its staged confluence of politics and pity found resonance in both parts of divided Germany.[2]

By paying attention to the dynamics of sympathy in Stoppard's and Müller's versions of *Philoctetes*, this essay observes how normative ideas of compassion play out in the two political systems competing for universality in the second half of the twentieth century. A comparison between the communist, capitalist, and Attic tragedies, moreover, suggests a critical politics of pity that interrogates claims about aesthetic compassion by thinkers as ideologically disparate as Bertolt Brecht and Hannah Arendt. Although the two playwrights come from opposite sides of the ideological divide, the critiques of compassion implicit in their adaptations of *Philoctetes* complement each other. The communist and the liberal democrat[3] meet on common—or perhaps neutral—ground in their shared skepticism for the efficacy and rhetoric of sympathy.

Though the connotations of 'sympathy' and 'compassion' in today's English are generally more positive than the condescension-laden 'pity,' in this essay these three terms are used more or less interchangeably. Here they refer to the phenomenon of feeling sorrow at another's suffering. 'Empathy,' in contrast, will indicate fellow-feeling regardless of the source or target emotion.[4] The seemingly indiscriminate usage of the first three terms may grate at first, but it points toward a principal conclusion that will become evident after working through the plays: the professed virtue of compassion, no less than tragic pity, involves a dynamic of superiority that makes it complicit in preserving the unequal hierarchies of the status quo in liberal democratic capitalism no less than (though through different mechanisms) in Soviet Bloc communism.

Before launching into a comparison of the texts, a brief reminder of their mythological sources is called for. Philoctetes was an archer among the Greek warriors headed for Troy when a snake bit his foot. The wound festered and refused to heal. Philoctetes' cries of anguish and the stench of his lesion disturbed his comrades and hindered the performance of religious rites. The Greeks abandoned Philoctetes on the island of Lemnos and forgot about him. Ten years later, when an oracle prophesied that Troy would only fall with the help of Philoctetes and his bow, they were forced to think of him again. All three great Attic tragedians wrote a *Philoctetes* tragedy in which Odysseus must bring the bitter archer back to Troy. In Sophocles' version, the only complete one we have, Odysseus brings Achilles' son Neoptolemus along and convinces

---

2 In marked contrast to *Neutral Ground*, Müller's *Philoktet* has attracted a host of high-quality critical attention. A helpful collection of materials about the play's evolution, production history, and critical reception can be found in Wolfgang Storch/Klaudia Ruschkowski (ed.): *Die Lücke im System*: *Philoktet Heiner Müller Werkbuch* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2005).

3 Stoppard's political commitments are hard to pin down, but can be located in the spectrum of views dedicated to values of liberal democracy. See John Bull: "Tom Stoppard and Politics." In: *The Cambridge Companion*, 136-53.

4 This usage follows Martha Nussbaum: *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 301-304, though she prefers 'compassion.' For helpful disambiguation of ancient Greek terms and their English equivalents, see David Konstan: *Pity Transformed* (Duckworth: London, 2001), 49-74.

the young hero to trick Philoctetes into giving him the bow. The plan backfires when Neoptolemus is so moved with pity for the suffering Philoctetes that he renounces deception, returns the bow, and determines to be an honest hero. No amount of persuasion or promise of a cure can convince Philoctetes to join the Greeks, however, and only the *deus ex machina* of Heracles' appearance finally resolves the stand-off.

A common interpretation of Sophocles' play involves a story of Neoptolemus coming to know himself and his true heroic nature of honest straightforwardness and fair play by means of his compassion for the noble, suffering Philoctetes. Neoptolemus' pity is instrumental in the moral education of the hero. This reading amounts to a triumph of humanism.[5] But another reading is also possible. The very fact that the play ends in a *deus ex machina* shows the limits of rational discourse and emotional appeal to heal Philoctetes' trauma and hatred. Furthermore, the pity that brings Neoptolemus to his dramatic self-recognition is short-lived and conditional. Pity played a role in making Neoptolemus a hero, but after his transformative lesson there are distinct limits to his capacity for sympathy. One of the great strengths of Sophocles' drama is that it allows for—and in fact demands—*both* the triumphant humanist reading of the power of pity and the sober reflection on the limits of human agency, virtue, and rational discourse.

Neither Stoppard's nor Müller's versions of the myth allows for so generous a reading of the humanizing potential of pity. They both pick up in very different ways on the critique of compassion implicit in Sophocles' play. To begin with the British television play, Stoppard's *Neutral Ground* turns the tale of Philoctetes into a Cold War spy thriller. With its morally ambivalent characters whose true motives and loyalties remain uncertain until the very end, Stoppard's drama owes much to the aesthetic of anti-heroic disillusionment inaugurated by John le Carré's espionage novels. Widely appreciated as an antidote to the fantastical escapades of such agents as James Bond, le Carré's works often highlight the contradictions between the rhetoric of Western democracy and the actions of its clandestine defenders. His breakaway bestseller, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold,* was released to great critical acclaim as a film in 1965, while Stoppard was working on his teleplay. Stoppard's script and camera directions clearly channel the dark stylistics of this supposedly more realistic iteration of the superpowers' undercover operations.

This noir spy genre is surprisingly appropriate for Philoctetes' story. Sophocles' version of the myth, which was first performed in Athens in the twenty-second year of its fatal war against Sparta, presents a jaded view of war's grandeur.[6] After ten years of hard and bloody fighting, Troy still stands. Odysseus struggles to convince the young, glory-hungry recruit, Neoptolemus, that heroism and honor have only managed to prolong the killing. The noble courage of the youth's dead father, Achilles, did not succeed in bringing down Troy's walls. Now only strategy and subterfuge can reliably bring the war to a successful conclusion. Odysseus' lesson to Neoptolemus in Sophocles' play is that the "still and mental parts" of combat should hold sway over

---

5 Nussbaum offers the clearest exposition of this soteriological reading of compassion in *Philoctetes*. See Nussbaum: *Upheavals,* 297-326. For other readings of the play, see Norman Austin: *Sophocles' Philoctetes and the Great Soul Robbery* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011) and Seth Schein's commentary and essay in his translation: *Philoktetes* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2003), 89-117.

6 For the connections of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* to fifth-century Athens and the Peloponnesian War, see Schein: *Philoktetes*, 26 (n. 16), 100-107.

the useless battering ram of valor. Hence it is quite fitting to set the action of the play in the "incomprehensive deeps" of the "watchful state."[7]

In *Neutral Ground*, the characters' connections with Sophocles' figures are marked by their names as well as the parallels of their dramatic interplay. Philo is a native of an unspecified country now subsumed by the Soviet Union, and he has been feeding important information to a Western intelligence agency referred to as "the factory."[8] Like Philoctetes, Philo is abandoned by his confederates as soon as he ceases to seem useful. The factory's new American boss, Otis, the Odysseus figure, judges the compromised ally to be a liability. He refuses to issue Philo a passport that would allow him to find safe haven in the West and effectually banishes him to an obscure no-man's land in the Balkans. Years later, Philo's suspect intel proves to be valid and newly urgent after all, and the factory needs him in order to follow up on it. Otis sends a young British intelligence officer, Acherson (whose name evokes *Ach*illes' *son*)[9] with an elaborate masquerade in order to convince Philo to return to the fold. Like Neoptolemus, Acherson makes a show of his genuine contempt for Otis/Odysseus in order to gain Philo's trust. When Philo discovers he has been tricked, he refuses to accompany the spies to the promise of safety in England. His caustic curses and defiant rejection of the proffered "cure" echo Philoctetes' stubborn invective against the Greeks. Instead, Philo insists on returning to his homeland in the Soviet Union, despite the almost certain death that awaits him there. Only a last-minute ploy, like Heracles' appearance at the end of *Philoctetes*, persuades Philo to board the train that will bring him back to help his erstwhile allies in their struggle against the enemy.

This summary makes *Neutral Ground* seem like the perfect marriage between Sophocles and le Carré. Yet Stoppard's teleplay differs from both of its intertextual templates in striking respects. Le Carré's spy novels often drive home the contradictions between the vaunted ideals of Western democracy and the questionable actions of governmental agents employed to defend them. Characters try to justify extreme measures (including illegal searches, theft, involuntary extradition, unlawful imprisonment, torture, murder, etc.) by adducing their necessity for the security of freedom in the face of an unscrupulous enemy. Of course the effect of le Carré's art is to call into question the legitimacy of this rhetoric, but at least some characters profess to believe it. In Stoppard's play, however, any such justification for banishing Philo is noticeably absent. Otis's frank excuse, which Acherson swallows without objection, is that the risk of rehabilitating Philo was too great to his own job prospects in the factory. There is a marked lack of any ideological underpinning to the behavior of characters. This failure even to gesture toward a greater good to motivate the actions of any of the play's figures is flagrant not only when compared to contemporary spy fiction, but also in contrast to the work of Sophocles and even Stoppard himself. Sophocles' play attains much of its dramatic tension from the competing value systems of Neoptolemus (noble courage and upright heroism), Odysseus (pragmatic efficiency in ending the war), and Philoctetes (justified indignation and resentment). Characters articulate and

7 Cited phrases are Ulysses' formulations for government surveillance in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, I.3., 200; III.3., 196-7.

8 In fact, the agency's front is a toy company, Toytown International, which proves a continuous source of sinister comedy throughout the teleplay.

9 It also echoes the compromised, controversial Cold Warrior, Dean Acheson.

develop these positions agonistically over the course of the play. Stoppard's own work, meanwhile, is also famous for eloquent and witty tirades in which his figures wax philosophical about conflicts between their motives and their morals.[10] *Neutral Ground* excises the passionate convictions from Sophocles' characters and renders them all into cynical functionaries who do not bother to trot out the tired clichés about why their measures are necessary.

The emptying-out of ideology is shocking both because of the teleplay's espionage genre and because of its debt to Sophocles. The effect, however, is to displace the drama from a dialectic of three justifiable but incompatible value systems. Instead, the dynamic element that remains in Stoppard's reworking of *Philoctetes* is the action of sympathy. There are three important differences between pity in the Greek and British dramas. In Stoppard's teleplay, compassion takes on new gender roles, ceases to be a factor in character development, and finally replaces the deus ex machina of Heracles' divine intervention.

Odysseus tutors Neoptolemus in how to deceive Philoctetes by playing upon the old warrior's loathing for the Greeks in general and Odysseus in particular. Though the wily strategist knows that he cannot let himself be seen by Philoctetes for the ruse to work, he ends up having to enter the scene after Neoptolemus has successfully obtained the bow in an attempt to save his plan from ruin by the young man's pity. Acherson employs a similar strategy with Philo in *Neutral Ground*, gaining the old man's trust by revealing their mutual hatred for Otis. But the teleplay's audience never sees Otis teach Acherson how to play this role, nor is the American spy anywhere near the scene of persuasion with Philo. Instead, Acherson is accompanied by Carol, who seems to be his wife, but who is also later revealed to be a spy. This new female figure has two opposing functions in Stoppard's version of the Philoctetes story. For one thing, she is indispensable in Acherson's attempt to gain Philo's confidence. When Philo realizes this in the last minutes of the play, he is "*stunned*" (s.d.). "So much deception," he cries. "Was it all necessary?" "Why not?" Acherson replies, "It was Carol who got through your distrust, wasn't it?" (126).[11] The seeming innocence of Philo's flirtation with Acherson's bored young wife makes him believe they are acting in good faith. Hence erotic objectification and assumptions about female agency are instrumental to the success of the plot.

But Carol's presence is necessary not only as a sex object to lure Philo. Acherson also needs her to complete his mission. After a long night of hard drinking, Acherson manages to get Philo to confide in him about his grievances with Otis, and then returns to the room he shares with Carol. He is clearly disturbed.

> ACHERSON: … People like that … what does one do about them?
> (*The note in his voice brings her up.*)
> CAROL: He upset you.
> ACHERSON: He did a bit.
> CAROL: You're sorry for him?

---

10 The very next teleplay printed after *Neutral Ground* in the collection of Stoppard's television plays, *Professional Foul* (which is dedicated to Vaclav Havel), is an excellent example of characters' incisive ruminations on their personal and political responsibilities.

11 Tom Stoppard. *Neutral Ground:* in: Tom Stoppard: *The Television Plays 1965-1984* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).

ACHERSON: I suppose so.
CAROL: You can't afford to be sorry for people. Not if there's nothing you can do about it.
ACHERSON: He'd like to leave. I offered to put in a word for him at home, but he didn't go for that.
CAROL: Oh … perhaps he'll change his mind.
ACHERSON: He doesn't like us.
CAROL: He likes me. Let's not talk about him. (*She comes over to his bed, wearing only underwear, and kisses him tamely.*) It's better than the hotel now.
ACHERSON: Is it?
CAROL: More sordid. (*She kisses him again.*) Much better.
(*He starts to respond.*) [End of scene, 111]

First-time viewers do not know that Carol is 'in' on the operation, and the scene can play as a dutiful wife comforting her hapless husband. Spectators who have witnessed Carol coldly leaving Acherson at the train station after the completion of their job at the show's end will re-read this scene quite differently. It is clear that Carol suspects Acherson to be wavering in his resolve to do what needs to be done. She first gives him a warning lesson about the limits of pity: "You can't afford to be sorry for people." And then she distracts him from his scruples with sex. Carol indeed offers her body "dutifully" here, but not in deference to a husband. She performs her duty to the agency by seducing Acheron away from the compassion that might impede his job with Philo. The stereotype of devoted wife is exchanged for that of a *femme fatale*.

Carol thus plays the role of Odysseus much more successfully than the wily Ithacan manages to do in Sophocles' tragedy. Odysseus ultimately fails to persuade either Neoptolemus or Philoctetes to go along with his plans. Carol easily manipulates both Acherson and Philo to comply with hers. Sophocles' play is one of competing father figures: both Odysseus and Philoctetes vie for the allegiance of Achilles' son. Stoppard's teleplay skews these paternity test dynamics by introducing a female figure who deflects the action of pity with calculated sexuality. In the eighteenth century, G.E. Lessing complained that French neo-classical versions of Greek tragedies inevitably tacked on a gratuitous love interest.[12] Just as these additions of innocent young maids speak volumes about the desires of eighteenth-century (male) audiences, Stoppard's *femme fatale* is indicative of the anxieties and fantasies surrounding the female imaginary of the twentieth century.

Yet the double-edged feminization of pity is not its only remarkable metamorphosis in *Neutral Ground.* In Sophocles' tragedy, compassion is the prime motivating factor for Neoptolemus' self-actualizing development. It is by observing the magnitude of Philoctetes' undeserved suffering that Neoptolemus comes to a conscious decision to act according to a code in stark contrast to the one Odysseus has advocated. Pity brings Neoptolemus to accept the mantle of his father's heroism and reject Odysseus' pragmatic deceptiveness. The young hero feels bad for having lied to Philoctetes, and in a powerful peripeteia, returns the bow he had tricked away from the injured warrior. In Stoppard's teleplay, meanwhile, though Acherson does feel sorry for the betrayed Philo, he never actually reverses course in an attempt to help him. The closest he comes is in a brief confrontation with his superior, Otis, about Philo's plight.

12 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: *Laokoon.* In: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: *Werke.* Vol. 5/2 (Deutscher Klassiker Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1990), 43. In Chateaubrun's *Philoctète* (1755), Philoctetes has a daughter with whom Neoptolemus falls in love.

> ACHERSON: … He's a sick old man who probably shortened his life by the number of years he's worked for us and then got kicked out for his pains. You can't make it *good* now.
> OTIS: (*Losing patience*) I'm not here to make things good. And nor are you. What the hell do you think I'm running—a compensations board? He was the victim of an accident and he wasn't insured, and it was a pity for him, and you don't like it. Well, *I* don't like it. But he can't go home now because the first time he gets drunk, or the third, or the fortieth, he's going to confide in someone again; and if they find out what it is we've got, then what we've got is no *good* any more. Do you understand *that*?
> ACHERSON: Yes. Yes, I suppose I do. (120)

Like Odysseus, Otis is undisturbed by the hatred Acherson freely expresses toward himself. All he cares about is that the young spy "just deliver." To which Acherson duly acquiesces, "Oh yes, I'll deliver" (119). And deliver he does.

Spectators familiar with Sophocles' play will expect an equivalent to the moment when a repentant Neoptolemus returns the bow to the victimized Philoctetes. In *Neutral Ground* this turning point seems to come when Philo is about to board a train he thinks will take him to back to his homeland. At the last minute, "ACHERSON *stands up and with a sudden decision* […] *shouts*: […] Otis is on that train!" (124). Philo, incensed and hurt, spits in Acherson's face, just as Philoctetes initially reacted to Neoptolemus' sudden honesty. But a final exposé in the closing scene of the show reveals that Acherson's admission was part of a carefully scripted act. In an ultimate le Carré-esque twist, the seeming conversion to genuine authenticity proves to be one more layer of the spy's deception. Otis needs Philo to come voluntarily to England, and Acherson's sudden candor is the first step in a ploy to secure Philo's consent.

Thus Stoppard's play appears to jettison pity as an effective motivating force altogether. In the context of Cold War superpower politics, the teleplay would suggest, compassion is not only problematic, but entirely insufficient to effect any change even for individuals. *Philoctetes* is often read as a proto-*Bildungsroman* in dramatic form, and Stoppard's version nips any such interpretation in the bud. In so far as one reads *Neutral Ground* as a commentary on the potential of sympathy to accomplish moral growth and personal transformation, this conclusion is inevitable. Yet a closer look at the end of the teleplay reveals that compelling pity has not been entirely expunged, but rather has migrated away from the Neoptolemus figure to that of Philoctetes.

After seeming to warn Philo about the trap waiting for him on the train, Acherson plays a further scene with Carol and Otis in which he is severely reprimanded and warned of the dire consequences for his insubordination upon their return to Britain. Against his will, Philo begins to worry about Acherson's fate: "They'll break you for this" (127). Though he knows he may be being manipulated (Philo repeatedly begs Acherson for the truth), in the end he cannot bear the thought of causing the young man's punishment. At the last minute he "runs after Acherson as the train starts to move" (127). In the final analysis, therefore, pity does induce a character to make a startling and radical moral choice after all. But instead of the Neoptolemus-figure, it is the Philoctetes-character who is moved by pity. True, this is no pure or selfless brand of sympathy—Philo himself characterizes it as "blackmail." Yet without compassion for Acheron's imagined suffering, Philo would never have given up his determined course to return home and voluntarily joined the hated intelligence officers who had betrayed him.

In effect, pity itself is the *deus ex machina* in Stoppard's teleplay. In Sophocles' tragedy, no amount of persuasion, inducement, promise of cure, or rational argument

can prevail upon the embittered Philoctetes to board the boats of the Greeks. Only the divine intervention of Heracles' injunction from on high overcomes Philoctetes' traumatized obstinacy and cajoles him to embark with Odysseus to Troy. In *Neutral Ground,* the British and American agents do not even bother trying to convince Philo to join them for the sake of a greater good. By stripping away all ideological justification and rhetoric, Stoppard's teleplay lays bare the theatrical pity at the basis of Western democracy's extralegal operations of self-preservation. In order to retrieve the intelligence necessary to maintain their competitive edge over the enemy, the spies place their trust in one man feeling sorry for another. They engineer a scenario and play roles to goad Philo into hectic and unwilling pity. In this particular battle, coerced compassion—theatrical pity itself!—is the god in the machine that saves the day for the free world.

The political import of the play's reliance on pity will come into sharper focus when compared to the dynamics of compassion in another reworking of Sophocles' tragedy published in 1965. Though Heiner Müller's *Philoktet* shares the same setting, characters, and situation as Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, a brief summary of the action shows that its plot departs more radically from the ancient template than Stoppard's modern spy thriller. The German play roughly follows the Greek plot until the return of the bow, after which Neoptolemus ends up killing Philoctetes from behind, and Odysseus carries his corpse for its propaganda potential back to Troy. Clearly no humanistic *bildungsroman* is in the cards here. Yet in its dramatic constellation and artful language, Müller's play is decidedly Sophoclean. Each character has a distinct way of perceiving the world, and the three perspectives collide throughout the play. The verbal shards of these collisions fall into scintillating mosaics that make up the dialogue of the drama. The dizzying cleverness of the back-and-forth stichomythia and the powerful expressiveness of the longer speeches harken back to the style and vatic wisdom of Sophocles' tragedies.

After the play first premiered in Munich in 1968—it could not be staged in Müller's native East Germany until 1977—Western commentators delighted in it as a biting parody of Eastern Bloc communism. They saw Odysseus as the ultimate Stalinist functionary, Neoptolemos as the young idealist headed for corruption, and Philoktet as the individual broken by the system.[13] Müller himself was surprised by these interpretations, and they are certainly far too reductive for his rich and multi-valent text. But the instinct to find in the characters three attempts to articulate and come to grips with irreconcilable world views is not off the mark. If Stoppard's figures stand out for their utter lack of ideological justification, Müller's characters wrap every intimation of action in language that invokes—while questioning the legitimate coherence of—justifying principles. Stoppard's ideological silence leaves bare the transformed actions of pity in the reworked myth. Müller's ideological surfeit allows each character to be pinned down in concrete utterances *about* pity, but can serve to hide the logic of sympathy as it plays out in the intersubjective performances of the figures. Attention to the characters' linguistic and performative rhetoric, however, reveals three important conclusions about both individual and communal compassion. First, personal sympathy in Philoktet and Neoptlolemos devolves into self-pity. Second, though Odysseus

13 See Storch/Ruschkowski (ed.): *Lücke,* 122.

clearly diagnoses the egotistical foundation of individual pity, he himself works in the service of collective compassion. Third, the play offers and then deconstructs a common intellectual history from the ancient to the modern emotion of sympathy.

Before turning to the three characters Müller adopts from Sophocles, it is illuminating to see which ones he leaves out. A simple glance at the two *dramatis personae* makes a first important difference obvious: the chorus of sailors, the merchant, and Heracles are missing. Müller boils the conflict of the play down to its triadic core, removing any possibility of a divine intervention. Even more critical than the absent demigod for the dynamics of pity, however, is the removal of the sailors. The chorus in Sophocles' play amplifies the pity that Neoptolemus feels at Philoctetes' misery. Most fundamentally, the chorus doubles the external audience. As judging and commenting spectators to Neoptolemus' interactions with Philoctetes, they frame the action of compassion in a performative space. For Aristotle, the passions in general and pity in particular are always already interactive scenes between people.[14] Sophocles' tragedy (re-)enacts sympathy as a performative configuration, and the chorus of sailors makes this reenactment visible.[15] Müller's ridding the drama of this meta-theatrical layer opens the door to non-scenic conceptions of fellow-feeling. An individual's interiority became the commonly imagined locus for empathy by the twentieth century. As will become clear below, Müller's *Philoktet* both demonstrates and deconstructs this modern understanding of shared emotion.

In Sophocles, Philoctetes' first imperatives to the new stranger on his island are "take pity on me […] speak to me" (227).[16] These two commands draw an immediate connection between language and sympathy. The mere act of establishing communication sets up a stage on which compassion can be played out. Philoctetes will echo this initial plea many times during his speeches. Müller's Philoktet spurns pity. Before even hearing Neoptolemos speak, he asks "Mit welcher Sprache, Hund, lerntest du lügen/" (20).[17] Language is equated with lying: to speak is to lie. In parallel rhetorical imperatives, Philoktet demands "Red, Grieche." Two lines later this becomes, "Lüg, Grieche." When Philoktet finally shuts up so that Neoptolemos has a chance to fulfill his request with speech (which incidentally does turn out to be a lie), Philoktet immediately counters, "Schweig, Grieche" (22-23).[18] For Philoctetes, language creates the potential for scenes of emotion between people; for Philoktet, the precondition for communication is the inevitability of prevarication.[19]

---

14 See Aristotle: *Rhetoric.* Trans. John Freese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) II.8.

15 For the understanding of Aristotelian *mimesis* as reenactment, see Stephen Halliwell: *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1986), 128.

16 Sophocles: *Philoctetes.* Trans. David Grene. In: *Greek Tragedies.* Vol. 3, Ed. Grene and Lattimore (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960).

17 "With what language, dog, did you learn to lie/" Heiner Müller: *Philoktet* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969). Cited parenthically by page number. Translations mine. Line endings in the play often function as syntax indicators in lieu of punctuation, hence they are indicated in all citations with the forward slash. The spellings Philoctetes/Philoktet and Neoptolemus/Neoptolemos will differentiate below between characters without the tiresome repetition of Sophocles' Neoptolemus and Müller's Philoktet. The spelling of "Odysseus" unfortunately does not allow for this shorthand.

18 "Speak, Greek." "Lie, Greek." "Be silent, Greek."

19 For the relationship of lying and language in the play, see Rainer Nägele: "Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn." In: Storch/Ruschkowski (ed.): *Lücke*, 268-280. See also Markus Wilczek's insightful analysis of Philoktet's language in *Das Artikulierte und das Inartikulierte* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 38-59.

This philosophy of language perhaps accounts for Philoktet's penchant for cursing. Whereas Philoctetes politely asks the stranger, "what countrymen may I call you without offense?" (222), Philoktet opens up with a burning blaze of insults, calling the newcomer "Ding," "Zweibein," "Hund," son of a bitch ("welche Hündin warf dich in die Welt").[20] Philoctetes is also generous with his insults, but only to those he knows to be his enemies, such as Odysseus. Philoktet lashes out at every human creature. Even the hope that the stranger might give him passage off of his rocky island, which for Philoctetes was a hesitant but passionate request, preceded by all manner of fawning and self-abnegation, becomes for Philoktet a contemptuous assumption that doesn't even merit the respect of an imperative, much less the civility of a question: "Sei der du bist, ein Lügner, Mörder, Dieb/ Du hast ein Schiff, mehr brauch ich nicht von dir/"[21] Yet the effect of all this sneering bile is fascinating to Neoptolemos, perhaps because of its contrast to Odysseus' persuasive rhetoric, and because curses seem to avoid the fate of falsehood with which Philoktet imputes all other types of language. Only curses can be true.

In Sophocles' play, Philoctetes asks after the health of the Greeks he knew, among them Thersites, "one quite unworthy but dexterous and clever with his tongue … who never was content to speak once only, though no one was for letting him speak at all" (442-5). Müller's Philoktet fits this description perfectly, and in his verbose contempt for humanity is much more akin to Shakespeare's endlessly and creatively cursing Thersites than to Sophocles' Philoctetes. Yet whereas Thersites is the only character in *Troilus and Cressida* who tells the truth, Philoktet is the only figure in Müller's play who sees honesty as an impossible, fetishized chimera. If it is in fact true that no one can speak without lying, then even Philoktet's statements to this effect must veer off at cross-purposes. His claims about pity demonstrate this slippage quite nicely.

Far from entreating pity as Philoctetes does, Philoktet makes a point of decrying the uselessness of compassion and claiming not to feel it. "Den Staub in Fleisch wandelt kein Tränenguß."[22] Tears of pity will never return life to the lifeless. Two lines later he claims, "Mein Aug hat Wasser nur für einen Leichnam/" (26)[23] The rhetorical implication of this phrase is that Philoktet feels pity for no one. Yet several pages earlier, when Philoktet is narrating the way he was injured in service to the Greeks, he complains "Und Griechen sahns und rührten keine Hand" (21).[24] In other words, the scene of pity that should have been triggered when his compatriots saw Philoktet's wound did not move them to help. There was a misfiring of pity: the sight of suffering did not move any body to action. In this passage that bemoans the failure of compassion, Philoktet continues, "Mit Augen siehst du was vom Griechen blieb / Ein Leichnam, der sich nährt von seinem Grab" (21).[25] In quick succession, Philoktet deplores the lack of pity and calls himself a corpse. With the echo of this passage in mind, Philoktet's later claim that would shed tears only for a dead body takes on a new resonance. Instead of merely denying all pity, Philoktet in effect admits to having only self-pity.

---

20 "Thing," "two-leg," "dog," "What bitch threw you into the world."
21 "Whoever you may be, a liar, murderer, thief / You have a ship, I don't need anything else from you/".
22 "No pouring of tears ever turned dust into flesh."
23 "My eye has water only for a corpse/".
24 "And the Greeks saw it and did not move a hand."
25 "With eyes you see what remained of the Greek / A corpse that nourishes itself from its grave."

Philoktet's language proves to be a lie, but one that tells a different truth. Furthermore, it is only by listening attentively to the lying language that the deflected truth of this lie is revealed.

In Sophocles' play, both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus are brought back to the original noble natures from which they had strayed, in the latter's case seduced by Odysseus' urgings to lying and deceit, and in the former's, compelled by years of hardship and the keenly felt experience of repeated treachery. Neoptolemos is restored to his upright nature by the action of pity for the sufferings of another, while Philoctetes is such a hard case that divine intervention is required. Philoktet for Müller remains incurable – that is, irreconcilable to a society that betrays and then courts him. But how does Neoptolemus' noble pity fare in Müller's play? Odysseus warns Achilles' son about the dangers of getting carried away by sympathy: "Fürchte sein Elend mehr als seinen Bogen./ Nur blind für seine Wunde heilst du die/ Nur taub für seinen Jammer stillst du den" (19)[26] Later on when he demands the bow from Neoptolemus, he says, "Gib seine andre Waffe mir, den Bogen/" (45).[27] If the bow is Philoktet's "other weapon," then his primary weapon is pity, and it proves even more potent than Heracles' bow. Yet Philoktet never asks to be pitied, nor in his pointed offensiveness acts in a way likely to inspire compassion. How then can weaponized sympathy work to realign Neoptolemos to his true nature? Again Odysseus provides a solution to the puzzle. When the eager young man asks what his mission is, Odysseus answers "Daß du in unsrer Sache dich nicht schonst" (12).[28] Neoptolemos replies that he's not afraid to die, and Odysseus counters that "Noch Andres das dir mehr sein mag als Leben."[29] It is quite literally the reflexive (and reflective) "dich" (yourself) that Odysseus wants Neoptolemos not to protect. That is, Neoptolemos should not take it easy on his precious conception of himself as noble warrior. Heroes of his ilk gladly sacrifice their lives for the sake of this self-conception and imagined reputation. When Achilles' son gives the bow back to Philoktet, he speaks not of pity or compassion, but admits that he does not want that "dein kommendes Geschick mir auch/ Wie dein vergangenes dem [Odysseus], die Hände fleckt."[30] He is concerned not so much for Philoktet as he is for his own self-understanding as a noble hero. Just as Philoktet's claimed lack of sympathy turns out to be self-pity, self-pity too is the driving force behind Neoptolemos' ennobling compassion.

Odysseus is the one character in Müller's piece who seems able to see through both positive and negative assessments of sympathy to recognize the self-pity engine at their core. His keen insight into the structure of compassion leads to its most damning denunciation: "Spuck aus dein Mitgefühl, es schmeckt nach Blut/" (45).[31] In addition to the self-serving facets that he diagnoses in Neoptolemos' pity for Philoktet, Odysseus goes on to insist that individual compassion brings suffering and even death to others. "Und jeder Augenblick, versäumt hier, tötet/ In der entfernten Schlacht uns

26 "Fear his misery more than his bow / Only when blind to his wound can you heal it / Only when deaf to his wailing can you quieten it."
27 "Give me his other weapon."
28 "That you don't spare yourself in our cause."
29 "Something else that may be more to you than life."
30 "Your future fate to stain my hands as your past fate [stained Odysseus']."
31 "Spit out your compassion, it tastes like blood/".

einen Mann" (39).[32] By giving way to his heroic pity for one man on Lemnos, Neoptolemos is selfishly sacrificing the lives of his comrades back at Troy. In both Sophocles and Müller, Odysseus is adamant about his commitment to an 'ends justify the means' policy, where his end is the speedy and successful conclusion of the war,[33] but Müller additionally makes Odysseus' overriding concern for the value of human lives (plural) explicit. Indeed the masses of soldiers are much more present in Müller's play than in Sophocles': in the German version Neoptolemus and Philoktet are needed by the Greeks not for any special powers they have or because of any mysterious oracles, but for the very practical reason that they can better incentivize and lead the troops from their respective homelands. Odysseus is motivated primarily by a calculus where the good of the many trumps sorrow for the few. Odysseus thus exhibits a pragmatic, social brand of compassion, where the survival and success of his fellow Greeks is an end that justifies many manners of means.

Yet the play cannot be boiled down to the simple old conflict between the rights of the individual and the needs of society. Neoptolemos does not end up killing Philoktet to serve the greater good. Instead, it is another mutation of pity that makes his murder necessary. Once Philoktet retrieves his bow while Neoptolemos and Odysseus squabble, he suddenly has the two men at his mercy. Like any good nemesis worth his weight in dramatic suspense, he does not kill his rival right away, but launches into several monologues first. Philoktet turns to Odysseus and adjures him to endure the suffering he has experienced on Lemnos. This remarkable speech culminates when Philoktet shoots a vulture with his bow to fall at the feet of Odysseus, demanding that the Ithacan should eat it and learn to scream and writhe in the agony of pain and isolation. In short, Philoktet desires not that Odysseus pity him, but rather that the *feel what he feels.* Philoktet demands empathy. This word was coined in English in 1907 as a translation for the German term *Einfühlung* (literally: feeling into) that had become an important terminological innovation in psychology and phenomenology around the turn of the century.[34] As opposed to the ancient understanding of pity as an external relationality (as Sophocles' *Philoctetes* demonstrates), "empathy" is prevalently understood as an internal subjective phenomenon. Rather than being constituted by an entire scene of relating people, it is the direct interior experience of another's feelings.

This conception of empathy was especially important for Freud, and took on a central role in his prescriptions for psychoanalysis. Though Philoctetes refuses to accept the older forms of pity, he still wants Odysseus to empathize with his trauma. In fact, Philoktet forces Odysseus into the role of therapist by coercing him to listen. Philoktet's speeches here mimic a Freudian "talking cure."[35] It would seem, then, that *Philoktet* has duly translated the external Greek pity of *Philoctetes* into its modern manifestation as internal empathy. Yet the text resists this easy and plausible intellectual history with two unavoidable gestures. In the first place, this culminating speech during which Philoktet begins compelling Odysseus to experience his trauma is the

32 "And every moment wasted here kills / one of our men in the distant battle."

33 E.g., "What I seek in everything is to win …" (1052).

34 For a good account of the terminological history, see Remy Debes: "From *Einfühlung* to Empathy." In: *Sympathy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 286-322.

35 Though Philoktet's "talking cure" is meant to be lethal to the listening therapist.

moment of Neoptolemos' stunning peripeteia. The youth, who had only just returned the bow to Philoktet in a magnanimous gesture, now "takes up his sword and runs it through Philoktet's back" (50). The young idealist is willing to partake of pity, but the prospect of empathy is so dangerous that it requires him to murder its proponent.

Even more perplexing, however, is the way Philoktet prefaces his mission to make Odysseus feel his pain. Neoptolemos offers his own life in place of Odysseus', and Philoktet refuses with this startling speech:

> Auch brauch ich dein Gesicht
> Zum Spiegel jetzt, daß ich den aufhörn seh
> Mit deinen Augen eh du aufhörst auch.
> Warum hat mir der Gott verweigert Augen
> Zu sehen meine eignen sehnden Augen
> Warum dem Augenblick die Dauer? Könnt ich
> Sein letztes Bild aus deinen Augen graben
> Dir aus den Ohren seinen letzten Schrei. (49)[36]

This passage cites and subverts the classic Platonic image of coming to know oneself through one's reflection in the eyes of a friend.[37] But now Philoktet needs Neoptolemos' eye as a mirror for the expiring and suffering Odysseus. Philoktet requires a third party to witness his empathetic talking cure. The idealized interiority of empathy is revealed to entail a spectator from the beginning. The immediacy of internal feeling turns out to rely on the mediation of an externalized scene all along.

Appropriately enough for a play whose title character expounds a theory of language in which all utterances betray themselves and are deflected to other stages, Müller's *Philoktet* discloses contradictions in the core of both ancient and modern sympathy. The former cannot escape the logic of self-pity and the latter reneges on its promise of feeling another's emotions. The Aristotelian scene of pity collapses into the wish fulfillment of a single subject while modern interiority expands to involve a triangulated stage of inter-actors.

Now that the dynamics of sympathy have become visible in both adaptations of *Philoctetes*, it becomes possible to see their complementary political import. Two mid-century opponents of sympathy will help make Stoppard's relation to Müller in this respect even clearer. Bertolt Brecht's critique of the individual exercise of pity is evident in many of his works.[38] In *Die Maßnahme* (*The Measures Taken*), a young communist provocateur in China fails in his mission to agitate for the revolution that will bring betterment to *all* oppressed workers because of his misguided pity for the few he encounters in person. The satirical treatment of Peachum's beggars' racket in the *Three-Penny Opera*, meanwhile, demonstrates how the arousal of pity is tantamount to the survival of capitalist society. For Brecht, individual compassion is a

---

36 "Also I need your face / for a mirror now, so that I can see him cease / with your eyes before you also cease. / Why did God deny me eyes / to see my own seeing eyes / why [did he deny] duration to the moment? If only I could / gouge his last image out of your eyes / [and] his last scream out of your ears."

37 See the end of *Alcibiades I.* This topos became a commonplace in the Renaissance, and is scattered throughout Shakespeare. Just think of Cassius' ploy to persuade Brutus in *Julius Caesar* ("I, your glass" I.ii., 68), or Ulysses' lesson to Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida* (III.3).

38 Brecht is also critical of the aesthetic production of sympathy in the theater [*Schriften zum Theater* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1957), 61-64.] The scenic composition of pity in *Philoctetes* pointedly invites a combined interrogation of aesthetic pity with its individual emotional make-up, but that is a task for another essay.

suspect emotion that props up the status quo and obstructs the necessary systemic change that could actually help people. Hannah Arendt, meanwhile, has no problem with individual or theatrical pity. In her comparative study of revolutions, however, she zeroes in on collective sympathy as one of the most decisive differences between what she saw as the success of the American and the failure of the French (and Russian) revolutions. In the latter, the rhetoric of sympathy for the teeming, suffering masses led to rash attempts to correct the sensationalized injustices. The drastic policies enacted to right these wrongs had unintended and unforeseeable consequences. Sympathy, then, led (circuitously but inevitably) to the Reign of Terror and the Stalinist purges.[39] Hence the communist Brecht condemns compassion for individuals and the liberal Arendt is suspicious of sympathy for the masses. Surprisingly, Stoppard's play echoes Brecht's critique while Müller's engages with Arendt's.

Neutral Ground ends up being an indictment of the invisible price paid for the survival of Western democracies. By making Philo's personal sympathy for Acherson the *deus ex machina* that saves the British and American intelligence operation, the play posits pity as a manipulative aesthetic that brings about the human sacrifice required to secure liberal democratic values from their enemies. Philo is the victim of and oblation to the free society that, in order to remain free, cannot grant him freedom. Pity is the coercive force that makes his immolation possible. A more Brechtian condemnation of individual compassion hand in hand with liberal democracy is hardly thinkable.

Müller's *Philoktet*, as seen above, provides a critical analysis of interpersonal pity and empathy that is even more nuanced and cogent than Brecht's. Yet it is difficult to arrive at a satisfactory reading of the political aspects of sympathy in the play. The West German scholars for whom Odysseus is a Stalinist functionary would certainly see Arendt's suspicion of collective sympathy vindicated in Odysseus' repeated concern for the masses of soldiers suffering and dying on the plains of Troy. His sympathy for the many then simply provides a rhetorical smokescreen to justify violence and deceit. Yet if one reads Odysseus as the "most important, most tragic figure in the play,"[40] then other vistas open up on Arendt's collective sympathy.

The justificatory force of mitigating and shortening the misery of common soldiers is only one of the uses to which Odysseus puts his sympathy with the masses. In fact, imagining how symbols and stories will make various factions of people feel is the primary mode by which Odysseus operates. This enlarging capacity to feel 'groupthink' explains his continued possession of Achilles' armor against the claims of Ajax and Neoptolemos (15), and it motivates his final act of schlepping Philoktet's body back to Troy. Odysseus is certainly no revolutionary. His sympathies for crowds serve instead to prop up and strengthen the powers that be. This complicates the simple bifurcation in Arendt's analysis of collective compassion. In his unhesitant willingness to bolster

---

39 See Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 53-110. The American revolution, in contrast, was undertaken by a wealthier class for the sake of its own economic interests, and hence the framers of the constitution were able to spend their intellectual energies on the problem of creating lasting, balanced institutions that included mechanisms for gradual change rather than trying to fix all of society's inequalities in one fell legalistic swoop. Nevertheless, Arendt's view of the success of the American Revolution remains very critical, as the majority of citizens are left out of direct political deliberation and action.

40 Storch/Ruschkowski (ed.): *Lücke*, 122. This is Müller's own reading of Odysseus. One need not be subservient to an author's claims about her own work, of course, but they can at least invite one to read differently or again if they seem surprising.

the state with fabricated tales and skillful propaganda, Odysseus would seem to fulfil Arendt's dire prognostications for those who rely on group sympathy: they tend to stymie any open access to the kind of participatory discourse she holds necessary for true political action. The deus ex machina in *Philoktet* is the propagandistic use to which Odysseus puts Philoktet's corpse. The patriotic story he invents to motivate the soldiers will silence their questions and debate. Perhaps the tragedy of Müller's Odysseus is an Arendtian one after all: his adroit but necessary lies in the service of the commiserated multitude effectually block their potential participation in the political process.

Pity itself plays out the political tragedy of the two dramas. In *Neutral Ground*, which ignores collective pity, individual compassion is the unjust sacrifice that liberal democracy demands to secure justice for its citizens. In *Philoktet*, which reveals the insufficiency of ancient and modern conceptions of individual sympathy, the rhetoric of collective compassion, historically used to incite revolutions against unjust systems, instead serves to perpetuate the oppressive power of injustice. These roles of pity in maintaining the status quo mark the great difference of the modern dramas from Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. In the ancient tragedy, pity introduces the potential for change and moral growth. In both modern dramas, sympathy brings about the final peripeteia that allows the continuance of the existing system. In this way, the plays exhibit an attitude prevalent on both ideological sides of the Cold War: a sense that the prevailing order of things is inalterable.[41] Remarkably, however, both plays lay this systemic inevitability at the feet of tragic pity.

In a criss-crossing of Cold War compassion, therefore, the communist theorist reveals what's at stake in the liberal democrat's tragedy, and vice versa. But the resulting chiasmus does not deliver a tidy lesson. Like Sophocles before them, Müller and Stoppard make legible the problems involved in the dynamics of pity. Spy thriller or Trojan myth, these 1960s versions of *Philoctetes* underscore the contradictions inherent in current conceptions of sympathy as well as the power imbalances implicit in constellations of its action in the world. Yet unlike Sophocles, the modern playwrights do not offer a vision of compassion that can offer hope despite its attendant troubles and pitfalls.

41 This fatalism forces a reevaluation of modern notions of the tragic. Christoph Menke has employed *Philoktet* in just such a rehabilitation of the tragic for modernity by stressing the ironical relation between play and judgment in great tragedies from Sophocles' *Oedipus* to Müller's *Philoktet*. See *Die Gegenwart der Tragödie: Versuch über Urteil und Spiel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), 203-214. Stoppard's *Neutral Ground* invites a complementary reading in its generic play between spy noir and black comedy. The KGB agents, appropriately named Laurel and Hardy, seem to be on a collision course with Philo throughout the teleplay as the 'Sophoclean' scenes intercut with the sinister humor of the agents zeroing in on their target. In a final laugh, Acherson kills them both with what they think is a toy gun. The "toy factory" of the Western intelligence agency echoes the German pun between the meanings of 'Spiel' in Menke's title: play, game, and drama. The fatal weakness of the Soviet spies is their inability to see the real danger in pretend play.