

CORRESPONDENCE

Professor O. Mandel writes:

Regarding the review by Mr P. G. Mason (*CR* 33 (1983), 314) of my *Philoctetes and the Fall of Troy* (University of Nebraska Press, 1981), a few observations may be of interest to your readers. Mr Mason either failed to notice, or noticed but failed to report, that a central theme is elaborated in this book. This theme is restated a number of times, but I shall give only the passage (p. 146) which concludes the iconographical survey:

Most significant of all, no one sought out the heart of Sophocles to portray the pivotal scene... of Neoptolemus returning the bow to Philoctetes. Once again I note the astonishing blotting out of this scene from those who tangled with the Philoctetes matter from the time of Sophocles himself (if the surviving evidence is representative) to the second half of the nineteenth century... The notion of a betrayal of the Greek cause in the name of a higher ideal never hove into view.

I have quoted at length, because a review which 'forgets' to mention this theme is rather like the proverbial *Hamlet* without the Prince.

I will also point out that these crucial passages constitute an authentic *discovery*. No one had noticed before that Sophocles is the only artist in any medium ever to have used the Philoctetes legend for the sort of perilously subversive purpose a Thoreau would have understood; and the reason is not that scholars have been remiss, but that no one had ever bothered to dredge up all or nearly all the materials needed to make this discovery: the texts, and the massive pictorial evidence which Mr Mason summarizes as follows: 'Mr Mandel... has some good illustrations of artistic representations of the story.' Amazingly, Mr Mason does not even *mention* the fact that these texts and these visual representations are here given to the reader to examine for the first time in any language.

Whether Mr Mason's jaunty verdict that 'experts will learn nothing from his discussion of the legend' is tenable, the experts themselves must decide. 'Nothing', like the guillotine, leaves one a little breathless. I am concerned here with omissions and misinterpretations, for these can be verified. In my very closely argued 'Observations on the Philoctetes Plays of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles' (which, although your readers would not know it from reading the review, makes up a section separate and distinct from that in which the surviving texts are presented and arranged), I try to show that those who see Neoptolemus as the central personage – thematically speaking, that is – and his return of the bow, followed by his decision to take Philoctetes back to Malis as the central 'twin action' of the play, are reading the text correctly. In this connection, after a minute examination of the text, I write:

Philoctetes is replete with puzzles, but wonderfully enough, they do not affect the twin action I have just named. The latter subsists whether we resolve the puzzles or not – or, if we do resolve them, whether we provide one solution or another... Sophocles allowed a degree of blurring in matters of subordinate interest to him, content to be luminous and logical with regard to the essential action (p. 106).

This perfectly limp statement is garbled by Mr Mason as follows: 'any imperfection in plot and action are [according to Mandel] subordinate to the importance of the philosophical exposition of the value of human identity'. Needless to say, Mr Mason fails to notice that this reading of the play's puzzles is also new.

Perhaps enough has been said in the way of filling holes and clarifying fogs. But I want to add a final word touching Mr Mason's condescension toward Heiner Müller's acknowledged masterpiece, the *Philoktet* which I translated for my book, and which he first misinterprets and then berates. Let it at least be recorded here, since nothing is said in the review, that Müller's play is one of the most widely admired and performed German works for the stage to emerge since World War II. (It is being performed in Paris – in Nanterre, to be exact – at the time I am writing these words.) Since Heiner Müller is not yet a household name in the English-speaking world, a word to this effect might have been useful in a review, and might have placed in context Mr Mason's assignment of *Philoktet* among the plays that 'share a wordiness and lack of dramatic force which seems to dog the cerebral kind of author who in the twentieth century finds inspiration in ancient legend'.

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