

The Difficult Patient, a Problem Old as History (or Older)

by Abigail Zuger

The sick man was a misery to himself and to everyone around him. For one thing, his personal hygiene was horrific. He stank. And he was constantly in pain, moaning and groaning until you began to wonder if he was doing it just for effect. Worst of all, he was a mean old cuss, angry and embittered after years of illness. All he did was complain.

A few dozen medical students, most of them in their first year at Weill Medical College of Cornell University, listened with concern to a presentation about him. Eventually, they knew, they would run into difficult patients like this one.

The sick man had been a mover and shaker once, with a place in high government circles. But then he had the accident. His wound became infected. It was all downhill from there. He quickly became unable to work, and his distress upset everyone around him. Finally, his business associates forced him into long-term residential care.

Some of the faculty members in the conference room nodded in recognition. It was a case right out of a chronic-care ward in a Veterans Administration hospital.

The patient stayed in his residence for years. Not a single visitor dropped by. He grew prematurely aged, a miserable, stinking, moaning wreck. The infection in his foot was untreatable and oozed foul pus. Pain medication helped only slightly. He became obsessed, focusing all his anger on the old crowd, the false friends who had abandoned him. He blamed them for everything.

The diagnosticians in the room suspected that the patient had a chronic osteomyelitis of the foot, with an anaerobic component accounting for the odor. Perhaps the infection had spread elsewhere through the bloodstream. And then there were his psychiatric diagnoses:

reactive depression with psychotic features, possibly an underlying character disorder. He had certainly been a little narcissistic way back when.

Nine years after the sick man's admission, a stranger came knocking at his door. The visitor was a young man, just a kid, really. He knew the sick man's history, but the sight and sound and smell were overwhelming anyway. The kid was filled with pity

the man became only more agitated, almost incoherent, pain and fury all garbled together.

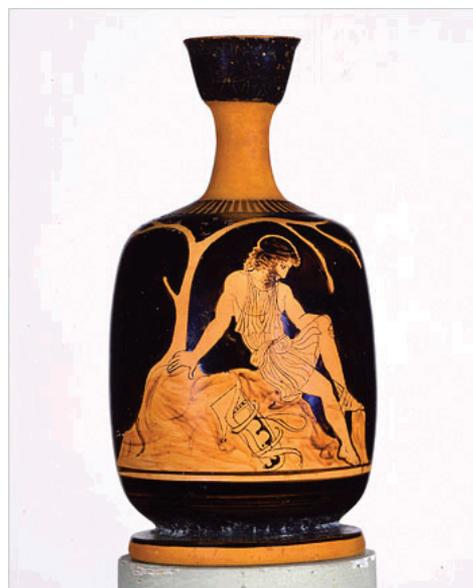
Fortunately, at this juncture the demigod Heracles showed up to straighten everything out. The medical students breathed a sigh of relief and clapped heartily.

These students and this patient will, of course, never meet; that would require a giant warp in the fabric of time and history. The sick man with the infected foot, Philoctetes, was marooned by his comrades on a deserted Greek island back in the mists of ancient myth. The rest of the crowd all headed off to sack Troy, but the kid, Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, was sent back to steal Philoctetes's magic bow and arrows (without which the Greeks could not prevail). The wily Odysseus was waiting on the beach for the kid to get the goods. It was all only a footnote to the bloody saga of the Trojan war.

But to Dr. Lyuba Konopasek, a pediatrician who directs the medical school's first-year course in Medicine, Patients and Society, Sophocles's play, from the fifth century B.C., had so much to say to medical students and doctors that she invited Bryan Doerries, a classicist and director, to stage a reading for her course last winter.

After the actors finished, students and faculty members talked for a long time about how students often feel helpless in the hospital, torn between befriending patients with incurable illness and sticking to a professional script. Sophocles somehow got that tenuous position just right, just as he knew that sick people, isolated and transformed by chronic disease, dread being alone and forgotten more than they dread pain or even death.

"We have created a subclass of patients like Philoctetes with modern medicine," Doerries said. "They are



A vase depicting a certain master archer during his stay on the island of Lemnos.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

and revulsion in equal measure. He wanted to help, but had been advised by his supervisor to be dignified and professional, to do his business and leave. Still, the patient was so miserable. Every time the young man tried to leave, the sick man pleaded with him to stay. "Don't go!" the sick man cried. "Please. Stay with me."

The visitor was torn. What should he do? He could have been a medical student on his first clinical clerkship, transfixed by the misery of a patient everyone else had labeled a miserable old crock years before. He tried to reassure the sick man, but the usual platitudes sounded hollow, and

Continued on 10



Photo Credit: Amelia Panico

Philoctetes reading on June 6, 2007, for doctors and medical students at Cornell's Weill Medical College, featuring David Strathairn (*Good Night, and Good Luck*), Jesse Eisenberg (*The Squid and the Whale*), Dudley Knight and John Schmerling.

About The Philoctetes Project

by Bryan Doerries *ΦBK*, Kenyon College, 1998

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is a lean, psychologically complex tragedy about a famous Greek warrior who is marooned on a deserted island by his army after contracting a horrifying and debilitating illness. After nine years of fruitless and bloody warfare, the Greeks learn from an oracle that they will never conquer Troy without Philoctetes and his invincible bow on their side. A small unit is sent back to the island to retrieve the embittered warrior — by any means necessary.

The action of the play arises from the conflict between Philoctetes and the Greek soldiers who come to reclaim him. One of the soldiers, the young Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, soon finds himself mired in a difficult ethical bind. Torn between his allegiance to the Greek army and his compassion for a suffering man, he must choose to do what he thinks is right.

Philoctetes was first performed in 409 B.C., and yet the title character's sense of abandonment and search for meaning in his suffering still speaks to us today, perhaps with greater force and urgency than ever before.

Over the past two years, I have directed several readings of my translation of *Philoctetes* for diverse audiences in New York City. In every

instance, I have marveled at the profound response to this overlooked play. Some people recognize their fathers, uncles and lovers in Sophocles' depiction of the suffering soldier, while others see themselves in the conflicted caregiver, Neoptolemus.

Last year, I was asked to direct two readings of *Philoctetes* for doctors and medical students at Cornell's Weill Medical College. After one of the readings, featuring the actors David Strathairn (*Good Night, and Good Luck*.) and Jesse Eisenberg (*The Squid and the Whale*), doctors connected the character Philoctetes to difficult patients whom they had encountered in hospitals and hospice wards. After another reading, medical students, burdened with compassion for their suffering patients, strongly identified with Neoptolemus' struggle.

Recently, in December 2007, I directed a reading of *Philoctetes* at a foundation called The Philoctetes Center in New York City (no relation). The reading was followed by a panel discussion about doctor-patient relationships in which a psychiatrist, two physicians and a military oncologist related the play to their professional experiences. The medical community's enthusiastic response to

Philoctetes has confirmed the play's unique power to open crucial space for dialogue within our culture about health care. It is my hope to continue to bring people together through the play for meaningful discussion about chronic illness, modern medicine and soldiers returning from war.

In my work, I try to engage audiences with timeless social issues through ancient Greek and Roman plays. By placing smaller, select audiences in dialogue with these texts, it is my hope to one day build a larger audience for ancient Greek and Roman theater in America. My production of *Philoctetes* has helped physicians, psychiatrists, medical students and others address tough questions about doctor-patient relationships, medical ethics and debilitating, long-term illness. The play serves as a powerful bridge between medicine and the humanities.

Bryan Doerries is a New York-based writer and director. He has a B.A. in classics from Kenyon College, where he was elected to ΦBK, and an M.F.A. in directing from the University of California, Irvine. He is currently director of programs at the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. For more information visit www.philoctetesproject.org. ■

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Award for Distinguished Service to the Humanities and the Sidney Hook Memorial Award

Phi Beta Kappa is soliciting nominations for the two awards to be given during the Council of 2009 in Austin, Texas.

The **Award for Distinguished Service to the Humanities** — a cash prize of \$2,500 and a medal — is given in each triennium to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions in the humanities. The award is underwritten by a gift in 1970 from Mr. and Mrs. William B. Jaffe. Mr. Jaffe was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Union College. Past winners include Daniel J. Boorstin, Joseph Epstein and Robert Pinsky. The 2006 recipient was Gerald Early of Washington University.

Established in 1991 in memory of the distinguished American philosopher Sidney Hook

(1902–1989), who was elected to Phi Beta Kappa at City College of New York, the **Sidney Hook Memorial Award** recognizes national distinction by a single scholar in each of the following three endeavors: scholarship, undergraduate teaching and leadership in the cause of liberal arts education. The award of \$7,500 has been presented five times in conjunction with Council meetings. Past winners include Leon Lederman, John Hope Franklin and Natalie Zemon Davis. The 2006 recipient was Charles Tilly of Columbia University.

More information on these awards may be found at www.pbk.org/awards.

Submissions must include a letter of nomination written by a person

familiar with the nominee's scholarly work, the nominee's curriculum vitae and contact information for the nominee. Winners must be available to accept their awards at the 2009 triennial Council of the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

Please mail all materials to:

Awards Coordinator
The Phi Beta Kappa Society
1606 New Hampshire Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20009

The deadline for nominations is **May 15, 2008**.

Direct questions to Sam Esquith, awards coordinator, at (202) 745-3235 or awards@pbk.org. ■

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THE DIFFICULT PATIENT

Continued from 8

abandoned on their islands to live long, but have we risen to the challenge of taking emotional care of them?"

Dr. Edith Langner, an internist, said, "Philoctetes' horror was the horror of abandonment." And yet, she continued, as Sophocles accurately pointed out, it can take so little from doctors to turn that around: a daily visit, a few minutes of friendly conversation, or sometimes just a new young ear to hear the old story all over again.

Abigail Zuger, M.D., is an associate clinical professor of medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and attending physician at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center. Zuger frequently writes on medical subjects for a variety of publications, including The New York Times. Zuger has served on the AIDS Clinical Care editorial board since the publication's launch in 1989 and is also an associate editor of Journal Watch. This article was originally published in The New York Times on March 6, 2007. ■