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Suffering, Embodiment, and the Self in Sophocles' Philoctetes

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The *Philoctetes* (c. 409 BCE) is unique in the Greek tragic corpus for the extreme physicality of its central event: abandoned by the Greeks on the deserted island of Lemnos because of his foul stench and cries which interrupted the religious rituals, Philoctetes suffers attacks of excruciating pain from a stinking, ulcerous sore in his foot. Deprived of companions and resources, he uses his divine bow—Heracles' gift and the sole means, together with its owner, of capturing Troy—to eke out a meager existence. His wounded foot causes sudden bouts of pain across the space of a hundred lines (730-826): he first tries to hide his pain but then gives voice to it repeatedly until he finally collapses into sleep. Although suffering is present almost by definition in tragedy (Poetics 1452b11-13), *Philoctetes* makes suffering its explicit subject: the main hero just is suffering or pain incarnate (Scarry 1985, Garner 1994).

In this paper, I look at the ways in which Sophocles constructs Philoctetes' sense of self out of the material means available to him: his cries and bow. Drawing upon the distinction of the phenomenologist Herbert Plügge between *Körper* (the physical body observed from outside and subject to biomechanical laws) and *Leib* (the body as it is subjectively lived, the ground of perception, knowledge, intention, and self-extension beyond the body's physical boundaries), I argue that Philoctetes' shrieks of agony foreground his waning *Körper*, whereas the bow symbolizes his potent *Leib*, the means by which he transmutes his defeat by the Greeks—his being treated as a dispensable tool—into the double victory of his survival on Lemnos and the anticipated capture of Troy. In this way, *Philoctetes* overcomes his suffering, which bifurcates the human being into the bodily and the mental (Cassell 2004), and preserves his sense of himself as a hero.