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The Besieged Free: Sophocles' *Philoctetes* on Makronisos, Summer 1948

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Abstract Few ancient tragedies capture the sense of geographical, temporal, and societal dislocation as well as Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, a prime play with which inmate actors opened multiple levels of understanding for the spectators of Makronisos, who were political prisoners of the Greek Left during the Civil War. The actors of the Third Battalion found freedom in their rehearsals for a production of the *Philoctetes*, which was scheduled to open in the late summer of 1948. The Makronisiot Philoctetes lamented that fellow Greeks had abandoned him to the loneliness of an inhospitable island (Lemnos). The production conveyed a strong sense of group cohesion and appealed to inmate solidarity to break the curse of enforced banishment. Sophocles' play became autobiographical when the prisoners became participants as well as spectators and understood their tragic state as the drama of the hero who, in a kind of 'double-speak', commented on the predicament that he shared with his public.

Keywords Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, Makronisos, political prisoners, stage production.

Few ancient tragedies capture the sense of geographical, temporal, and societal dislocation as well as Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, a prime play with which inmate actors opened up multiple levels of understanding for the spectators of Makronisos.

The actors of the Third Battalion who produced the *Antigone* in the summer of 1948 found more freedom in their rehearsals for a production of the *Philoctetes*, which was scheduled to open a few weeks later. Lefteris Raftopoulos recalled how moved he was when he heard the Makronisiot Philoctetes lament that fellow Greeks had abandoned him to the loneliness of an inhospitable island (Lemnos)[1]. The production conveyed a strong sense of group cohesion and appealed to inmate solidarity to break the curse of enforced banishment:

> And it stirred in you an extraordinary emotion to hear Philoctetes speak about

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[1] Raftopoulos 1995, p. 46.

his martyr's life on the island of his involuntary exile, as if he was speaking precisely about this island:
No sailor comes here of his own free will:
there is no harbour...[2]

Would you say, however, that it was only the words of Philoctetes that moved you? Or rather also your comrade, the soul and the mind of the troupe, who interpreted the role of Philoctetes?[3] Sophocles' play became autobiographical when the prisoners became participants as well as spectators and understood their tragic state as the drama of the hero who, in a kind of 'doublespeak', commented on the predicament that he shared with his public. Such sensitivity on the part of the audience underscores the heightening of awareness within the prison theatre: fellow inmates expected to find contemporary relevance in the production of the *Philoctetes*; performers counted on having their pointed remarks and actions caught, interpreted, and appreciated. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* became a survivor guide that gave a dramatic and interactive expression to the woundedness, physical and mental alike, of a person, family, or community. The (unnamed) actor playing Philoctetes gave voice to the voiceless through the immediacy of his physical embodiment of the lead role. The concrete moral dilemmas uncovered in the ancient original blended with the story of the Left's Civil War legacy and recent history of island confinement. Philoctetes is the model subsister who challenges the group to adhere to the same high moral standards, for the purpose of collective survival and eventual victory. Harsh methods of depersonalizing the hero fail: he remains an exemplum of integrity and defines the concept of tragic heroism anew in – temporary – defeat and isolation. Philoctetes' resilience is the result of a tough personal struggle but is also made dependent on friendships and loyalties in the immediate Greek circles, which may falter under the allure of personal advancement and veer off toward opportunistic company. The hero confronts his interlocutors who vacillate between personal integrity and – purported – public duty. With such capacities, Philoctetes, the vocal victim of a protracted ordeal, was seen as much more of a political firebrand than the – young and female – Antigone. Also, he exposed the Greek leaders' betrayal or the army's abandoning of its heroes. This sentiment struck a chord with many detainees such as Nikos Koundouros who, in later writings, preferred the harsh term of 'revenge' to that of the 'resistance' of the prisoners. In Koundouros's view, the Greek establishment

[2] Soph. *Philoctetes,* vv. 301-302.
[3] Raftopoulos 1995, p. 46.

had 'betrayed' and 'abandoned' the fighters marooned on the islands and had robbed their wartime resistance of its meaning[4]. The rehearsals of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* helped the inmates to ponder these relations that impacted on both the private and the community levels of their lives in exile. With a drama like the *Philoctetes* and its complex physical and psychological resonances, ancient theatre on the prison islands took care of its own defence and survival, and did so with the power of spareness.

The more the abandoned hero Philoctetes insisted on his stage identity, the more powerful his protest grew for his fellow internees. The protagonist mastered the art of saying things without actually saying them. The public of fellow actors instinctively understood and responded with a show of appreciation, which alleviated the anxiety of the protagonist. The applicability of Philoctetes' words and fate led Raftopoulos to posit the lead actor's uninhibited identification with the tragic hero, the 'realness' of his emotions, and the belief that Lemnos/ Makronisos was a stage fit for a hero, who would find an accepting audience – an audience in the know[5]. The essence of the selected text remained embedded in the living memory and imagination of the participants. Nonetheless, Raftopoulos's memory is – understandably – somewhat sketchy: he did not name the lead actor. He was unsure whether the modern Greek translation used for this *Philoctetes* was the one written by Aristos Kambanis[6]. More significantly, Raftopoulos expressed some doubt as to whether the production saw an actual opening performance or merely advanced rehearsals. The formal opening appears to have been cancelled by the camp authorities. That Raftopoulos could no longer be sure may prove that the performance experience was more important and more memorable to him than proper attribution or precise wording. For Raftopoulos, the *Philoctetes* had become a play about putting on the *Philoctetes on Makronisos*: 'And you don't remember if in the end the Philoctetes was presented on the stage within the two years that you were in that battalion. Some left; go figure if their replacements could be found. Add to that other changes'[7]. Raftopoulos did not see the likely ban on an opening performance detract from the collective experience. His emphasis was on the long process of the troupe's communal work and its intense rehearsals. Rehearsals entail performative repetition or constant reiteration, which strengthened the experience for Raftopoulos and others, who perhaps enjoyed

[4] Koundouros 1980, p. 36-37.

[5] Testimonies by K. S., 31 May 2005, and Koundouros, 25 June 2005; Vrahiotis 2005, pp. 3; 47; 69, in Van Steen 2011, p. 73.

[6] Kambanis 1913; Raftopoulos 1995, p. 46 n. 30.

[7] Raftopoulos 1995, p. 46.

the process more than the end result[8]. Maybe, too, Raftopoulos remembered the play most sympathetically precisely because its interpretation was never put to the final test of the actual production in front of hundreds of inmates of the Third Battalion, some of whom were keen to show how well they had learned the lessons of the institution.

Raftopoulos cited lines from Philoctetes' explanation to Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, on his lonely condition: because of the stench of a festering wound in his foot, the hero was left behind on Lemnos by the Greek troops, including his own, who continued on their voyage to Troy. Philoctetes was a fighter whose life was held in abeyance because of a gangrenous and foul-smelling 'infection'. But *miasma* was precisely the term that the Right and the monarchy used for the mind's dangerous 'infection' by communism, the 'satanic' disease that threatened to infect the body of the entire nation and that needed to be extirpated. For the inmate audience, verbal and visual references to Philoctetes' physical condition thus acquired symbolic proportions and reverberated with the prevailing value judgements cast in pseudo-medical verdicts of illness.

Philoctetes' myth is about physical sickness that exposes the opposing camp's state of moral rot and, ultimately, about the healing of bodily and psychological wounds, of relationships, and of the community at large. The actors and their public together took a long and in-depth view on the experience of detention and oppression. For them, the play also touched on the more difficult subjects of internal confusion, festering self-doubt, the need to rein in anger, and the hope for outside recognition, as the marooned recruits worried about their present and future position in Greek society[9]. Sophocles' play posits, first, retribution and the reward of justice but, once those goals have been achieved and Neoptolemus has established his trustworthiness, also the prophecy of a cure. After Philoctetes' protracted refusal, the availability of a cure for his emotional as well as physical pain is reiterated by the Sophoclean *Heracles* (vv. 1424, 1437-1438; earlier mentions occur late in the play: vv. 1329-1334, 1345-1346, 1378-1379). This healing entails that the hero will recover his self-confidence, which will open up the path to his reintegration into Greek society. Up until the play's final rehearsals, the camp authorities might have seen the *Philoctetes* as serving their agenda, that is, as a tool to resocialize and rehabilitate the leftist prisoners. Philoctetes 're-educates' himself and Neoptolemus, who has a change of heart and

[8] Raftopoulos 1995, p. 46.
[9] Testimony by K. S., 31 May 2005, in Van Steen 2011, p. 74.

drops any concealed motivations. Together, they achieve one of the most potent reconciliations in all of Greek myth. Significantly, however, in the tense standoff between the Greeks and Philoctetes, Neoptolemus, who represents the younger and more principled generation and who holds the potential to stop the mistreatment of Philoctetes, makes the first move toward reconciliation and recognition on behalf of the long- imperious establishment. With its web of dramatic rebounds and turning points, the play held out the exiles' hope that, some day in modern Greece, reconciliation or at least sanity would prevail and also that the resistance movement would be properly acknowledged. On the scale of the nation, dramatic changes of course promised national redemption in addition to the redemption of the formerly deserted individual. Sophocles resorted to the divine intervention of Heracles to bring his tragedy to a rapid and positive conclusion: persuaded by Heracles, the inveterately stubborn Philoctetes at last agrees to leave for the glory and healing that await him at Troy. The camp authorities likely accepted the play's basic premise, because they saw this *deus ex machina* symbolically lead the reformed recruits to the battlefields of the Civil War: it was crucial for the cause of national security that every leftist Philoctetes (re)join the ranks of the embattled government forces. From a modern dramaturgical and critical point of view, however, the recourse to a *deus ex machina* is merely a semi-satisfactory solution, because of the sheer artificiality with which it imposes divine ordinances; it also raises questions about the validity of forced resolutions. The device undermines logical and psychological agency: it derails the cause-and-effect sequence of the protagonists' actions and unnerves the inherent strength of tight character development. Some of these dimensions, however, probably remained opaque to the camp supervisors and censors.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* gave the lead actor the possibility to display a body in anguish and to signify the mutilation and malnourishment that the exiles endured on Makronisos. The hero's frightening and repeated bouts of pain dispelled any illusion of wholeness and consensus. The tragedy depicts Philoctetes wracked with pain in the foot or leg (the same word denotes 'foot' and 'leg' both in ancient and in modern Greek). Greek torturers tended to beat the victim's feet violently, with techniques practised from the interwar years through the colonels' dictatorship. The character of Philoctetes in tattered, bloodied clothes could become a witness to such a torture act. The continuous presence of the hero's gravely wounded body on stage gave the player a means to access the nonvisual order of terror on Makronisos. For lack of any other outlet, illusion helped to project the violent reality of camp life – and death – which the administration argued away as if it was spawned by the recruits'

antityrannical clichés[10]. With all the prisoners' world becoming a stage, corporeality was part and parcel of their production of acute visual representation and wrenching performative language.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* shows the proud warrior's state of being reduced to crawling on all fours (much like an animal), but also his despair at the thought that his plight might remain unknown: 'How wretched I am, how hated by the gods, if no word of my plight has reached home or any other part of Greece!' (Soph. *Philoctetes* vv. 254-256). Philoctetes is a warrior robbed of his *kleos* or 'fame', which he could have been earning in the siege of Troy. As long as he remains confined on Lemnos, he misses out on any and every opportunity to win *kleos* on the battlefield, which he considers to be a severe additional punishment. The young recruit on Makronisos had similarly been physically removed from the Greek army: he was a potential fighter whose 'trustworthiness' as a soldier was being tested; he had also become socially isolated from the Greek public space. Yet he was seen to engage in a contest of wills to restore especially his military reputation. In the summer of 1948, the Civil War was still raging and the internees of Makronisos were unable to fight, on either front. Like right-wing nationalism, leftist militancy, too, was concerned with fashioning its own image of the brave Greek soldier.

The degrading process of animalizing or dehumanizing Philoctetes started with Odysseus' opening statement: 'No mortal man steps here – let alone lives here' (Soph. *Philoctetes* v. 2). Odysseus knows well that his claim is false since he himself abandoned Philoctetes on Lemnos. His statement, however, suggests that he sees Philoctetes as lower than a human being, as a man of an erased existence. Thus the play focuses on falsehood versus truth in words, on the breakdown of trust in relations, and on a reality of mistreatment that is constantly being performed and reperformed. It is precisely the notorious 'lie' of the 'Makronisos phenomenon' that deserves further attention in the subsequent sections of this chapter. Falsehood and distrust are at the core also of Alexandrou's *Antigone*. However, as Raftopoulos's opening quotation on the *Philoctetes* indicated, the lead actor's emotive force posited a language of truth and solidarity. Philoctetes' ferocious struggle was, like that of the exiles, aimed at restoring his humanity and at becoming a new social, political, and military body.

[10] Testimony by K. S., 31 May 2005, in Van Steen 2011, p. 75.

Makronisos: Place, Time, and Theatrics on No Man's Island

Where did the detainees of Makronisos produce their plays? Who took the initiative and how many watched? How was such an initiative even possible in a punitive environment? How did the exiles' experience affect living memory? These are some of the questions that the remaining sections of this chapter will attempt to answer. Recent records have painted a picture of the detainees on Makronisos performing as much for and with each other as those on Trikeri or Aï Stratis, to find purpose, strength, and solace in play producing, regardless of who or how many would attend. This is not the whole story, however, and the following chapter sections add some basic facts, corrections, and distinctions; they analyse wider issues of prison theatre and performativity and broaden the rhetorical and metatheatrical subtext.

On two of the hill slopes of Makronisos, the recruits built a total of four large outdoor theatres, after the model of the ancient Greek open-air theatre. They used stone for the official, 'show' theatres, or those that were constructed with the approval or under the instigation of the regime[11]. They built with mortar, however, a smaller theatre that they favoured as their own. Stone was associated with the internees' forced labour[12]. Tasos Daniil, the architect of the outdoor theatre of mortar, emphasized that only volunteer labour was used and that his theatre was an 'expression of ourselves'[13]. Daniil further reflected on how drama production fulfilled a basic need:

> It indicated that, at the worst moments, the Greek people brought also their cultural needs along... And, of course, the plays we staged at this little theatre had no connection at all with the administration's wishes or programs or with its oppressive violation of our personal dignity. On the contrary, they were a manifestation of resistance and elevation[14].

Given the large numbers held on Makronisos, the audiences there were usually very substantial and numbered up to 6,000 people[15]. The steady flow of recruits to Makronisos gives a new meaning to the modern Greek word for 'the public', *to koino* (literally, 'the common'), in that both performing and watching were part of a 'shared' mass experience. But this was not necessarily a 'free' experience, or an expression of freedom. The detainees' desire to play and to

[11] Vrahiotis 2005, pp. 13; 16–21; 53; 66; 69–70.
[12] Hamilakis 2007, p. 228; Panourgia 2009, p. 93.
[13] Testimony quoted by Bournazos and Sakellaropoulos 2000, p. 265.
[14] Bournazos and Sakellaropoulos 2000, p. 265.
[15] According to Efthymiou 1980a, p. 40.

be recognized for their act's performativity manifested itself in ways that were not simply definitive but generative – theatrically spoken. As subjects of the guards' gaze, the prisoners suffered various kinds of psychological and physical humiliations offstage. Meanwhile, the authorities kept fooling outsiders such as the many visitors from Athens and abroad: these onlookers were trumped into seeing the illusion of stage freedom as a measure of the real interaction between inmates and prison personnel. During performances, the stage was as much the site of the exiles' coerced erasure of their actual common experience as it was the platform on which they could reveal at least some reality behind the mask of theatrical make-belief.

Theatre on Makronisos involved a complex exchange of gazes and cultivated an active and multi-eyed public. The actors watched those who were watching them and watched themselves. The inmate spectators followed the action on stage, kept an eye out for the guards, and scrutinized the overall turnout of recruits, most of whom were obliged to appear in the theatre. The impassioned cheering of certain words was an active instrument of audience participation, as were whispers, rumblings, or gestures. They were ways for the powerless to exert power. The public's seating area was a thickly packed space but it was not an entirely regimented space. The more engaged or 'unruly' the spectators were, the more they became impulsive or spontaneous theatre for the prison staff. The wardens watched the cast while they controlled the detainees; they saw performers and spectators but, in them, they saw firebrands and possible wirepullers and kept on guard against their acts and antics. They observed especially those who were 'too talented for their own good' and whose reciprocal gaze had more of an agent's monitoring of the guard. Benas's testimony captured the image of a warden who could not bear the pressure of the gaze that the actors (re)turned on him when they made a powerful line strike home[16]. Showtime reminded the guards that they, too, were interned on the island and were not shielded from their subjects' watchful gaze – or from acts of harassment or sabotage against the much-hated apparatus of enforcement. Occasionally, the guards too buckled under the psychological strain. The top administrators were triply viewed: by the actors on stage, by the audience from the seating areas, and by the guards worried about retaliation from above against their moments of weakness. Theatre was the one place where inmates could momentarily fluster their supervisors, and where prison personnel and top officials might find themselves temporarily powerless. But all parties knew

[16] Benas 1996, in Van Steen 2011, pp. 38–39.

that challenging the administration's authority, especially before an external audience of visitors, could have the direst of consequences[17].

What then did the camp supervisors have to gain from granting the production of plays? Entertaining one's subjects to distract them from injustice and terror has been a strategy employed by many power holders. More purposefully, however, the theatre on Makronisos had to function as a showcase theatre. The officials let it exist and encouraged the production of 'serious' plays, even though they had no plan for a general repertory of classics, to be able to show off the recruits' 'progress' on the path to 're-education', 'conversion', and 're-birth'. What better stage on which to display the 'success' of the rehabilitation act than the stage of theatre itself! A 'civilized' or 'sacred' theatre for outsiders to see and admire invested the camp administrators with gravitas and authority. Ancient tragedy lent the best cover of civility: it helped to paint the picture of cultural unanimity and patriotic loyalty that the government wanted to disseminate. Thus both the Right and the Left could agree on producing ancient drama and other classics; they could find middle ground when selecting the plays, but their views parted ways on the chosen works' interpretation and reception. Depending on the circumstances, the official call or support for classical plays created a moral dilemma for some detainees, who worried that they might compromise their integrity[18]. But if individual directors or actors needed to engage in a modest degree of collaboration to survive, their act of saving themselves through performance was the one that was the least morally offensive: they could mount highly valued tragedy, balance or alternate it with much-desired entertainment, and thus reach out to so many fellow prisoners who stood to gain from the overall practice. Also, even those who worked with the visible support of the camp wardens could still not – or especially not – afford to cross their path. More than the spectators, who could somehow disappear in the crowds or seek strength in numbers, the actors came face to face with the guards and supervisors[19].

The authorities' spatial focus on the stage, too, differed from the democratizing effect associated with the architecture and the natural setting of the large outdoor theatres of antiquity. In the official conception, or the bird's eye perspective of spatial hierarchy, the theatre stage was to enact top-down power relations: the guards held a secure and superior position above or on the sides of the hollow seating area; the special, reserved seats had the best, undistracted

[17] Testimonies by Koundouros, 25 June 2005, and P. T., 2 June 2005 in Van Steen 2011, p. 78.
[18] Koundouros 1980, pp. 36–37.
[19] Testimonies by Koundouros, 25 June 2005, and P. T., 2 June 2005; Vrahiotis 2005, pp. 66, 70, in Van Steen 2011, p. 79.

view and were themselves clearly visible; the actors on stage appeared small, indeed[20]. The physical space and its configuration at showtime helped the authorities to display where victor and victim ranked – always a useful exercise in discipline. The spatial order and the exact time were fixed by those who feared that any protest might escalate at the first mass occasion. The officials hoped to turn theatre into a theatre, not of disturbance, but of reassurance and affirmation, in which undercurrents of conservative patriotism, morality, and religion could flow together. The condemned became protagonists in their own – publicized – drama when the administration turned them into live advertisement for the project Makronisos – in the sinister double meaning of 'live', that is, happening there and then and performed by those still alive.

The government frequently invited an outside public of Greek and foreign opinion makers to take a passage to Makronisos, its show island. Such group visits were widely announced as 'inspection' visits. This advance notice, of course, defeated the purpose of real inspection. The local prison authorities tried hard to reassure the visitors of the humanity of the camp and honoured them by inviting them to an inmate performance of, preferably, a classical concert or play. Stavros Avdoulos called the administrators of Makronisos 'the most talented theatre directors', who spent days preparing the showcase events[21]. It took a particular kind of brutality to stage concerts and theatre acts side by side with punishments and torture acts, or to create a façade of humane treatment of the recruits that was nothing more than a fabrication. Among the detainees, it created the false perception of a sense of freedom, and especially of intellectual freedom – the lack of which had landed many of the inmates on Makronisos in the first place. The subterfuge or front that the prison wardens put up through theatre and behind which they concealed the horrid conditions in which they kept the recruits worked for some time. Conservative Greek intellectuals and artists, high-ranking politicians and military personnel, academics, journalists, clergymen, students and their teachers, delegates, and also foreign correspondents made the Sunday trip to the island. In reality, however, they went as political voyeurs whose return trip was always securely booked. As planned, they left very satisfied, both morally and intellectually, because they had seen, with their very own eyes, that the 'national re-education project' of Makronisos was working. Most uncritically, they sang the praises of the authorities' 'admirable' and 'Christian' work with their 'unruly' or 'stubborn' human material. They noted the 'success' of the 'Makronisos phenomenon' in

[20] Testimony by P. T., 2 June 2005, in Van Steen 2011, p. 82.
[21] Avdoulos 1998, pp. 197-198.

fostering patriotism – a patriotism that, they knew well, was made of pro-government and pro-Western sympathies.

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