Adrienne Rich on Lemnos[1]

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Poet, feminist, essayist, activist: Adrienne Rich's legacy extends to many different roles in American letters from her first published poems in 1952 until her death in 2012. Interpreter of classical texts, however, is not usually named among these roles. Yet Rich's early work was noted for its "literary allusions and classical reserve" and throughout her poetry, Rich draws on classical themes culled from her own reading. Taking one of these classical references as a nodal point for tracing a new reading of Rich's poetry, here I argue that Adrienne Rich's epochal "Twenty-One Love Poems" offer a provocative reception of the Philoctetes myth. Homer describes the wounded Philoctetes on Lemnos, where he "sat in anger and in grief" (*Iliad* 2.694); in "Twenty-One Love Poems," Rich remembers the wound but refuses to sit in her own anger and grief. In the broader Epic cycle, Philoctetes rejoins the Greeks and helps to defeat Troy; Rich's cycle of poems trace the end of love and the embrace of a resilient solitude. Rich's "Philoctetes / in woman's form" learns to live alone, to write her own life and thus to refuse to let her brokenness define her.

On my reading, then, "Twenty-One Love Poems" turns the story of Philoctetes on its head. The myth chronicles integration, the overcoming of distrust and the vacuous sophistries of Odysseus, and the replacing of manipulation and force with friendship and empathy. Contrariwise, Rich's reception of Philoctetes moves the opposite direction, toward disintegration – although, importantly, a *chosen* disintegration – with society.

[1] This is a draft. Please do not cite without the author's explicit permission.

Rich refuses to give up her bow, which is her poetry and the life it fashions; instead she insists on crafting her own story, one not dependent on the "miracle" of companionship. I will argue that this recasting of the myth calls Rich's readers toward an ethics of solitude and a broader politics of poetic self-fashioning.

Rich's reception of the Philoctetes myth also has ramifications for its best known portrayal, namely Sophocles' *Philoctetes.* Seen through the lens of Rich's reception, Sophocles' particular choices for shaping the play appear as elements of a new possible meaning. In particular, Sophocles' addition of the character of Neoptolemos, his isolation of Philoctetes, and his use of the *deus ex machina* to end the play illustrate a much more ambivalent depiction of Philoctetes than influential readings such as Edmund Wilson's suggest. With Rich's implicit direction, I suggest a rereading of the *Philoctetes* as a tragedy of political life rather than simply the vanishing heroic ethic that appears on its surface.

Bringing Rich's reception of Philoctetes and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* together calls attention to a particular cluster of problems they both illuminate and to which they both respond in different ways. On my reading of "Twenty-One Love Poems" and Sophocles' play, political life appears to demand closing of wounds such that healing is preempted by the requirements of solidarity. Both writers depict a struggle to let these wounds speak even while resisting the stories of trauma with which the broader political and social context seeks to contain them.

Philoctetes / in woman's form

In the eighth poem of "Twenty One Love Poems," Rich writes as follows:

I can see myself years back at Sunion

hurting with an infected foot, Philoctetes
in woman's form, limping the long path,
lying on a headland over the dark sea,
looking down the red rocks to where a soundless curl
of white told me a wave had struck,
imagining the pull of that water from that height,
knowing deliberate suicide wasn't my métier,
yet all the time nursing, measuring that wound.
Well, that's finished. The woman who cherished
her suffering is dead. I am her descendant.
I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me,
but I want to go on from here with you
fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.[2]

This "Philoctetes / in woman's form" now lies behind the poet; "nursing, measuring that wound" is "finished." Yet Rich does not leave this Philoctetes behind; she claims her as ancestor. She loves the scar-tissue handed down. She will "fight the temptation to make a career of pain" but not entirely abjure it. This ambivalence about the wound itself – refusing to allow it to define her yet not denying it either – figures "Twenty-One Love Poems" from the beginning. "We need to grasp our lives inseparable / from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces," Rich writes in the first poem of the sequence. She concludes that poem:

No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.

While Olga Boumas is right to declare that these poems gesture toward a desire "for a totality of living, openness, communication and trust, in the new, the immediate, the

[2] All citations from "Twenty-One Love Poems" refer to the text as printed in Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language* (Norton, 1978). Roman numerals in parentheses refer to sections of "Twenty-One Love Poems."

real,"[3] they also maintain an attachment to the past and the mediated, which are no less real. Scars mediate ancient pain. When Rich gazes at her lover's books, a history of silenced voices cry out: "Once open the books, you have to face / the underside of everything you've loved –" she stares into the absence, "this still unexcavated hold / called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world" (V).

Wounded and isolated, this descendant of Philoctetes first reaches toward companionship. She and her lover will help each other live. They will help each other die. Her lover's hands teach the poet to trust the world. She teaches the consolation of bodily comfort, "that without tenderness, we are in hell" (X). Bodies, lovemaking, "like the half-curled frond / of the fiddlehead fern," "generous thighs," the "insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth": these remain; "whatever happens, this is" (Floating Poem).

The close comfort of this intimacy does not, however, close all gaps. Silence still chills the poet: "I fear this silence, / this inarticulate life" (IX). Although "a touch is enough to let us know / we're not alone in the universe" (XII), difference persists:

> But we have different voices, even in sleep
> and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different
> and the past echoing through our bloodstreams
> is freighted with different languages, different meanings –

"We're out in a country that has no language / no laws," runs the following poem. "We're driving through the desert / wondering if the water will hold out." Suffering together brings the lovers to one another, yet it comes with a dangerous illusion "as if all suffering / were physical." As if the common language shared by touch could cover that baleful silence, the "different languages, different meanings."

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[3] Quoted in Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (Georgia, 1986), p. 171.

Whereas the Epic Cycle depicts the reintegration of Philoctetes and his cure among fellow Greeks at Troy, for Rich the solace of companionship does not restore her to her former, unwounded self. There's no arc of recovery:

> No one's fated or doomed to love anyone.
> The accidents happen, we're not heroines,
> they happen in our lives like car crashes,
> books that change us, neighborhoods
> we move into and come to love.

The horrific accident of Philoctetes' wound becomes part of a fateful cycle; here Rich denies fate and the heroic order that shapes Philoctetes' life. All that remains – a tape-recorder that once played G minor Mozart and now might recall "some ghost of us," how they "tried to love," "the forces they had ranged against us," and "the forces we had ranged within us" (XVII). Philoctetes can trust his fate, but Rich's descendant of "Philoctetes / in woman's form" inhabits a different world.

> *the more I live the more I think*
> *two people together is a miracle*

The miracle cannot last and Rich finds herself estranged. *There are no miracles.*

The unwanted separation, however, marks a new possibility and not just a closure. In the wake of estrangement, "a cleft of light," unmentioned in the Philoctetes myth, appears.

> Close between grief and anger, a space opens
> where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder.

Cold without her lover's touch, speaking coldly when she denies there can be miracles, Rich finds herself addressing another and, in a moment of surprise, recognizes this other to be her own soul. The mind realizes its solitude "shared, could be chosen without loneliness." Rich chooses to be a figure in the light, amid "blue and foreign stones, " "the

great round rippled by stone implements / the midsummer night light rising from beneath / the horizon" (XXI).

This descendant of "Philoctetes / in woman's form" does not lose her limp nor her rocky environs, but by the end of "Twenty-One Love Poems" she comes to chose the solitude she first fled by instinct. Philoctetes sits in pain and anger yet finds his cure at Troy. Rich's poetry allows her to recreate herself as Philoctetes' descendant without repeating his fate. Instead of leaving Lemnos, Rich chooses to stay – to savor the solitude of her own stone-lined cave, to walk there, to draw a circle around herself.

Of a woman Philoctetes born

Rich's reception of Philoctetes, I have suggested, places herself as descendant of a woman Philoctetes, a descendant who learns to speak to herself when the love affair that promises a "shared suffering" ends. But what does it mean that this ancestor Philoctetes is a woman and not, as in the myth, a man?

Here a contrast with Edmund Wilson's reading of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in *The Wound and the Bow* can educe the important differences. Wilson reads *Philoctetes* as Sophocles' "universal statement on the role of the artist in society: wounded, outcast, lacking some inner quality that might permit him or her to engage in the mundane events of life."[4] For Wilson, the wound blessed Philoctetes with creative insight. "Philoctetes" thus figured an idea Wilson brought to readings of D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, and others. Wilson claimed "superior strength as inseparable from disability." Philoctetes was an "anchorite" whose only care is to be a "literary man."

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[4] Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (Ohio University Press, 2007). Here I quote the description of Wilson's reading by Gregory McNamee in the introduction to his translation of *Philoketetes* (Cooper Canyon, 1986), p. 3.

In Rich's reception, the creative act of Philoctetes shifts from literary production to birth. Rich – the poet narrator of "Twenty-One Love Poems" – is the woman Philoctetes' creation. She is of a woman Philoctetes born. Rich limped "the long path, / lying on a headland over the dark sea." She watched the "soundless curl / of white" where the waves struck. But she realized "deliberate suicide" was not her "métier." She nursed and measured her wound, but now, she declares "all that is finished." Wilson's Philoctetes holds his wound dear, returning to it like a childhood trauma; Rich leaves her Philoctetes "imagining the pull of that water from that height" back at Sunion. The "Philoctetes / in woman's form," however, bequeaths Rich scar-tissue that Rich loves, but Rich chooses not literary loneliness but "to go on from here with you."

Rich's description of herself "years back at Sunion" also casts the ancestor Philoctetes in a different light. In the myth, Philoctetes inhabits Lemnos. Sunion does not appear. Yet Sunion carried importance in the lyric tradition with which Rich affiliates herself. The *Odyssey* refers to Sounion as "the sacred cape of the Athenian," yet Rich's allusion probably refers not to the Temple of Poseidon there but a modern inscription on its stones – that of Lord Byron.

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Byron appears to refer to his memorial at the end of the "Isles of Greece," sung by the court poet where shipwrecked Don Juan enjoys a sumptuous banquet.

> Place me on Sunium's marbled steep,
>   Where nothing, save the waves and I,
> May hear our mutual murmurs sweep;
>   There, swan-like, let me sing and die:
> A land of slaves shall ne'er be mine—
> Dash down yon cup of Samian wine!

This allusion to Byron opens a chasm between the poetry Rich will craft and the tradition Byron represents. Rich crafts herself as Philoctetes' descendant while also explicitly departing from Byron's vision of reproduction (not to mention the nationalistic, bellicose, and masculine world it evokes in the larger poem). "Well, that's finished." Instead of carving her name in the marbles of antiquity, Rich will construct her own world, her circle with its "dark lintels" and "blue and foreign stones" (XXI).

The wound of Philoctetes, moreover, does not become the basis of creative production. Instead, Rich's attraction to her lover seems to propel her into words.

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[5] Image from Pininterest site on Newstead Abbey, Lord Byron's home. See https://www.pinterest.co.uk/tanyatokarski/newstead-abbey-the-home-of-lord-byron/

“Writing words like these, I’m also living,” claims Rich. “The stories of our lives become our lives” (XVIII). In the country with no language, the world where women can love women, Rich finds a place for her words. She acts like “a woman’s voice singing old songs / with new words,” refashioning the lyric to hymn “two lovers of one gender.” Yet this creative outpour must also distance itself from the given language of romance. When her lover turns away “in a fugue” across “the *salt estranging sea,*” Rich feels estranged from the words that come to mind. The allusion to Matthew Arnold invokes a world where God puts lovers on their separate islands; Arnold’s poem, “To Marguerite” laments “man isl’d.” Rich’s lover turns away with Arnoldian pathos, reproducing the masculine discourse that Rich chooses instead to resist. Yet Rich will discover her own island and reclaim Lemnos as hers alone.

Unlike Wilson’s Philoctetes, trauma does not produce creativity so much as obstruct it for Rich. She must fight the “temptation to make a career of pain.” In the wake of the love affair, Rich wins distance from her wounded self, she “whose hurt, expressive head / turning aside from pain, is dragged down deeper” (XX). Seeing that this is her “own soul,” Rich unwinds the fear wrapping her throat and “choking her like hair.” She can then choose to be a figure in that “cleft of light,” “half-blotted by darkness” – but only half.

Wilson’s Philoctetes is an outcast, “lacking some inner quality,” but for Rich, the descendant of “Philoctetes /in woman’s form,” refusing her wounded identity – and the impossibility of become a lonely Romantic at Sunion – allows her to accept her solitude as the basis for a truer creativity. Rich does not create out of lack but rather out of

abundance. Early in “Twenty-One Love Poems,” poetic creation is associated with connection to the lover, the other.

> *I dreamed you were a poem,*
> I say, *a poem I wanted to show someone . . .*
> and I laugh and fall dreaming again

Yet this poetic living through the other is disappointed when Rich recognizes their “different language, different meanings.” Rather than wounding her further, however, her recognition leads her towards her own language, “Adrienne alone” and a dialogue with herself. She reaches not for society but rather towards a language that can clarify for herself, first of all, the meaning of her experience.

The return to “Adrienne alone” and the final poem’s vision of “The dark lintels, the blue and foreign stones” may seem to draw Rich closer to Wilson’s anchorite. Yet rather than retiring back from society, as the anchorite does, Rich instead claims solitude over and against the imperatives toward society that she as a women experiences so powerfully. “This is not Stonehenge,” writes Rich.

> I choose to be a figure in that light,
> half-blotted by darkness, something moving
> across that space, the color of stone
> greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
> a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.

The beginning of “Twenty-One Love Poems” finds Rich in an urban space flickering with pornography, “with science-fiction vampire / victimized hirelings bending to the lash.” She inhabits a world unfriendly to women and to women in love. Across the poems Rich traverses the territory of lyric she has inherited, a territory ruled by men like Byron and Arnold and adorned by the works of men like Mozart, Wagner, and Strauss. In this world Rich must discover her own language, a project not even her lover can aid. “Of a

woman Philoctetes born," Rich learns to claim her ancestry, including her wounds, while claiming her ability to fashion her own life.

> If I cling to circumstances I could feel
> not responsible. Only she who says
> she did not choose, is the loser in the end.

Born of tragedy, Rich's descendant of a woman Philoctetes refuses the plot she has inherited. No longer tragic, Rich begins to fashion her own language and life.

Back on Lemnos: Sophocles' Philoctetes

Rich's reception of the Philoctetes myth also opens a different reading of Sophocles' *Philoctetes.* Interpretations of the play most often focus on the young Neoptolemos, who shirks the corrupting influence of Odysseus and develops personal integrity through his friendship with Philoctetes. On this reading, Neoptolemos plays the role of descendant of Philoctetes; Philoctetes' suffering becomes redeemed in part by being understood by his younger companion. Rich's reception, however, calls attention first of all to Philoctetes. The fate he suffers – from which the poet Rich learns, loving both the scar and being finished with making a career of pain – illuminates a set of problems around the demands of society and the fate of men in a war-obsessed society. Philoctetes cannot choose the solitude that Rich chooses; the compelling force of Odysseus, Neoptolemos, and Herakles destroys what sweetness his isolation affords.

Sophocles' version of the Philoctetes myth introduces a few notable differences from previous iterations; each of these, on my argument, can invigorate the Rich-inspired reading I elaborate here. First, Sophocles creates a desolate Lemnos, contrary to Homer's description. Readers have often missed, however, how perceptions of this desolation vary

with each character. Odysseus opens the play, declaring that “No man / lives here – even / steps here.” The chorus of sailors sings:

> This man may well be no inferior in birth to the best born,
> yet he lies alone, apart from all others,
> except the spotted and hairy beasts – pitiable
> In his hunger, in his sufferings, his miseries without cure. (341)[6]

This sense of Philoctetes’ abandonment to a miserable life among beasts permeates the descriptions of the newly arrived, yet even before the encounter with Philoctetes signs of habitation appear in the play. Odysseus identifies the cave; Neoptolemos describes “some ground cover, crushed, as if from someone / lying on it” and “a wooden cup – the work of an amateur – along with / some firewood” and “some rags drying out, pus-heavy.” Odysseus’ first words are belied – a man does indeed live and step here – and the ordinary objects lend a human poignancy to the scene. Philoctetes may lack wine, but he’s not suffered hunger or thirst (363).

Philoctetes himself speaks of Lemnos in tones different from the strangers. Although he first says that he found nothing except suffering, he then describes fashioning his life: making do under an improvised roof, felling doves in flight, melting ice for water in winter (344 – 5). He has an herb to dress his wound and ease the pain. He hunts for his food with arrows notched on the unerring string of Herakles’ bow.

Although Philoctetes does not suffer from the desolation that the sailors, including Odysseus and Neoptolemos, imagine, he does have one particular lack: human company. In all of his exchanges, he returns to this one fact: how he not only suffers but suffers alone. Listen to his first speech to the new arrivals:

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[6] Here and throughout this essay (unless otherwise indicated) I refer to the Carl Phillips translation of *Philoctetes* (Oxford, 2003).

Let me hear a voice – do not fear me and
panic at my wildness, no; but
pitying a man so ill-starred and alone and suffering as
    I am, and with
no friend, no companion – please, speak – if you have
    in fact come as friends – (342)

Philoctetes bemoans his *abandonment* – being left alone – as much as his suffering. "Don't be afraid and – don't betray me – " he screams at Neoptolemos when the pain of his wound grows fierce. Despite hating those who left him on Lemnos, he still wonders about their fates; he wants company so much, it seems, that he's willing to hear about what has befallen the likes of the Atreidai and even Odysseus. He fears a repetition of that abandonment more than anything else.

Here a second aspect of Sophocles' innovation has salience. Sophocles introduces Neoptolemos to the myth. Philoctetes cannot find companionship in Odysseus whom he reviles as one among the Greeks who abandoned him on Lemnos. But Neoptolemos can remedy Philoctetes' loneliness. He promises a cure to this wound, a wound for which Philoctetes has devised no balm.

The son of Achilles, Neoptolemos also allows Sophocles to recast *Philoctetes* as a modulated Achilles-Patroclus story. Philoctetes plays the father, Achilles; Neoptolemos plays the younger beloved, Patroclus. As the conventional reading goes, Philoctetes teaches Neoptolemos how to act like a man, instructing him in the proper sense of shame, which eventually overrides Odysseus's instructions in perfidy. Yet this reading must take at least two further steps, both of which move away from celebrating the love between the warrior Philoctetes and the just-bearded Neoptolemos. First, the connection between Philoctetes and Achilles calls attention to how Philoctetes will be dragged back into a war against his will, with his young beloved serving as goad. When Achilles remains in his

tent and refuses to rejoin the Greeks on the fields of Troy, Odysseus goes to him; Achilles responds with much the same sentiment that Philoctetes directs to Odysseus here: “More than I hate the gates of Hades I hate the man who says one thing and conceals another in his heart” (*Iliad* 308 – 313). Now Philoctetes plays the role of Achilles, rejecting Odysseus’s embassy but nonetheless finding himself forced to rejoin the conflict despite his desires to the contrary.

Second, the fate of Neoptolemos indicates that the relationship between Philoctetes and Neoptolemos is perverted at best. As the audience of Sophocles’ play would have well known, Neoptolemos will fail to take up whatever education Philoctetes gives him. As Diskin Clay notes, Neoptolemos becomes Pyrrhos, “whose savage bloodlust was already commemorated by Polygnotos on the walls of the club house of the Knidians at Delphi.”[7] He would be held responsible for the murder of Priam as well as Priam’s daughter, Polyxena.

The subsequent history of Neoptolemos should shadow readings of his relationship with Philoctetes. Although Philoctetes calls him “noble,” Philoctetes may be deceived. Philoctetes seeks the salvation of companionship, which appears in his undue response to the promise of sailing home:

> Dearest day, sweetest man, beloved sailors –
> by what deed might I show you how full of love you have made me
> toward yourselves? (354)

The swiftness with which Philoctetes relinquishes the bow to Neoptolemos bespeaks a man infatuated: “For you,” Philoctetes gushes to Neoptolemos, “not only this bow but / anything else in my power to give / will be yours” (360).

[7] From Clay’s introduction to the Carl Phillips translation (Oxford, 2003), p. 6.

Rich's reception takes us to what seems to me the crux of these moments, what can connect Sophocles' particular additions to the Philoctetes myth: *Philoctetes is betrayed not once but twice.* Neoptolemos never tells him the truth and never once really deviates from the plan all along – to take not just the bow but Philoctetes himself. Neoptolemos' return of the bow is calculated, part of a larger strategy to convince Philoctetes to relent, to agree to accompany Neoptolemos and Odysseus back to Troy.

Neoptolemos does not succeed because Philoctetes refuses again and again – against every feint and trick that Neoptolemos tries (including giving back the bow). Neoptolemos' strategies even comprise appealing to Philoctetes' desire for companionship. When Neoptolemos tergiversates and Philoctetes laments that "this man, if I judge correctly, acts like one who / has already betrayed and abandoned me," Neoptolemos responds: "Not abandoning you – " (372). Neoptolemos tries to promise a cure to the wound of loneliness and appeals to Philoctetes' desire for this. Philoctetes seems willing to forgive Neoptolemos – "You are not evil," he tells Neoptolemos (375) – but he still despairs, threatening to kill himself lest he suffer yet another abandonment.

After Neoptolemos and Odysseus have revealed their deception, Philoctetes' lyrical laments carry the play. They also illuminate how Philoctetes' despair centers on his lost solitude. Although he longed for company, he still had his bow and his hollow cavern (381). Now he will starve; the beasts he once hunted will wreak their revenge (383).

When Neoptolemos claims to "undo the wrong" he did earlier by giving back the bow, saying he took it "shamefully and unjustly," this forms one more attempt to persuade – but this time with deeds rather than words (389). Neoptolemos claims the act

is clear, but it also seems clear he does not yet understand Philoctetes. If he did, would Neoptolemos say this?

> You have become an animal, and refuse
> all advice: if someone, thinking on your behalf,
> does give advice, you hate him, you
> consider him an enemy. (391)

Neoptolemos repeats his argument that Philoctetes must go to Troy. But Philoctetes refuses. Neoptolemos invokes friendship again and again, but Philoctetes denies that friends would hand friends over to enemies.

Philoctetes' intransigent refusal necessitates the third of Sophocles' significant additions: the *deus ex machina* of Herakles' entrance at the end, which confirms Philoctetes' fate, a fate that even Sophocles could not endeavor to change. But Herakles' entrance and the divine resolution he effects also allow Sophocles to portray Philoctetes as refusing Neoptolemos all the way until the end. Only a superhuman necessity embodied by Herakles can convince him.

Herakles' commandment forces Philoctetes to sail for Troy, but Philoctetes' words at the departure suggest the loss this occasions. Departing, he calls on the island: chamber that watched over him; water-nymphs and nymphs of the meadow; "muscled crashing of sea against headland" and the mountains of Hermes. The island becomes divine, as Homer described it (*Iliad* 21.79). Neoptolemos, Odysseus, and the sailors never seem to recognize this.

They still control the world

In the fourth of the "Twenty-One Love Poems," Rich describes returning home when her mail lets fall "a Xerox of something written by a man / aged 27, a hostage, tortured in prison":

> *My genitals have been the object of such a sadistic display*
> *They keep me constantly awake with the pain . . .*
> *Do whatever you can to survive.*
> *You know, I think that men love wars . . .*
> And my incurable anger, my unmendable wounds
> break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly,
> and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms.

Awake with pain, a victim of war, Philoctetes resembles this young man, although he is tortured not by sadistic enemies but instead by his supposed friends. *You know, I think that men love wars* . . . Philoctetes attempts to refuse men's wars yet runs against the limits of his world. *Do whatever you can to survive*, the man enjoins. Philoctetes struggles against his fate as long as he can. But the gods still control the world in Sophocles' play. Philoctetes must suffer his fate.

Rich's response – her "incurable anger" and "unmendable wounds" – shows her filiation with "Philoctetes / in woman's form." Neoptolemos pities Philoctetes but his story of anger is a fiction. Rich claims herself as Philoctetes' descendant because she shares his wounds as well as his anger. She too cries helplessly. She too is alone.

They still control the world. Yet the poet, unlike Philoctetes, can do otherwise. Rich lets this Xerox fall. She can refuse the books on the shelves – "Goethe's dream of the Mothers, Claudel vilifying Gide" – and remember the wounds of "artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake" – while inventing her own language. She does not have to live by Blake and Kafka and Swift. She can stare into "this still

unexcavated hole / called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world" and fill it with other voices, other words, other poems.

Through Rich's lens, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* becomes, by contrast, the tragedy of a man who could not escape his wounds, a man trapped within the destiny of his time. Philoctetes would not go home. He would not find companionship. He would not find a place of solitude where he might address his lonely soul. He tells Neoptolemos:

> I am frightened.
> I was ruined before by lovely words – your words –
> when I was persuaded by them. (389)

Philoctetes suffers not just a personal betrayal; he feels language itself betrayed. The heroic codes of shame and honor and virtue have come to nothing. Recall Achilles when Odysseus visits him: What can any of this mean? Why do we fight?

Rich can ask these questions; Philoctetes cannot. This shifts what Susan Stewart has called the "Philoctetes problem" in ways that illuminate often ignored aspects of Sophocles' play.[8] For Stewart, the "Philoctetes problem" describes the dilemma faced by Philoctetes and his suffering: he must somehow make his pain intelligible, yet the unintelligibility of this pain – indeed, its repulsiveness to onlookers – makes this appear impossible. Communication that can bridge isolation and suffering requires an "implicit tie of intelligibility between speakers and listener," yet as the myth of Philoctetes has it, his isolation and suffering prevent this. For Stewart, the recall of Philoctetes returns him to a community that can hear his suffering. Changed circumstances – and relocation to society from the desolation of Lemnos – allow Philoctetes to become intelligible, healing both his physical wound and his societal one.

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[8] Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, 2002).

The reading opened by Rich's reception, however, leads me to question whether or not Philoctetes becomes intelligible – at least in Sophocles' retelling. As Elizabeth Wingrove asks in her engagement with Stewart's formulation: "Why assume he wants to be recalled?" The Greeks want Philoctetes but Philoctetes quite clearly does not want the Greeks. At most, he seems to want the company of other men – but even then once betrayed by Neoptolemos Philoctetes seems unwilling to trust again. Stewart presumes. . .

Wingrove turns to Sophocles' *Philoctetes* to illuminate how Philoctetes generates his own dialogue directed toward "the very possibility of recognition." For Wingrove, "Philoctetes dramatizes an interlocutory zeal fueled by the agony of abandonment."[9] His rhetorical performance, in other words, animates a new world – or reaches toward one, creating language in the wake of the world-emptying betrayal suffered at the hands of the Greeks.

Rich's reception places Wingrove's insightful reading in a broader context: Philoctetes not only reaches toward a new language but by doing so he refuses the world that "they" control. This refusal is at once linguistic and political, as Philoctetes stops his ears against the inveigling persuasions of his compatriots while also rescinding from participating in their schemes of war and conquest. Philoctetes refuses "to go unrecognized as a betrayed friend," in Wingrove's words; he also refuses to bend when threatened with the wrath of the Greek army. Philoctetes thus stands against the world that "they" maintain.

But Rich's reception also calls attention to a broader dynamic unmentioned by Wingrove and Stewart: the tragedy of Philoctetes' departure from Lemnos. Philoctetes is

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[9] Wingrove, "Philoctetes in the Bastille," *Cultural Critique* (Winter 2010), p. 73.

compelling to return to war; he is compelled to join the unsavory plots of Odysseus and Neoptolemos. Herakles' words portend not the end of Philoctetes' sufferance but its continuation: His warning echoes that of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* against the Greek army's sacrilegious treatment of the altars and temples of the gods of Troy; a similar warning comes in Aeschylus' *Persians* by King Darius to his son Xerxes. Audiences would have known these warnings went unheeded and the Greeks would suffer in the wake of their victory at Troy. Herakles compels Philoctetes to participate in these horrors and impieties.

The tragedy has a personal dimension as well. Rich's poem evokes this: "and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms." Philoctetes not only suffers compulsion to return to a war whose value and meaning he has seen as empty; he also must continue to suffer his loneliness. He will not return home. The promise of friendship with Philoctetes appears beyond repair. His parting words to Lemnos mark the intimate relationships he once had but now must leave behind. They also suggest the loss of a particular dialogue that Rich, by the end of "Twenty-One Love Poems," has learned to affirm as the site of her creative voice:

> In departing,
> I shall call upon this island: farewell,
> chamber that kept watch over me,
>
> water-nymphs,
>
> nymphs of the meadows,
>
> the muscled crashing of sea against headland,
> where often my head, though
> inside the cave, was drenched by the south wind's
> beating,
> and often the mountain of Hermes sent
> back to me in answer

my own voice
echoing,
groaning,
as I weathered the storm.

Although Odysseus, Neoptolemos, and the sailors see Lemnos only as a place of desolation, these final words from Philoctetes suggest it also provided a sweet solitude. In contrast to the warped words exchanged upon the former's arrival, Philoctetes has experienced another, truer dialogue. Recall Rich's final poem, the invocation of her own island with its "dark lintels, blue and foreign stones" and her chosen solitude. Rich intimates that this will provide a place of repair and creativity unbound from the dominant terms of address. Philoctetes must lose this – all of it.

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