

“DAME DISEASE?”:
A NOTE ON THE GENDER OF
PHILOCTETES’ WOUND*

If I remember right, I first came to Bernd Seidensticker’s work when preparing a review of his contribution to the volume of *Entretiens Hardt* devoted to Sophocles, “Die Wahl des Todes”,¹ with the *Ajax* as his central exhibit. I was struck that Seidensticker took the trouble to investigate the possibility that the psychopathology of suicide in the real world might shed light on suicide in Sophocles. This I took as a mark of intellectual breadth and humanity. And in a pleasing coincidence, the last lecture in that book, by R. P. Winnington-Ingram, includes a literally parenthetical statement pertinent to my contribution to this issue of *Hyperboreus* honoring Seidensticker: “*Philoctetes* is all-male”.²

My business here is a small, but I think important, point in the artistic representation of a physical malady in another Sophoclean play, the *Philoctetes*, specifically when it is referred to as ἡ νόσος. Does the disease that afflicts Philoctetes have gender in any but the linguistic sense? That the nouns *Krankheit* and *болезнь* are of feminine gender (for obvious reasons German and Russian come to mind) would not itself justify any suggestion of femaleness in a biological sense. Often – not always – English uses “he” and “she” in referring to mammals and birds, but “it” for reptiles, plants, and protozoa, even when the reproductive mechanism is in fact sexual. One reptile, the whiptail lizard (genus *aspidoscelis*), being exclusively female, is necessarily parthenogenetic, and yet English speakers ignorant of this curious feature would normally refer to the animal as “it,” not “she”. Similarly, plants and protozoa are routinely “it,” even if they reproduce sexually, e.g., the tetrahymena thermophile, which in fact has *seven* sexes.³

* Although this note disputes Seth Schein’s opinion of one matter, I thank him for his friendly discussions on the point, first at the *Drama III* conference in Sydney, and then at Yale, immediately after the publication of his “Green and Yellow” *Philoctetes*.

¹ Seidensticker 1983, 105–155.

² Winnington-Ingram 1983, 237.

³ <http://www.plosbiology.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pbio.1001518>

Exceptions to this English usage are very few indeed: “she”/“her” in reference to ships is still seen in contemporary usage; far less frequently, one meets those distinctively feminine words in reference to cities.

The *Philoctetes* holds nineteen explicit references by the main characters and the chorus to the painful, dripping, foul-smelling infection that set in after the snake guarding the precinct sacred to Chryse inflicted a bite in Philoctetes’ foot. Seventeen times the word is grammatically feminine – ἡ νόσος; twice it is grammatically neuter – τὰ νόσημα (spoken by Neoptolemus at 755, by Philoctetes at 900). In his 2003 translation of the play,⁴ and again in his erudite commentary on that play in the *Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics* series,⁵ Seth Schein generally uses “it” to refer to the disease, but twice uses “she” (lines 758 and 807–808). In his comment ad 265–267 Schein advances an explicit justification of his decision to use the feminine: in the tradition, known in greatest detail from Hesiod, the snake that bit Philoctetes, Echidna (or *echidna*), an amalgam of human (insofar as she is a nymph) and animal, is biologically female, the mother or grandmother of various monstrous and malevolent creatures.

With that much I have no quarrel, and Schein is surely right in remarking ad 268 that “Philoctetes speaks of the disease as something separate from himself, with which he lives”. But I see a misstep in Schein’s extension of the feminine gender from the animal to the ensuing pathology, a recurring topic in the play: “Thus Philoctetes describes the ‘man-destroying ... serpent’ in language suggesting something monstrously savage, chthonic, and distinctively female at 758–759 [ἡκεῖ γὰρ αὕτη διὰ χρόνον | πλάνοις ἴσως ὡς ἐξεπλήσθη, 807–808 [ἀλλ’, ὦ τέκνον, καὶ θάρσος ἴσχ’ ὡς ἦδε μοι | ὀξεῖα φοιτᾷ καὶ ταχεῖ ἀπέρχεται]. Schein’s note includes this translation: “for she [lit(erally) ‘this female’] arrives after a period of time, perhaps when she has been fully sated with (her) wanderings.⁶ αὕτη has no feminine antecedent, except perhaps the idea of νόσος in 755 νοσήματα”. This comment is an incautious conflation of biological and linguistic gender, likely to mislead some readers. The wording “she has been fully sated” might suggest the consciousness and agency moderns associate with a mammalian, indeed human brain, but Schein himself rightly comments ad 743–744 that “...here he does not use a feminine pron[oun] or adj[ective]”. Confusingly, he then goes on to remark that “his language suggests a living force (fem[inine] or neut[er] [emphasis

⁴ Schein 2003.

⁵ Schein 2013.

⁶ Ad 758–759. I had worried that wandering might be associated with consciousness, and even sexual feeling, but Schein very usefully remarks ad 758–759 that the Hippocratic essay on epidemics describes intermittent fevers as “wandering”.

added])". Those last words suggest that sex in any human terms is *not* on Sophocles' mind. I note that in his comment ad 807–808 Schein has an easier time explaining the feminine, since the neuter form inconvenient to his argument has not here made a recent appearance: "'as she [lit. 'this female'] comes to me sharply and departs swiftly'. The adverbs in this translation are pred[icate] adjectives in Greek, agreeing with ἥδε, which looks back to 795 τήνδε τήν νόσον".

As I see it, it is a mistake to translate a Greek demonstrative adjective having grammatical gender by using an English word, "female", that can only be understood as referring to a biological, rather than a linguistic, object. Within a short compass in his description of the plague, Thucydides uses both τὰ νόσημα and ἡ νόσος in reference to one and the same disease. [Demosthenes] 59. 56 *Against Neaera* switches from τὰ νόσημα to τῇ νόσῳ with only two words intervening. In my opinion, Sophocles did not worry that "αὐτή has no feminine antecedent", not because the snake was female (as also her half-human owner) and because he had already signaled that Philoctetes' affliction was to be imagined as female, but simply because the Greek word most commonly used to signify disease is of the feminine gender.⁷ Accordingly, Sophocles did not shrink from putting νόσημα, a linguistically, not biologically, neuter form with a different metrical shape into Neoptolemus' mouth at 755 and into Philoctetes' mouth at 900. To adapt an aphorism (wrongly) attributed to Sigmund Freud, sometimes a painful, malodorous, blood-dripping infection is only a painful, malodorous, blood-dripping infection.

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⁷ Divergence of biological and linguistic gender are, of course, very common in both decent and obscene Greek words for the sexual organs.

Although Sophocles' *Philoctetes* many times over refers to Philoctetes' affliction with a feminine noun, ἡ νόσος, Seth Schein's recent commentary on the play is mistaken to refer to it as "female".

Хотя в *Филоктете* Софокла рана Филоктета неоднократно обозначается при помощи существительного женского рода, ἡ νόσος, автор недавнего комментария к трагедии (Seth L. Schein, *Philoctetes* [Cambridge 2013]) ошибается, полагая, что это дает основание приписать самой ране женский пол.

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