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His Father's Son? Examining inheritance through the figure of Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Vergil's *Aeneid*

Sarah Macdonald

The play *Philoctetes*, by Sophocles, and the *Aeneid*, Vergil's epic, are parts of the same homeric tradition; responses to ancient poetry afforded practically divine status. This paper is primarily interested in how these authors explore their reception of this tradition through Neoptolemus' acceptance or rejection of his inheritance; what he may choose to emulate from the person of Achilles, and what they in turn wish to take from the work of Homer. This exploration is particularly concerned with the anxieties of their own times, and a uniting desire to consider conflict and its effect on culture and populace through literary forms. This paper was originally written for the honours course Homer and his readers, taught by Dr Hau and Dr Chadha of the Classics department, and seeks to engage with the same issues of historiography, intent and intertext.

Neoptolemus, child of Achilles and Deidamia, is mentioned only once in the *Iliad*, when Achilles cries that not even the death of 'my own son, godlike Neoptolemus' (*Il.*19.326-7), could grieve him more than the loss of Patroclus. Given the epic's emphasis on familial relations – the incipit for the Trojan war being the 'theft' of Helen, wife of Menelaos – and the repeated call throughout the conflict to the fathers of dead sons or vice-versa, one might expect this sentiment to be reversed: that the only thing able to grieve him more than the death of his boon companion would be the passing of his son. Regardless, Achilles is unaware of whether his own son is even still alive after ten years of absence; the conflict has divorced him from his homeland and the natural order of things. Our only understanding of Neoptolemus within the *Iliad* is through this deviation from what one might expect. Despite the brevity of this introduction, Neoptolemus has an enduring narrative in his own right. His later arrival at Troy, his storming of the city, and his notorious impiety at Priam's altar[1] were part of the larger

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[1] This impiety consists of murdering Polites, Priam's youngest living son, in front of him, and then gutting the Trojan King against the altar of Zeus at the heart of the palace.

Epic Cycle which encompassed the entirety of the Troy-stories that Homer would have drawn the events of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from. Considering the presence of his story in the canon and the enduring appeal of Homer, Neoptolemus' sparse introduction in the most famous work in the ancient world did nothing to limit his presence in later sequels and adaptations of Homer. *Philoctetes* by Sophocles and *The Aeneid*[2] of Vergil are just two such texts. Their treatment of Neoptolemus is interesting, and reflects an interrogation of their own contexts and of the revered tradition of Homer. In particular, it will be argued, they investigate the work of Homer with reference to the character of Achilles, reflected 'through a glass, darkly' in the figure of Neoptolemus. This is explored in modern scholarship by academics such as Gotschall, whose deconstruction of Homeric context is vital to the discussion, as is Schein's dialogue of artistic response to Neoptolemus' set fate in the mythic cycle and Knox's scholarship on the 'rebirth' of Neptolemus in new contexts. These discussions of inheritance, of both the unchangeable and the adaptable, can be extended outwards from the characters themselves, and used to examine broader questions of cultural inheritance, of fear and fascination. In order to understand this, one must consider context, character and intertextuality.

Context is key when considering intertext - it seems impossible to understand the whys of adaption if we do not discuss the culture a text was written for. In order to understand Achilles as presented through Neoptolemus in later works, we must first understand the Achilles of Homer. Attempting to clarify the context of the Homer figure is almost impossible, but Gottschall's theory that they took form after the Mycenaean civilisation collapse is appealing. The great bronze age society rapidly declined at some point around 1200 BC, leaving only the fragmentary remains of 'cities', sophisticated stonework and treasure. People continued to live about the ruins, and this is the life Gottschall posits for the Homeric poet, that of a relatively poor bard looking at a palace. If the poets of this era lived in the ruins of a great civilisation, it would clarify why the Homeric princesses take part in laundering the clothes of the court, why Odysseus' great hall had a midden at its door, and why even the 'king' of Ithaca is also a farmer. In Gotschall's words, 'Homer looks back from his relatively degraded age and imagines a lost world of great prosperity'.[3] Whilst still a violent world, with raids and retributive attacks, the Greece of Homer was smaller, and lacked the context of total war that haunts the work

[2] Inline references to the *Aeneid* follow the line numbers of Fagles' translation throughout. See *The Aeneid,* (trans.) R. Fagles, (New York, 2006).

[3] J. Gotschall, *The Rape of Troy: evolution, violence, and the world of Homer* (Cambridge, 2008), 31.

of Sophocles and Vergil, writing in the final years of the Peloponnesian war[4] and the aftermath of Italy's civil wars[5] respectively. Achilles in Homer is a cultural memory of a a hero; the unbridled violence he unleashes is the same exaggeration that sees every king with a stash of golden treasures to give away, and every meal a feast of roasted meat.[6] Everything he does he does to excess; he is so fast he is like a god (*Il.*22.21), when he fights, his violence is so excessive that he is no longer human (*Il.*22.262), and when he chooses to pity he pities the family of his greatest enemy (*Il.*24.510). The poet of the *Iliad* uses the figure of Achilles to examine the force that could have levelled a civilisation. This takes the fascination of the Mycenaean collapse and Greek life continuing amongst the ruins to a natural conclusion in the desire to know *why* and *how*. The most vital part of this lies in the fact that Homer was not present for this event; did not live when those walls fell. The tension between these texts, then, lies in the fact that the *Iliad* is a means of understanding through memory the demise of a society; the *Aeneid* and *Philoctetes* present analysis of their author's respective fear of the same.

In order to consider the present, you must move forwards; Achilles' story has already been told by Homer, and the reverence his work was (and is) held in[7] surely would have have made direct rewritings a daunting prospect. 'Achilles is dramatised both as a model and as a problem, not only through his presence but ... also through his absence.'[8] In taking his son, an author is able to grasp at these binary interpretations and consider the impact of both aspects in one figure. Neoptolemus is *tabula rasa* to investigate the idea of a destructive force and the tension between *phusis* (inherited characteristics) and learned behaviour. Both texts name Neoptolemus as son of Achilles; Michelakis says this "imposes on the spectator an angle from which to look at and to think about the character of Neoptolemus.'[9] He cannot be divorced from his heritage.

As we have established that Neoptolemus serves as a malleable extension of the Achilles figure, we must examine what the different ideologies of place and time alter about him, and how this reflects contemporary attitudes to the text of the *Iliad.* Sophocles' Athens

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[4] S.L. Schein, 'The Iliad and Odyssey in Sophocles' Philoctetes: generic complexity and ethical ambiguity' (2006) 49 *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, Special Issue: Institute of Classical Studies, Bulletin Supplement No. S87: Greek Drama III: Essays in Honour of Kevin Lee,*133.
[5] B.M.W. Knox, 'Introduction' in *The Aeneid,* (trans.) R. Fagles, (New York, 2006), 25.
[6] Gotschall, *The rape of Troy,* 31.
[7] Strabo, *Geography,* (trans.) H. L. Jones (Harvard, 1917-1932), 1;1;2.
[8] P. Michelakis, *Achilles in Greek Tragedy*, (Cambridge, 2002), 1.
[9] P. Michelakis, *Achilles*, 163.

was on the surface entirely divorced from the life of 'Homeric era Greeks' who resided in 'semi-isolation from each other - separated by ... mountains and ... waves.'[10] This bears little resemblance to the strong Attic city culture, where the interconnectedness of the Athenian people was the lifeblood of the *polis*. It would be easy to suggest that these two worlds were radically different. The raids that characterise Homer's fragmented Greece had by this point developed into the Peloponnesian war, and the semi-isolated townships into aggressive city states such as Sparta and Athens. The Greece of Sophocles had the same problems at that of Homer on a much larger scale, and Athens was at the epicentre. Whilst a democratic city, the elite of Athens were those largely in control of said political system, free to expend their time and energy in the assembly. But by their very nature, the elite were a minority, and in some ways were held accountable by the masses, the middling to poor citizens who rowed the triremes and made up the foot soldiers. Cultural tensions in Athens stemmed from the perceived inclination of the masses to follow demagogues, as laid out in texts such as pseudo-Xenophon's *Old Oligarch* which claims that 'in every land the best element is opposed to democracy' (*O.O.*1.5), and that 'it is...the worst elements in each city who are well-disposed to the common people' (*O.O.*3.9). Sophocles transfers these anxieties onto the text of his play *Philoctetes.* Here Neoptolemus, having arrived in Troy to take his father's place, is told that he will be unable to take the city without the bow of Hercules. This weapon never reached Troy, and is currently in the possession of the titular character, Philoctetes: he, however, was disabled by an injury and abandoned en route to Troy. This situation understandably leads to a loathing of the remaining commanders - Agamemnon, Menelaus and Odysseus - so Neoptolemus is dispatched with Odysseus to reclaim the bow through trickery and deceit. What results forms the body of the play, as Neoptolemus is torn between pragmatism and *phusis.*

The Neoptolemus Sophocles presents in *Philoctetes* is the model of an exemplary Athenian youth, eager to fight and serve but also caught between the legacy of his heroic father and the wily demagogue figure of Odysseus. Knox alleges that 'The democratic viewpoint (typically that of a seafaring and commercial community) is Odyssean - an ideal of versatility, adaptability, diplomatic skill and intellectual curiosity, insisting on success combined with glory rather than sacrificed for it.'[11] Despite this, Sophocles indicates throughout the text that Odysseus is a figure not to be trusted. He is associated, rather, with undesirable attributes, as at 1.86-89; Neoptolemus expresses distress at 'telling lies' on his behalf, and at 3.1051-2 he remarks that even his piety comes second

[10] J. Gotschall, *The Rape of Troy,* 27.
[11] B.M.W. Knox, 'Philoctetes', (1964) 3.1 *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics,* 45.

to his desire to 'win'. If Odysseus is emblematic of the democratic ideal, this negative portrayal certainly creates a tension between the writer and the dominant ideology of the time. The democratic ideal, as represented in the mutability of Odysseus, has not saved Athens from the past two decades of war; and Sophocles casts doubt on it throughout the play when Neoptolemus chastises 'cunning' Odysseus for his lack of honour (*Phil.*3.842). Some scholars suggest Odysseus has been written as a villain, 'a Sophoclean symbol of late fifth-century corruption', 'intellectually corrupt' to 'balance the physically corrupt'[12] figure of the disabled Philoctetes.

Doubting Odysseus, however, is not the same as damning him for his actions; the reader is shown when Neoptolemus gains the bow that his plan would have worked. It is a struggle, rather, between ideals, and how the inhabitants of the city-state can navigate their political system whilst still upholding traditional values as received from their forebears. These values present themselves in Achilles, invoked by name early on (*Phil.*1.3), represents another ideal, that of 'essential nobility,'[13] his brute strength combined with sympathy for the pathetic. Neoptolemus must struggle throughout with these two natures, from his initial impulse to listen to the older man he is beholden to, and force 'Philoctetes against his will to participate in the war for the sake of the Greek army and Neoptolemus' own prospective glory'[14] through to the restoration of his Achillean nature with his refusal to take the bow from Philoctetes. His redemption is prompted by his 'moral education' at the hands of Philoctetes, who in remembering the virtue of Achilles' generation (*Phil.*2.410-435) reminds him of his *phusis.*

In Athens, thick with sophists and teachers, the issue of education was a major public concern; one only has to consider the frenzy of Socrates' trial on a charge of corrupting the youth of Athens and his ensuing death (a few years after *Philoctetes* was first performed) to corroborate the point. If Odysseus is the epitome of democratic thought, then Sophocles utilises the figure of Neoptolemus to represent the dilemma the next generation of elites will face between nature and inheritance; they are only potentials and require the right education and environment to flourish.[15] The youth of the city then have to 'flourish' correctly, as the problem lies in the fact that this is no thought

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[12] C.R. Beye, 'Sophocles' Philoctetes and the Homeric Embassy' (1970) 101 *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 67-8.
[13] B.M.W. Knox, 'Philoctetes', 46.
[14] S.L. Schein, 'The Iliad and Odyssey', 136.
[15] M.W. Blundell, 'The '*phusis*' of Neoptolemus in Sophocles' 'Philoctetes'', (1988) 35:2 *Greece & Rome* 147.

exercise; if they make the wrong choice in the future the city will fall. As such, we are returned to Homer's life amongst the Mycenaean ruins - the fascination of what, of *who* can level a city. For the Athenians, the ongoing threat of the Peloponnesian war has made this a brutal and possible reality on a larger scale.

Achilles haunts this text as the choice Neoptolemus can make; indeed, though addressed throughout as 'son of', Philoctetes fails to recognise him without introduction, meaning that it is his own choice 'to decide whether to become like Achilles or not.'[16] In following following his father's straightforward footsteps post-inspiration by Philoctetes it is implied Neoptolemus does the right thing; that he has successfully received a moral education and has achieved the promise of his inherited nobility. Despite this, Heracles' warning at the end of the play (*Phil.*1439-1443) that reminds Neoptolemus 'that nothing ranks so high' as piety has an ominous ring to it. Schein writes that it indicates to the audience 'the knowledge that something in his character and destiny is warped and cannot be straightened, undercuts this identification and with it the values for which he seems to stand'.[17] The problem here lies in the issue of working from a pre-established canon of events such as the Epic Cycle; while it may have only existed in myth and in the oral tradition, the stories and their endings were widely known. In drawing from the work of Homer (and in turn the greater tradition of events at Troy) no writer could manipulate Neoptolemus into a pious future and correct moral behaviour. He is doomed to be a lesser reflection of his father because his impious slaughter of Priam is a fixed point. Unlike Achilles, he is unable to reject impiety, as when the corpse of Hector is returned to Priam. Sophocles' decision to write not of the straightforward victory of Achilles, but rather of his problematic descendant who is fated to make the wrong choice - particularly at a time when the threat of destruction hangs over Athens - is an interesting one. It implies certain things about the nature of decision making in the city-state, and of the forces that controlled its politics. Perhaps this is at heart a validation of democracy, that the right choice can only be made when one is surrounded by peers and forced to examine one's actions; after all, the tradition follows that Neoptolemus is alone and thus free to act rashly when he kills Priam.

Vergil's *Aeneid*, however, was not written in a Greek context but a Roman one. Rome at this point was a culture in flux, adjusting to Augustus' reign as *princeps* and the aftermath of the civil wars. Neoptolemus' inevitable slaughter of Priam raises few problems for Vergil, who renders it vividly (2:668-690); he is not seeking to further

[16] P. Michelakis, *Achilles*, 168.
[17] S.L. Schein, 'The Iliad and Odyssey', 138.

lionise a Greek inheritance. Rather, he is creating a background against which Rome can struggle and then emerge in a new, hopefully stable, imperial context. After all, the threat of destruction that hung over Athens at the time of *Philoctetes* writing had already come true for Roman Italy, and whilst the modern reader is aware of the continued stability of Augustus' reign, there is no reason that a contemporary of Vergil's would not fixate on such violence, or fear future proscriptions whilst hoping desperately for stability. Neoptolemus' appearance in the *Aeneid* forms the central part of a similar destruction; his slaughter of the royal family is one of the last things Aeneas witnesses before he is forced to flee Troy.

Neoptolemus - renamed Pyrrhus - is introduced as the towers of Ilium burn. 'the ubiquitous presence of the imagery of fire...with its introduction, the Trojans have to fight not only against mortal enemies but also the power of the elements, against which all resistance is in vain.'[18] Pyrrhus, already identified with the flames through his name, is also a force of nature, 'no river so wild, frothing with spite' (*Aen.*2.615) and unstoppable in his rush through the palace. This cannot help but recall his father's last wild chase after Hector, his relentless run that his son has inherited that enables him to catch Polites before he can reach Priam. The image of him as inhuman continues; at *Aen.*2.589 he is compared to a snake that has shed its skin. This casting off of the old self raises ideas of intertext between Vergil's work and Sophocles', as if Neoptolemus has cast off not just the earlier 'moral' education Philoctetes and the spirit of Hercules granted him but also his acceptance of his father's *phusis,* which is made plain when he sneers at Priam's invocation of him (*Aen.*2:668).

Emerging from the civil war, Vergil's Italy saw death and proscription to establish it as a 'reformed' state under Augustus; while not technically imperial in nature, it was no longer a republic. This transformation was a violent one. Pyrrhus, too, had a transformation; from soldier to snake, his old skin sloughed off (*Aen.*2.585-590). Knox reminds us his real name is Neoptolemus; 'new war, new warrior. He is the rebirth of the old war'.[19] It seems plausible that Pyrrhus is the war given form by Vergil, the renewal of the violence the state saw under Julius Caesar's seizing of power. He slays young (Polites) and old (Priam) alike; the proscriptions under the second triumvirate did much the same. Priam stands for tradition, continuity - his fifty sons could probably

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[18] A. Rossi, *Contexts of War: Manipulation of Genre in Virgilian Battle Narrative* (Ann Arbour, 2004), 27.

[19] B.M.W. Knox, 'The Serpent and the Flame: The Imagery of the Second Book of the Aeneid' (1950) 71:4 *The American Journal of Philology*, 394.

have made a reasonable senate themselves - but Pyrrhus ends this when he renders Priam 'a corpse without a name (*Aen.*2.692)'. Some of the family survive, such as his son Helenus and a handful of his daughters. Continuity has not, therefore, been destroyed, but it lacks its previous heft without the surrounding culture to validate its power, much as the senate and systems of the republic survived under Augustus in neutered form. Instead elite power reshapes itself in the figure of a new king, Aeneas (who nonetheless stemmed from an old tradition, just as Augustus claimed legitimacy from the patrician Julian line of his adopted father, Caesar). As Budick says

> […] the foundation of every state is violent ... one responsibility ... must be to question foundation itself and to promote an internal re-foundation that would exclude violence on all sides. This re-foundation must entail, pre-eminently, the questioning and revision of the terms self, place, and state themselves.[20]

Vergil founds and re-founds his epic with questions regarding the place of violence. Pyrrhus kills Priam at the beginning of the poem and Aeneas kills Turnus at the end. These are the first and last 'big' deaths one encounters, remarkable in their violence, and Vergil arguably utilises a Homeric ring composition in order to parallel them. In a poem so laden with symbolism as the Aeneid it seems likely this was intentional; but let us again consider Vergil in context and think about this death cycle in reference to his own time. Both include a call to the killer's father (*Aen.* 2.668, *Aen.*12.1086) and both invoke the name of a dead loved one in response. Priam's murder at the hands of Phyrrus ends a civilisation, however, while Aeneas' slaughter of Turnus promotes an exclusion of violence in the future through the use of violence *now* against the 'dangerous' element of society. This may have enabled the contemporary reader to directly parallel Aeneas' need to kill Turnus with the deaths Augustus is forced to enact in order to secure his state; Vergil's task is the re-examination Budick prioritises. This situation is the inverse of the *Iliad*, where at the end of the poem the force of violence personified in Achilles (who even says he is a lion, and not a man *Il.*22.262), kills the stabilising figure of crown-prince Hector. If the final death in the Aeneid is established in contrast to the death of Priam and intertext implies it is also in opposition to the death of Hector, Vergil's intent appears to be to remind the reader of the similarity between Achilles and his son, no matter what Priam says in the second book ('You say you're Achilles son? You lie!' *Aen.*2.668).

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[20] S. Budick, 'The Prospect of Tradition: Elements of Futurity in a Topos of Homer and Virgil' (1991) 22:1 *New Literary History,* 23.

Waiting until the very end of the poem to re-establish this intertext allows Vergil space to clarify his epic as separate from Homer throughout; Fowler in particular notes the pathetic imagery of death in Vergil, and states that the 'change of mood from Homer has often been observed.'[21] Having conceived and completed an epic that is able to use Homer, but avoids slavish devotion to his tradition, ensures that the audience is aware of the intertext of inheritance that informs the character of Pyrrhus and the text itself. This frames not only an examination of the destruction and foundation of states, but also allows Vergil to position himself as an heir to Homer, just as Sophocles does.

The approach of Vergil could not be more distant from that of Sophocles. Sophocles' adaptation must seek to indicate continuity between the Greece of Homer and his own time, because the association is prized and thought of as noble. Vergil, though, is not constrained by regard for the Greeks as a whole because it is not his history to preserve. Rather, he is able to utilise and extend the characteristics of Achilles for his own ends, adapting the metaphors of Homer to create a relentless force in his Pyrrhus. Both, however, are driven by their contexts, fascinated by the same issue at the heart of Homer's work; what forces can destroy a city, a way of life? Achilles is the manifestation of what can shake the foundations of a civilisation in Homer, and Neoptolemus in these texts is an ongoing interrogation of that character. Just as the youth of Athens had to choose between their noble *phusis* and the demands of their culture, so Vergil witnesses Rome suffer through wars driven by similar forces of inheritance and ideology. *Philoctetes* and the *Aenied* may approach their interpretations of the *Iliad* in a way unique to their place and time in order to examine the preoccupations of their writers, but the fascination of conflict and its consequences unite both in their inheritance of the Homeric tradition.

[21] Don Fowler, 'Vergil on Killing Virgins', in Whitby, Whitby, & Hardie (eds.), *Homo viator : classical essays for John Bramble* (Bristol, 1987), 189.

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