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

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