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Gide's *Philoctète*: An Untested Happiness

Gide's *Philoctète* is a brilliant—but flawed—text. Philoctète liberates himself from a corrupt, oppressive society and discovers happiness in the end. But while Gide succeeds in charting Philoctète's path to happiness, he fails to make this happiness fully persuasive to his audience. The purpose of this paper is to explore Gide's success and failure in his project.

There can be no doubt that Gide himself believed in Philoctète's happiness, and even felt it personally. Gide's model in charting Philoctète's path to happiness was Nietzsche. Not long before finishing *Philoctète* Gide wrote in a letter, "I would *madly* have wanted to be him [Nietzsche]." (Sheridan 163-4) Several have noticed that Philoctète is a Nietzschean hero: he liberates himself from the state and its gods to determine his own values—he is Nietzsche's *der Schätzende* (Nietzsche 72). When he realizes that he has been betrayed by the state with its gods and heroes, he chooses to remain on the island where, in his liberation, he finds happiness: *je suis heureux* (Gide 63). But it has not been noticed how indebted Gide is to Nietzsche's chapter "On the New Idol" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Kaufmann 160-3). Here Nietzsche blisters the state for claiming religious authority, for rendering the individual superfluous, and for lying. All three points are important in *Philoctète*. Ulysse teaches Néoptolème that virtue is "the voice of the gods, the orders of the city, and the offering of ourselves to Greece" (Gide 25). The text begins with Néoptolème prepared to be sacrificed as Iphigenia was. And Ulysse teaches Néoptolème to lie.

Philoctète, by contrast, teaches him real virtue. Gide makes their relationship pederastic (which some miss) and virtuous, to expose Ulysse's exploitation of Néoptolème. And as Pollard observes, Philoctète reflects Gide's own sexuality (327). Indeed, this helps explain Gide's interest in criticizing societal values (O'Brien 283)—the very theme so evident in Nietzsche.

But in making Philoctète a poet whose intellect enables him to forget his physical anguish in the beauty of his own words (Gide 35) Gide omits the gut-wrenching emotional trauma we experience in Sophocles. Gide's Philoctète discusses his illness but never cries out in agony in the way Sophocles' Philoctetes does, e.g. ἄ ἄ ἄ ἄ (732, 739). While Sophocles' Philoctetes demonstrates his heroic resolve in accepting further suffering in order not to yield to his enemies (Lessing 30), Gide's Philoctète pays no such price in claiming to be happy. Philoctetes' resolve passes the test presented by his suffering; Philoctète's happiness is not tested. Gide's claim that Philoctète is happy is therefore less persuasive than Sophocles' claim that Philoctetes is strong. Does Gide fail here because he is so Nietzschean that ideas—and nothing else—drive his characters (Rothermere I-III)? Because he is by nature averse to emotion (Watson-Williams 171-3, 179-81)? Or simply because he is not as talented a poet as Sophocles?

