

§ 5. But all this was changed when Philoctetes became a subject of tragic drama. The very essence of the situation, as a theme for Tragedy, was the terrible disadvantage at which the irony of fate had placed the Greeks. Here was a brave and loyal man, guiltless of offence, whom they had banished from their company,—whom they had even condemned to long years of extreme suffering,—because a misfortune,—incurred by him in the course of doing them a service,—had rendered his person obnoxious to them. For ten years he had been pining on Lemnos; and now they learned that their miserable victim was the arbiter of their destinies. It was not enough if, by force or fraud, they could acquire his bow. The oracle had said that the bow must be used at Troy by Philoctetes himself. How could he be induced to give this indispensable aid?

The story  
as a theme  
for drama.

A dramatist could not glide over this difficulty with the facile eloquence of an epic poet. If the Lemnian outcast was to be brought, in all his wretchedness, before the eyes of the spectators, nature and art alike required the inference that such misery had driven the iron into his soul. It would seem a violation of all probability if, when visited at last by an envoy from the camp, he was instantly conciliated by a promise—be the sanction what it might—that, on going to Troy, he would be healed, and would gain a victory of which the profit would be shared by the authors of his past woes. Rather the Philoctetes of drama would be conceived as one to whom the Greeks at Troy were objects of a fixed mistrust, and their leaders, of an invincible abhorrence; one to whom their foes were friends, and their disasters, consolations; one who could almost think that his long agony had been an evil dream, if he could but hear that they were utterly overthrown, and that it was once more possible for him, without misgiving or perplexity, to recognise the justice of the gods<sup>1</sup>.

§ 6. Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles—to place their names in the chronological order of their plays on this subject—solved the problem each in his own manner. A comparison of their methods is interesting. That it is possible, is due in great

The three  
great dra-  
matists.

<sup>1</sup> See, *e.g.*, in this play, vv. 451 f., 631 f., 1043 f.