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TWO AMPUTATIONS IN SOPHOCLES

I

As his fit overpowers him, Philoctetes makes the following request of Neoptolemus (*Phil.* 747-50):

πρὸς θεῶν, πρόχειρον εἴ τί σοι, τέκνον, πάρα
ξίφος χερσῶν, πάταξον εἰς ἄκρον πόδα·
ἀπάμησον ὡς τάχιστα· μὴ φείσῃ βίου.
ἴθ', ὦ παῖ.

Most translators, and commentators who express a view, take ἄκρον πόδα in 748 to denote Philoctetes' heel or toes.¹ This is odd in the context, for the following reasons (in decreasing order of significance). (i) Philoctetes is afflicted with pain in his foot, not just his heel or toes. If he seeks solace through amputation, we would naturally assume that he wants the whole limb removed rather than a small part of it. (ii) Cutting off the heel or toes, though painful, could hardly be imagined to result in immediate death, a fact

I am grateful to Professor Alan Sommerstein for helpful comments.

¹ Heel: Jebb 1890 and 1898, Ussher 1990, Lloyd-Jones 1998. Toes: Cerri 2003, Ceschi 2005, p. 12 ('la punta del piede'). Campbell 1881 unhelpfully comments 'the force of ἄκρος in such phrases is not to be pressed'. Webster 1970 has no note on the passage.

which renders the subsequent request μὴ φείση βίου comic at best. (iii) The procedure seems too precise and delicate to be carried out by a man with no better surgical tools to hand than a sword.

These objections would be satisfied if Philoctetes were asking for his whole foot to be removed:² but how do we extract such a sense from ἄκρον πόδα? The basic sense of ἄκρος is ‘at the farthest point or end, hence either topmost, outermost, or inmost’ (LSJ⁹ s.v.)³, and this can apply in different ways to parts of the body. To take two examples from the entry in LSJ⁹, at Hom. *Od.* 22.277-8 Ἀμφιμέδων δ’ ἄρα Τηλέμαχον βάλει χεῖρ’ ἐπὶ καρπῶ | λίγδην, ἄκρον δὲ ῥινὸν δηλήσατο χαλκός the sense is ‘grazed the surface of his skin’,⁴ while Eur. *Ion* 1166 ἐν δ’ ἄκροισι βὰς ποσίν means ‘standing on tip-toe’. There are several places on the foot which would satisfy such a definition. One of them is the ankle, its uppermost extremity; and when the adjective

² Thus Mazon 1960 ‘frappe, coupe-moi le pied au plus vite’ and Raeburn 2008 ‘Cut this wretched foot off!’

³ Compare Gow’s point (1950, on Theocr. 11.35 ff.) that ‘ἄκρος qualifying a period of time usually denotes, not the middle, but either the beginning or the end’. Cf. *id.* on *ibid.* 24.77, Pind. *P.* 11.10 ἄκρᾱ σὺν ἑσπέρᾱ ‘at nightfall’ (not ‘at dead of night’: see Finglass 2007 *ad loc.*), Soph. *Aj.* 285-6 ἄκρας νυκτός, ἤνιχ’ ἑσπεροὶ | λαμπτήρες οὐκέτ’ ἦθον ‘at nightfall, when the evening lamps were no longer burning’ (see the note in my forthcoming edition), fr. 991c Radt 1999 ἀκρόνυξ (defined by Photius (α 862 = Theodoridis 1982–, vol. I p. 92, quoting the fragment) as οἶον ἀρχὴ νυκτός; cf. Radt 1968 = 2002, pp. 40-1).

⁴ This sense also seems desirable at *Phil.* 823-5 ἰδρώς γέ τοί νιν πᾶν καταστάζει δέμας, | μέλαινά τ’ ἄκρου τις παρέρρωγεν ποδός | αἰμορραγῆς φλέψ, where the blood flows from ‘the surface of the foot’. Commentators again take ἄκρον πόδα to denote the heel (thus Jebb, Wilamowitz *apud* Kamerbeek, Lloyd-Jones, Ussher, Raeburn) or toes (Mazon, Cerri, Ceschi 2005, p. 16), but neither is an obvious location for a burst vein or artery.

is understood in this way,⁵ our original three problems disappear. (i) Philoctetes now requests the amputation of the limb which is troubling him. (ii) Such an amputation would lead to a swift demise through blood loss. (iii) Cutting off the foot at the ankle is obviously well within the capabilities of a competent swordsman.⁶

A parallel for this sense is provided by Eur. *Cycl.* 400 τένοντος ἀρπάσας ἄκρου ποδός, where Seaford 1984 comments “‘The tendon at the end of the foot’ is where the foot joins the leg’, or the ankle. This is the location of what we call the Achilles tendon, the most obvious tendon in the foot, which can be easily felt behind the ankle. This is the logical place to grab someone in order to throw them: it is harder to imagine someone being gripped effectively by either the toes or the heel before suffering such a fate. This latter point is confirmed by S. *Tr.* 779-80 μάρψας ποδός νιν, ἄρθρον ἧ λυγίζεται, | ῥίπτει πρὸς ἀμφίκλυστον ἐκ πόντου πέτραν, a passage which Seaford thinks may have influenced Euripides here.

⁵ As it was by Schneidewin in his editions (1849-55, ‘bis an die Wurzel’), though without argument.

⁶ Kamerbeek 1980, on 747-8 puts forward the correct interpretation for the wrong reason when he writes ‘Jebb interprets as “heel” (πτέρνα), others prefer to understand the whole foot, ἄκρον πόδα meaning the foot at the end of the leg (πούς, after all, can be used to denote the leg, just as χεῖρ the arm).’ In another work this might be a natural interpretation: but when we have heard πούς in this play referring so many times to Philoctetes’ foot, it hardly be used here to denote his leg.

II

Closer attention to the meaning of ἄκρος can elucidate another passage of Sophocles, from his *Ajax* (lines 235-44). Tecmessa is describing to the chorus how Ajax attacked certain animals in his hut, as follows:

ὦν τὰ μὲν εἶσω ἴσφάζ' ἐπὶ γαίᾳς, 235
τὰ δὲ πλευροκοπῶν δίχ' ἀνερρήγνυ.
δύο δ' ἀργίποδας κριούς ἀνελών
τοῦ μὲν κεφαλὴν καὶ γλώσσαν ἄκραν
ρίπτει θερίσας, τὸν δ' ὀρθὸν ἄνω
κίονι δήσας 240
μέγαν ἵπποδέτην ῥυτῆρα λαβῶν
παίει λιγυρᾶ μάστιγι διπλῆ,
κακὰ δεινάζων ῥήμαθ', ἅ δαίμων
κούδεις ἀνδρῶν ἐδίδαξεν.

Many scholars take γλώσσαν ἄκραν in 238 to mean ‘tip of the tongue’.⁷ Some simply refer to the tongue without further specification, though they give no account of

⁷ Thus Campbell 1881, Jebb 1868 and 1896, Untersteiner 1946, Kamerbeek 1953 and 1963, Lloyd-Jones 1997, Garvie 1998, Raeburn 2008. The phrase has this sense at Theocr. 9.30 μηκέτ' ἐπὶ γλώσσας ἄκρας ὀλοφυγγόνα φύσω.

the adjective.⁸ Following on from the above discussion of ἄκρος, I understand the phrase to denote the opposite extremity of the tongue: that is, its base or root.⁹ This interpretation brings the following advantages:

(i) The passage as a whole is one of extraordinary violence: I have quoted it in full for that reason. The traditional translation requires us to believe that in between beheading animals, cleaving through their spines, and scourging them at a pillar, Ajax carefully nicks the tongue-tip of one the beasts. The very delicacy of the action in the midst of such brutality is incongruous. It is much easier to imagine him grabbing the tongue and cutting it off by the root. Ajax would thus inflict a suitably vicious wound, one which also has Homeric precedent (*Il.* 5.292 τοῦ δ' ἀπὸ μὲν γλῶσσαν πρυμνὴν τάμε χαλκὸς ἀτειρής).

(ii) Cutting out the tongue (or 'elinguation') as a punishment is attested in the ancient world, most famously for Hyperides¹⁰ and Cicero¹¹; beyond Greco-Roman

⁸ E.g. Mazon 1958, Segal 1981, p. 139, Ciani 1999.

⁹ This was first proposed by Schneidewin ('extremo palato tenus'), though without argument. Jebb 1868 and 1896 deprecates the idea, but again without saying why.

¹⁰ [Plut.] *X Orat. Vit.* 849bc καὶ ἀχθεῖς πρὸς Ἄντίπατρον εἰς Κόρινθον, ἔπειτα βασανιζόμενος διέφαγε τὴν γλῶτταν, ὥστε μηδὲν ἐξειπεῖν τῶν τῆς πόλεως ἀπορρήτων δυνηθῆναι· καὶ οὕτως ἐτελεύτησε ...

Ἑρμιππος (*FGrHist* 1026 F 47 Bollansée) δὲ φησιν αὐτὸν γλωττοτομηθῆναι εἰς Μακεδονίαν ἐλθόντα καὶ ριφῆναι ἄταφον ... οἱ δ' ἐν Κλεωναῖς ἀποθανεῖν αὐτὸν λέγουσιν, ἀπαχθέντα μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων, ὅπου γλωττοτομηθῆναι καὶ διαφθαρῆναι ὃν προεῖρηται τρόπον; Plut. *Dem.* 28.4 Ὑπερείδου δὲ καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν ἐκτμηθῆναι ζῶντος λέγουσι (at Cleonae by Antipater). Cf. Bollansée's comment (1999, p. 394) 'the cutting out of

antiquity, we find it in Hammurabi's *Code*¹² and the Old Testament.¹³ Some texts explicitly refer to the tongue being cut out by the roots: these include a decree of the Emperor Constantine,¹⁴ and the case of one Udiastes, recorded by Ctesias as cited by Photius.¹⁵ I have not found a case of the tongue-tip being cut out as a punishment. Since

the orator's tongue [is an] overt ... reference to the man's chief weapon against the Macedonians'. See further Engels 1989, p. 386 with n. 826.

¹¹ Cf. Cassius Dio 47.8.3-4 ὡς δ' οὖν καὶ ἡ [sc. κεφαλὴ] τοῦ Κικέρωνός ποτε ἐκομίσθη σφίσι (φεύγων γὰρ καὶ καταληφθεὶς ἐσφάγη), ὁ μὲν Ἀντώνιος πολλὰ αὐτῷ καὶ δυσχερῆ ἐξονειδίσας ἔπειτ' ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὴν ἐκφανέστερον τῶν ἄλλων ἐν τῷ βήματι προτεθῆναι, ἴν' ὅθεν κατ' αὐτοῦ δημηγορῶν ἠκούετο, ἐνταῦθα μετὰ τῆς χειρὸς τῆς δεξιᾶς, ὡσπερ ἀπετέμνητο, ὀρώτο· ἡ δὲ δὴ Φουλουία ἔς τε τὰς χεῖρας αὐτὴν, πρὶν ἀποκομισθῆναι, ἐδέξατο καὶ ἐμπικραναμένη οἱ καὶ ἐμπύσσασα ἐπὶ τε τὰ γόνατα ἐπέθηκε καὶ τὸ στόμα αὐτῆς διοίξασα τὴν τε γλῶσσαν ἐξείλκυσε καὶ ταῖς βελόνας, αἷς ἐς τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐχρήτο, κατεκέντησε πολλὰ ἅμα καὶ μιὰρὰ προσεπισκώπτουσα.

¹² Paragraph 192 (translated by Viel 2005, vol. II p. 633 ≈ 2002, p. 631): 'If a son of an official or the son of a priestess has said to the father or the mother who has brought him up, "You are not my father. You are not my mother", they shall cut out his tongue.'

¹³ *Proverbs* 10.31: 'The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out.'

¹⁴ Theodosian Code 10.10.2 (Mommsen and Meyer 1905, vol. I p. 540): *Imp. Constantinus a. ad populum. Comprimatur unum maximum humanae vitae malum delatorum exsecranda pernicies et inter primos conatus in ipsis faucibus stranguletur, et amputata radicitus invidiae lingua vellatur, ita ut iudices nec calumniam nec vocem prorsus deferentis admittant; sed si qui delator exstiterit, capitali sententiae subiugetur. Dat. et p(ro)p(osita) in foro Divi Traiani kal. decemb., Constantino a. v. et Licinio Caes. cons.* For the date of the edict (1st December A.D. 312) see Liebs 2007, p. 5 n. 33.

¹⁵ Ctesias *FGrHist* 688 F16.58 = Lenfant 2004 fr. 142 = Phot. *Bibl.* 43a καὶ ἐκτέμνεται Οὐδιάστῃς τὴν γλῶτταν καὶ ἐξελκύνεται ταύτην ἐξόπισθεν, καὶ θνήσκει.

Ajax believes that he is taking justified vengeance on the Greek leaders, it is appropriate that his action corresponds to a recognisable, if vicious, form of retribution, and thus should involve removal of the entire organ. This would be still more appropriate if the animal in question is meant to represent Agamemnon:¹⁶ as Hermann argues, elinguation would be an obvious penalty for the man who, as overall commander of the host, would have pronounced the judgment which awarded the arms of Achilles to Odysseus.¹⁷ A Zoroastrian text depicts a judge in Hell with his tongue cut out because of his corrupt verdicts:¹⁸ the idea that this was an especially fitting punishment for false judges could easily have occurred independently in different cultures.

¹⁶ The special treatment received by the two animals in this passage encourages us to identify them with Ajax's chief foes, who in the play are Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Odysseus. The second animal (described at 239-44) represents Odysseus, since it experiences the same torture which Ajax reserves for him at 105-10. That leaves either Agamemnon or Menelaus for the first animal; and if only one of the Atreids is to be represented, it should be the senior brother. The scholia (p. 76 Christodoulou) suggest Nestor (ἴσως τοῦτον ἐνόμιζε Νέστορα ὡς ψευδομαρτυρήσαντα κατ' αὐτοῦ), but he is not mentioned elsewhere in the play.

¹⁷ As he writes in all four of his editions (1817 to 1851), 'apparet arietem, quem capite et lingua truncavit, pro Agamemnone ab eo habitum esse, quem, quod iniustam sententiam pronuntiasset, ita puniri opinabatur.'

¹⁸ Book of Arda Viraf, chapter 79: 'Then I saw the soul of a man, both of whose eyes were scooped out, and his tongue cut away; and he remained suspended, in hell, by one leg; his body also was ever raked with the two brazen prongs of a fork; and an iron spike was driven into his head [or heart]. And I asked thus: "What man is this? and what sin was committed by him?" Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, said thus: "This is the soul of that wicked man whose justice, in the world, was false; and he took bribes, and made false decisions.'" (Translation taken from <http://www.avesta.org/pahlavi/viraf.html> (checked 13th April 2009); originally published by M. Haug in 1872.)

(iii) The tongue is burned as a separate portion of the grand sacrifice offered by Nestor in the *Odyssey*,¹⁹ while in the classical period, both at Athens and elsewhere, the tongue was not sacrificed to the gods, but was a perquisite of the priest officiating at the sacrifice.²⁰ This is relevant because Tecmessa has earlier programmatically characterised Ajax's behaviour inside the hut in terms of a sacrifice,²¹ and σφάζειν and its derivatives are frequently used to describe it.²² In such a context, the act of cutting out the tongue 'may be interpreted as [a reference] to perverted sacrificial rites'.²³ Ajax's subsequent

¹⁹ Hom. *Od.* 3.332-4 ἄλλ' ἄγε τάμνετε μὲν γλώσσας, κεράσθε δὲ οἶνον, | ὄφρα Ποσειδάωνι καὶ ἄλλοις ἀθανάτοισι | σπείσαντες κοίτοιο μεδώμεθα· τοῖο γὰρ ὤρη, 341 γλώσσας δ' ἐν πυρὶ βάλλον, ἀνιστάμενοι δ' ἐπέλειβον. This passage presumably provided the inspiration for the tongues in the sacrifice at Ar. Rh. 1.516-18.

²⁰ Cf. *IG* i³ 255 B.8-9 (Attica, c. 430 B.C.), Meuli 1946, pp. 222-3 = 1975, vol. II, pp. 946-7 (especially n. 15 on the epigraphic evidence), Kadletz 1981, pp. 26-8, Dunbar 1995 on Ar. *Av.* 1702-5, Olson 1998 on *Pax* 1060 (though on the text of Ar. *Plut.* 1110, which they cite, see Kadletz 1981, pp. 24-6). According to Dieuchidas *FGrHist* 485 F 10 = fr. 8 Piccirilli 1975 (*ap.* Σ Ar. Rh. 1.516-18c = Wendel 1935, p. 45.5-14), at Megara the tongue was placed on the altar after a sacrifice; he gives an *aition* to explain the practice. In his work *On Sacrifices* Philochorus *FGrHist* 328 F 80 (*ap.* Σ Ar. Rh. 1.516-18c = Wendel 1935, p. 45.14-161) describes the tongue as τὸ κάλλιστον τοῦ σώματος καὶ πρωτεύον. Simon 1982, pp. 126-7 n. 21 claims to identify vase-paintings depicting the sacrifice of tongues, but other more persuasive interpretations of the images are available (see van Straten 1995, 118-44).

²¹ 218-20 τοιαῦτ' ἂν ἴδοις σκηνῆς ἔνδον | χειροδάκτυα σφάγι' αἰμοβαφῆ, | κείνου χρηστήρια τάνδρός ('Such are the victims which you could see within the hut, rent by his hands, bathed in blood – the sacrifices of this man').

²² Lines 219, 235, 299, 546; on this word as a sacrificial term see Casabona 1966, pp. 180-9.

²³ Henrichs 2000, p. 181 n. 29; cf. Segal 1981, p. 139. He also argues (p. 181) that 'Aias violates the sacrificial code both by killing the animals in an inappropriate place and by resorting to torture and mutilation. This explains why Sophokles ... mostly uses non-ritual language – words like κτείνειν, ἐναρίζειν, φθείρειν, ἀναρῆν, and φόνος – to

throwing of the tongue (ρίπτει) may have strengthened this connexion, given βάλλον in the *Odyssey* passage cited above (n. 20). Campbell additionally compares Hdt. 4.61.2 ὁ θύσας τῶν κρεῶν καὶ τῶν σπλάγχνων ἀπαρξάμενος ρίπτει ἐς τὸ ἔμπροσθε.²⁴

This interpretation is only evoked if the whole tongue is cut out: I have not found evidence for the removal of only the tongue-tip in a sacrificial context. A die-hard supporter of the translation ‘tongue-tip’ for γλῶσσαν ἄκρον might argue that the very fact that only a fraction of the tongue is cut is itself a perversion of the sacrifice. But this would suggest that Ajax was somehow skimping on the sacrifice, which is the reverse of the truth: he is nothing if not thorough. The perversion rather lies in the uncontrolled and savage violence, which is a world away from the ordered killing of sacrificial ritual.

In both passages the great Sophoclean scholar F. W. Schneidewin grasped the truth where other editors, both before and after him, failed to do so. He also realised that the two passages are mutually reinforcing, since in each of the notes he compares the use of ἄκρος in the other. I hope that the above discussion has shown that later scholars were wrong to reject, or ignore, his interpretation.

describe the slaughter.’ But ἀναίρέω is found in a sacrificial context at Hom. *Od.* 3.453-4 οἱ μὲν ἔπειτ’ ἀνελόντες ἀπὸ χθονὸς εὐρυοδείης | ἔσχον· ἀτὰρ σφάξεν Πεισίστρατος. Moreover, the sheer number of verbs predicated of Ajax in this and similar passages – a stylistic choice aimed at evoking his manic activity – would have made it difficult for Sophocles to limit himself to purely sacrificial vocabulary.

²⁴ Jebb 1896 is skeptical, writing ‘I doubt whether there is any reference here to the sacrificial custom; the act of Ajax rather expresses merely fierce hatred of a slanderer.’ But the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

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