



Finglass, P. J. (2012). Ajax. In A. Markantonatos (Ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles* (pp. 59-72). Brill Academic Publishers.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004217621_005

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1163/9789004217621_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004217621_005)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Brill at DOI: 10.1163/9789004217621_005. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Ajax

Sophocles' *Ajax* was probably first performed at the Dionysia festival at Athens in the 450s or 440s. In this essay I concentrate on a single, central question: what, if anything, holds the play together? Even this narrow line of inquiry receives only a brief discussion in the available space. Nevertheless, the focus on one major topic, of interest to specialists and non-specialists alike, should prove more illuminating than (or at least not as unsatisfactory as) an attempt to cover several issues in a few pages.¹

The unity of the play, and in particular the relevance and quality of its final scenes, has been debated since antiquity. The margins of some mediaeval manuscripts preserve two ancient criticisms of the exchange between Teucer and Menelaus at 1120-1141: 'such quibbles are not appropriate to tragedy. Sophocles' desire to prolong the action after the suicide led to a frigid result, and the destruction of the tragic pathos' and 'this sort of thing belongs more to comedy than tragedy'.² The play has attracted similar objections in modern times. So according to one

I am grateful to Professor Alan Sommerstein for helpful comments.

¹ Hesk (2003) provides a thoughtful introduction to the play, and Garvie (1998) an accessible commentary. The three recent items of scholarship which I have found most stimulating are Winnington-Ingram (1980) 11-72, Heath (1987) 165-208, and Scullion (1994) 89-128. Each contains extensive further bibliography. At every point this essay skates over issues which deserve fuller documentation, which limits of space and the conventions of the genre lead me to eschew.

² Scholia on 1123 (p. 227 Chr.) τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφίσματα οὐκ οἰκεία τραγωδίας. μετὰ γὰρ τὴν ἀναίρεσιν ἐπεκτείνει τὸ δράμα θελήσας ἐψυχρεύσατο καὶ ἔλυσε τὸ τραγικὸν πάθος and on 1127 (p. 228) τὸ δὲ τοιοῦτον κωμωδίας μᾶλλον ἢ τραγωδίας.

seventeenth-century commentator, ‘le denoüement de l’Ajax ne repond pas à l’intrigue: l’auteur ne devoit pas finir un spectacle si terrible, si funeste, & si pitoyable par une contestation froide & languissante’; while another, a century later, argues that ‘les longs discours, les plaidoyers de Teucer, de Ménélas & d’Agamemnon, quelque beaux qu’ils soient en eux mêmes, laissent l’action absolument éteinte; & voilà ce qu’on ne peut excuser’.³ Nineteenth-century critics such as Lobeck, Hermann, and Bergk held a similar view.⁴ More recently, scholars have been keener to explain and justify the construction of the play than to condemn it.

Ajax kills himself at line 865, when the play still has some 40% of its length to run.⁵ In *Trachiniae* and *Antigone* Deianira and Antigone depart with over 35% and 30% of their respective dramas remaining. Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* goes offstage to blind himself at line 1185; more than 20% of the play remains, even though the truth about his parentage has now been revealed. So the relatively early loss of a protagonist, or the placing of a climax with a chunk of a play still to run, can be paralleled within the Sophoclean corpus. Yet the construction of *Ajax* has unsettled critics more than that of these other plays. In *Trachiniae* the loss of Deianira is balanced by the arrival of Heracles, whose death agonies provide a memorable finale. Despite its title, *Antigone* owes as much to Creon as to Antigone herself, and his tragedy has still some way to go when she leaves the stage. Indeed, Antigone’s story is not quite complete even at this point, since there will be an abortive attempt to rescue her from her living tomb. The *exodos*

³ Rapin (1674) 194; Brumoy (1785) 468-9.

⁴ For references see Foerster (1869) 715.

⁵ We should beware of designating this latter section ‘the second half’ of the play: a 50-50 split is different from a 60-40 one.

of *Oedipus Rex* is dominated by the protagonist's moving laments as he attempts to come to terms with his dramatic fall.

Ajax, on the other hand, can seem unsatisfying after the protagonist's suicide. The loss of such a memorable and dominating character at a relatively early point was always going to present structural problems: how could Sophocles maintain the interest of the audience? These difficulties are exacerbated by the characters who now command the stage. Ajax was a figure of terrible grandeur; his speeches and interactions with others displayed high passion, as he wrestled with the tragic consequences of the Judgment of the Arms. By contrast, the debates between Teucer and the Atridae over Ajax's burial, which make up most of the remaining section, have seemed to many insufficiently elevated, with sophistry and character attacks taking precedence over consideration of the major ethical issues at stake.

One of the ancient complaints about the frigidity of this part of the play, cited above, is attached to a low point in these quarrels: an irrelevant argument between Teucer and Menelaus about the relative merits of bowmen and hoplites. Menelaus and Agamemnon make clear in their speeches (1052-90, 1226-63) that they are acting merely out of personal spite, not through the promptings of justice. But Teucer, Ajax's defender, is scarcely more impressive. His reply to Menelaus (1093-1117) begins with an effective rebuttal, but quickly degenerates into personal abuse which makes even the chorus uneasy (1118-19). Answering Agamemnon (1266-1315), he opens with a powerful defence of Ajax's prowess, before being diverted into an attack on his opponent's lineage, matching similar abuse from Agamemnon (1259-63) and thus allowing him to set the topic, and the tone, for the debate. Teucer may be the victor, but we are a long way

from the stark magnificence, and even beauty, of Ajax's speeches (e.g. 430-80, 646-92).⁶ The very fact that there are two such debates, each inconclusive, may induce a certain monotony.

According to one defence of this section, such a tone is deliberate: with the death of Ajax, the world is diminished. Knox memorably states this view in an influential essay:⁷

‘The tone of the speeches made over his body in the second half of the play emphasizes the fact that the world is a smaller, meaner place because of his death. The last half of the play shows us a world emptied of greatness; all that was great in the world lies there dead, impaled on that gigantic sword, while smaller men, with motives both good and bad, dispute over its burial. The unheroic tone of the end of the play (with its threats and boasts and personal insults) has often been criticized as an artistic failure; surely it is deliberate. Nothing else would make us feel what has happened. A heroic age has passed away, to be succeeded by one in which action is replaced by argument, stubbornness by compromise, defiance by acceptance ...’

There is some truth in this. No one in the play is quite like Ajax; once he is gone something is inevitably lost. But accepting Knox's view wholesale creates further difficulties. First, it does not have anything positive to say about the final 40% of the play, which (under this analysis) serves merely as foil for the preceding 60%. No doubt Sophocles wanted his audience to think well of the first three-fifths of his play; but there were better ways of effecting this than writing off the remainder.

⁶ For spirited attempts to champion Teucer see Heath (1987) 206, Hesk (2003) 114-18.

⁷ Knox (1961) 2 = (1979) 126.

Second, we may question whether Ajax is as ‘heroic’ as Knox implies.⁸ This is, after all, the man who attempts to slaughter the army because he was denied the Arms of Achilles. He takes this decision while sane; only later is he afflicted by madness, sent by Athena to ensure that he does not achieve his goal. When he recovers, he regrets not his original decision, but his failure to carry it through (364-7, 372-6). He then kills himself without making sufficient provision for the safety of his concubine and young son, ignoring a moving plea from the former (485-524); he relies on Teucer to protect them, even though he knows that Teucer is currently away from the camp (560-4). His final speech calls for the Erinyes to take vengeance on the entire army (843-4); he goes to his death having learned nothing, still regarding his injured honour as the consideration which overrides everything else. Undoubtedly impressive, Ajax is by no means always admirable, and his death is likely to stir mixed emotions in many of the audience.

Perhaps we can modify Knox’s view. The final 40% of the play does indeed help to establish Ajax as a sympathetic and admirable character: not simply by contrasting with the magnificence of the earlier scenes, but by providing an opportunity for the protagonist’s post-mortem rehabilitation.⁹ Such an aim was attractive from a dramatic point of view, since it would encourage the audience to consider Ajax from new perspectives. In Knoxian terms, Sophocles’ portrayal of the inadequacy of the figures who opposed him, Menelaus and Agamemnon, helps

⁸ Knox’s positive view of Ajax and other Sophoclean protagonists receives its classic statement in Knox (1964); more recently, Garvie (1998) adopts a ultra-Knoxian view in his commentary, seeing the entire play as an assertion of Ajax’s great and admirable nature.

⁹ See Hubbard (2003) 158-9 n. 4 for some scholars who take this view.

to achieve this goal. Even his chief defender, Teucer, was deliberately drawn as a somewhat inferior champion. The contrast between these figures and Ajax would lead the audience to remember what had most impressed them about the fallen protagonist.

But this was only one part of a wider strategy of rehabilitation, and must be seen alongside other techniques. The moving laments of Tecmessa and the chorus, followed by Teucer's distraught speech over Ajax's body, emphasise the sense of grief and loss which his death has caused to his immediate family.¹⁰ The tableau of Eurysaces holding on to his father's corpse in the posture of a suppliant, as arranged by Teucer, hints that Ajax will enjoy cultic honours, or at the very least suggests that there is something numinous about his body.¹¹ The chorus mournfully describe how their long sufferings at Troy have been accentuated through the loss of their only champion and defender.¹² Teucer's speech in his debate with Agamemnon, before he is side-tracked into defining his lineage and attacking Agamemnon's, powerfully vindicates Ajax's massive contribution to the Greek war effort.¹³ Even Odysseus, Ajax's great enemy and the recipient of the Arms which Ajax had so fatally desired, intervenes on his behalf

¹⁰ 937-73, 992-1027.

¹¹ 1171-5. Cf. Burian (1972) 156: 'the final scenes are played against a solemn ritual tableau which holds the answer and testifies to the final vindication of the hero'.

¹² 1185-1222, especially 1211-15.

¹³ 1266-89. This is the first time in the play that the audience hears of specific achievements on Ajax's part on behalf of the Greeks: his steadfast defence of the ships, and his single combat with Hector. The former is described in terms which go beyond the Iliadic account in order to magnify Ajax's contribution. Cf. Gardiner (1987) 78: 'The poet does not even describe Ajax's heroic deeds until long after he is dead ... Until then, one sees only the bad side of Ajax'.

and acknowledges that Ajax's good qualities should take precedence over their enmity.

Generously, he describes him as 'best of the Achaeans, apart from Achilles'.¹⁴

That is not to say that the audience forgets the other sides of Ajax's character. The final moments of the play bring them to the fore. Teucer is unable to accept the offer of help from Odysseus for the funeral, in case that assistance is 'unwelcome' to the dead man.¹⁵ Even after death, and even after Odysseus' decisive intervention to secure his burial, Teucer suspects that Ajax will not relent from his anger against his old foe.¹⁶ Then as Teucer prepares to lift the corpse, he remarks at how its arteries are still pumping the 'dark force' (μέλαν μένος, 1412-13) of his blood. μένος can denote the battle rage of the hero, and so suggests the persistence of violent emotion even as the body is laid to rest. This does not cancel the value of Ajax's rehabilitation. Rather, it circumscribes and qualifies it, ensuring that the largely positive presentation of Ajax in the final scene is not allowed to negate the earlier parts of the play. Sophocles thus brings his audience to a complex view of his protagonist, which ignores neither his virtues nor his vices. He achieves this in part by the diptych structure, in which the first part emphasises the darker side of Ajax's character, and the latter part its more positive aspects; although as we have seen, this is by no means a clear-cut divide. In this way both sections play a significant and complementary part in shaping the audience's responses.

The question of whether the play suffers after the suicide, and is thus not a properly unified composition, is, as we have seen, a hoary one, having already been discussed in antiquity.

¹⁴ 1332-45, 1355, 1357.

¹⁵ μή τῷ θανόντι τοῦτο δυσχερὲς ποιῶ, 1395.

¹⁶ This recalls Ajax's refusal to speak to Odysseus in the Underworld at Hom. *Od.* 11.543-7, 563-4.

Concentration on this topic, however, can divert our attention from the subtle handling of continuity present throughout the play. In one sense, Ajax's death forms an obvious and undeniable break-point. Moreover, immediately after he goes into the *skene* to die at 865, the chorus reappear (the so-called 'epiparodos') in what seems a new beginning; a thematic link to the opening scene reinforces this idea.¹⁷ But the change of scene – a very rare occurrence on the Greek tragic stage – takes place at 814, when the chorus leave the stage. If the protagonist did not commit suicide fifty lines later, we would certainly refer to this point as the fundamental divide near the centre of the drama. Standing so close to the 'real' dividing point, it competes with it, challenging its status as the place where the second part of the play begins.

After Ajax's suicide is discovered, there is an extended lament over his body by Tecmessa and the chorus, which lasts until 973. This is another crucial moment of transition: Tecmessa, Ajax's chief supporter up to this moment, yields that function to Teucer, and becomes a mute character. Yet even that break is not as decisive as it might have been, since Teucer proceeds to deliver his own lament over the corpse; not until 1040 is Menelaus seen approaching. Only then does the play turn its focus onto the question of Ajax's burial (a subject earlier raised by Ajax himself at 823-31), which dominates the remainder of the drama. Plainly, the death of Ajax is the most important break in the play; but it does not take much ingenuity to think of alternative dividing lines, all of which except one are found even later in the play than 865, and thus provide even more lopsided and unexpected divisions between the two parts. Such alternatives prevent the most important dividing point, 865, from assuming an unchallenged prominence in terms of its structural function.

¹⁷ See the discussion of the hunting theme, below.

More generally, the structuring of the play is handled with considerable sophistication. Alternation between song, speech, and recitative is fundamental to all tragedy, and is employed to good effect here. For example, from 134 to 330 the audience hears various kinds of speculation and information concerning Ajax's nocturnal expedition. After beginning in recitative, the chorus soon begin to sing; Tecmessa and the chorus then converse in recitative, before the chorus turn again to song. Each time the song contains a more directly emotional burden. There follows a more argumentative section in spoken verse, before Tecmessa gives her extended narrative, again in speech. The variety which this ensures, so crucial for maintaining audience interest, is also manifested in Sophocles' placing of individual scenes. One characteristic of *Ajax* is the comparatively large proportion of the play taken up by long speeches or *rheseis*. This is, after all, the play of 'the Deception speech' (646-92) and 'Ajax's suicide speech' (815-65); and they only begin the list of substantial *rheseis* delivered by Tecmessa, Teucer, Menelaus, Agamemnon, and Ajax himself, as well as a lengthy Messenger-speech. But Sophocles alternates these to good effect. So the two speeches named above, each an especially impressive *rhesis* taking up an entire scene, are separated by an episode with numerous exits and entrances and a wide variety of types of utterance, including two different varieties of stichomythia.¹⁸ Similarly, between the two monumental speeches by Ajax (815-65, before the suicide) and Teucer (992-1027, lamenting it) comes a scene in which the chorus appear on stage from separate entrances (866-78), sing of their failure to find Ajax (879-90), learn (via Tecmessa) that Ajax is dead (891-903), and then join with Tecmessa, in song and speech, as they

¹⁸ Cf. Goward (1999) 89: 'the two *rhêseis*, uttered in actual or virtual solitude, contrast violently with the "busy" group activities that come between them, characterised by misunderstanding, urgency, futility, even muddle'.

alternately lament their dead lord, as his covered body is brought out from the *skene* (904-73). This activity and interaction is the perfect foil for the static *rheseis* which precede and follow.

The delay, and consequent anticipation, of a crucial element of the plot can also help to unify the structure, encouraging viewers to see the play as a carefully conceived whole. In the opening scene the audience witness Athena's hostility to Ajax; she closes with the ominous statement 'the gods love the wise and hate the wicked',¹⁹ but there is no explanation of why she regards Ajax as (by implication) κακός; his recent anger against the Greeks, whom she supports, and his attempt to kill them, might seem motivation enough. Ajax is aware that Athena frustrated his attack and thereby contrived his disgrace; the chorus, by contrast, had earlier failed to hit the mark when they speculated as to which god was responsible for his madness, mentioning Artemis and Ares.²⁰ But Ajax says nothing about Athena's motivation. Tecmessa will, much later, when she attributes Ajax's death to Athena's desire to gratify Odysseus (952-3). Later still, Menelaus will attribute the deliverance of the Greeks to 'one of the gods',²¹ without giving a name or a reason.

In the midst of this speculation comes a speech delivered almost exactly at the half-way point of the play, which is heard only by the chorus; it is summarised for Tecmessa, but the summary omits the crucial reference to divine activity. At 748-83 the Messenger reveals the underlying cause of Athena's anger: Ajax's arrogance, as directed against his father, Telamon, and the goddess Athena. He rejected his father's advice to win his battles with a god's help, and

¹⁹ τοὺς δὲ σώφρονας | θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακοῦς, 132-3.

²⁰ 401a-402, 450-3; 172-82.

²¹ θεῶν τις, 1057; cf. 1060.

dismissed Athena when she offered him assistance as he fought. ‘With such words’, the Messenger solemnly proclaims, ‘he incurred the implacable anger of the goddess, by not thinking mortal thoughts’.²² This information ultimately derives from the prophet Calchas, a peerless source.

The delay of this revelation has led some critics to downplay it; for example, Hester (1979) 242 complains that ‘if Sophocles intends us to bear [Ajax’s insult to Athena] throughout, he has certainly made a rare mess of his exposition’. The reverse is true. Sophocles has ensured the partial and progressive revelation of a major aspect of his plot, holding back vital details for maximum effect.²³ Ajax’s current peril does not just derive from his reaction to the Judgment of the Arms. It is the consequence of arrogant behaviour towards others which predates even his arrival at Troy. The chorus’s contrast between his glorious departure from home, and his present woe, is misplaced; rather, ‘he is the same man he was when he left Salamis’.²⁴ As the play moves forward in time, the audience is presented with additional information regarding the remoter past, enabling them to make more informed judgments regarding the characters and their actions.

As well as structure, themes also give the play unity. The first which the audience encounters is the theme of hunting and searching. At the opening of the play, Athena remarks that Odysseus is on the hunt (θηρώμενον, line 2). This leads into a succession of terms and

²² τοιοῖσδέ τοι λόγοισιν ἀστεργῆ θεᾶς | ἐκτίσατ’ ὀργήν, οὐ κατ’ ἄνθρωπον φρονῶν, 776-7.

²³ Such delayed revelation is a characteristic of Homeric narrative. The information that Achilles has been offered a choice of two fates by his mother is relevant to his decision to withdraw from the fighting in *Iliad* 1, but is only revealed in book 9. The role of the Judgment of Paris in causing the war is not made clear until book 24 (see Davies (1981), especially 57 n. 6 on tragic parallels).

²⁴ 609-21; Biggs (1966) 225.

images taken from hunting, including a comparison of Odysseus to a keen-scented Laconian dog (7-8). Yet his quarry is no animal, but Ajax himself. As Athena tells her protégé what happened during the night, it turns out that this quarry was himself a would-be hunter, someone who attempted to bring back his enemies as ‘spoils’ (ἄγρᾱ, 64, 93) to his hut to torture. Athena frustrates this hunt, however, by sending him into the ‘nets of disaster’ (ἔρκη κακᾶ, 60), and diverting his impetus onto animals (but not animals which regularly feature as a hunter’s prey). Odysseus’ mission, also sped by Athena (36-7), thus turns the (failed) hunter Ajax into the object of a new, successful hunt, marking the reversal in his situation that has taken place even before the play begins.

This theme is reprised at 866 at the reappearance of the chorus. They, like Odysseus, have been searching for Ajax; but whereas he was responding to an act of violence inflicted by Ajax on third parties, they are attempting to prevent him inflicting a similarly bloody act on himself. Both are brought to their goal by a female: Athena in Odysseus’ case, Tecmessa in the chorus’s. The chorus do not employ hunting imagery, any more than Tecmessa had when she despatched them (803-11), probably because that would dehumanise Ajax somewhat; he remains their lord, after all. But the similarity of situation allows the audience to draw a thematic connexion between the two passages, which are thus linked even as the latter marks a new beginning.

As well as hunting, Athena’s opening words also introduce the theme of friends and enemies. She describes Odysseus as ‘always on the hunt to seize some opportunity against his enemies’.²⁵ Simple enough, one might think: it was an axiom of Greek morality that one helped

²⁵ ἀεὶ ... | πεῖραν τιν’ ἐχθρῶν ἀρπάζσαι θηρώμενον, 1-2.

one's friends and harmed one's enemies.²⁶ The play illustrates that it is harder to act on this axiom than may at first appear. It turns out that the ἐχθρός in question is Ajax, one of Odysseus' comrades-in-arms. The traditional φιλία of warriors has been rendered inoperative by Ajax's assault on the army. Yet when Odysseus learns the truth and watches Ajax in his inglorious madness, he does not gloat or mock, but pities him, even though he is his enemy.²⁷ Pitying an enemy is not unprecedented in ancient literature,²⁸ but it is strikingly framed in this play. Athena had previously remarked that laughing at one's enemies is 'most sweet' (ἡδιστος, 79), while Ajax later assumes that his enemies are mocking him (379-82) and wishes that he could see them suffer (384, 387-91).

When Ajax later appears sitting amid the animal carcasses, he begins by expressing his strong sense of φιλία for his fellow-soldiers.²⁹ But with the exception of the brief vocative φίλοι at 405b, the remainder of the lyric is addressed to people who are not present, to the gods, or even the land of Troy itself. This sense of isolation from φίλοι is accentuated in the following speech (430-80), formally a soliloquy despite the presence of Tecmessa and the chorus. Ajax declares that he is ἐχθρός to the gods, the Trojans, and the Greeks (457-9): his actions have cut him off from mortal and immortal alike. In deciding to kill himself, he rejects even the bonds of

²⁶ See e.g. Blundell (1989) 26-31.

²⁷ καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ, 122.

²⁸ See e.g. Rutherford (1982) 158-9 = Cairns (2001) 286-7.

²⁹ 348-53, 356-61.

φιλία which should tie him to Tecmessa and their son Eurysaces, despite the likelihood that this will leave the latter at the mercy of ‘unfriendly guardians’.³⁰

Ajax’s speech in the following episode, in which he deceives the chorus and Tecmessa into thinking that he has changed his mind about killing himself, justifies this apparent volte-face by invoking a different maxim about friendship. Referring to his new attitude to Agamemnon and Menelaus, the leaders of the army whom he previously hated, he declares ‘I have learned that my enemy should be hated as one whom I will later regard as a friend; while as for a friend, I shall want to give him help and assistance as someone who will not always remain so’,³¹ which alludes to a famous saying by the sixth-century sage Bias of Priene.³² These words are full of irony. Ajax uses them to lie: his attitude has not changed, as the audience will already suspect and as will be confirmed in his suicide speech, when he curses the entire army (835-44). Yet he is seemingly unconcerned that by killing himself he is abandoning his φίλοι to potentially mortal peril, and thereby behaving not as a φίλος but an ἐχθρός. Going further back in time, his attack on the army turned himself from their φίλος to their ἐχθρός; Menelaus later makes exactly this point, when he declares that ‘after hoping that we were bringing [Ajax] from home as an ally and

³⁰ ὑπ’ ὀρφανιστῶν μὴ φίλων, 512.

³¹ ἐπίσταμαι γὰρ ἀρτίως ὅτι | ὅ τ’ ἐχθρὸς ἡμῖν ἐς τοσόνδ’ ἐχθαρτέος, | ὡς καὶ φιλήσων αὐθις, ἔς τε τὸν φίλον | τοσαῦθ’ ὑπουργῶν ὠφελεῖν βουλήσομαι, | ὡς αἰὲν οὐ μενοῦντα, 678-82.

³² ‘[Bias] would say that people should be prepared for their friends to turn into enemies [lit. ‘should love as people who will hate’], since most people are wicked’ (ἔλεγε ... φιλεῖν ὡς μισήσοντας· τοὺς γὰρ πλείστους εἶναι κακοῦς, Diogenes Laertius 1.87).

friend for the Achaeans, we found in our dealings with him that he was a worse enemy than the Phrygians'.³³

The richest irony can be savoured at the end of the play, when Odysseus, Ajax's enemy, secures burial for his old foe. Earlier the audience had seen his pity for Ajax; now he intervenes directly on his behalf. He acknowledges the enmity that existed between them, but argues that his valour and nobility nevertheless demand respect and honour.³⁴ In the stichomythia which follows his speech, Odysseus voices a similar idea to the maxim cited earlier by Ajax, linking the two passages and encouraging the audience to consider how the two characters react in different ways to it.³⁵ Agamemnon cannot believe that Odysseus is supporting an enemy,³⁶ and although in the end he concedes, he emphasises that as far as he is concerned, Ajax is still a foe.³⁷ Odysseus achieves this remarkable breakthrough by emphasising the justice of his cause and the mutability of human affairs; but he also stresses that Agamemnon would be doing a favour to

³³... αὐτὸν ἐλπίσαντες οἴκοθεν | ἄγειν Ἀχαιοῖς ξύμμαχόν τε καὶ φίλον, | ἐξηύρομεν ξυνόντες ἐχθίῳ
Φρυγῶν, 1052-4.

³⁴ 1336-41, 1344-6.

³⁵ 'Indeed there are many now friends who will later be bitter foes' (ἦ κάρτα πολλοὶ νῦν φίλοι καὐθις πικροί,
1359).

³⁶ 'What ever will you do? Are you showing such respect to the corpse of an enemy?' (τί ποτε ποιήσεις; ἐχθρὸν
ὧδ' αἰδῆ νέκυν;, 1356).

³⁷ 'This man, both in this world and the next, will be most hateful to me. But you can do what you want' (οὗτος δὲ
κάκει κἀνθάδ' ὦν ἔμοιγ' ὁμῶς | ἐχθιστος ἔσται. σοὶ δὲ δρᾶν ἔξεσθ' ἂ χρεῖς, 1372-3).

him as a φίλος if he acted on his advice.³⁸ Ironically, the φιλία between Ajax's two chief enemies turns out to be decisive in effecting his burial, further highlighting the unexpected consequences to which this quality can lead.

The theme is not yet exhausted. As we have seen, Teucer refuses Odysseus' offer of assistance at the burial, in case this is unwelcome to Ajax. Odysseus can turn from enemy into friend, but Ajax, at least according to Teucer, is unwilling to reciprocate. Although Ajax previously described how friends can become enemies, and enemies friends, he fails to act himself on the second, more optimistic side of the maxim, preferring to dwell on the cynical first part. From the start of the play until its end, the differing attitudes which he and other characters have towards friendship and enmity are of central importance in determining the audience's reactions to them.³⁹

A third theme with a significant function is that of fathers and sons. Ajax's father, Telamon, had sacked Troy alongside Heracles (434-6). Part of Ajax's grief at failing to be awarded the Arms of Achilles lies in his failure to emulate his father's deeds (437-40). In the *Iliad*, when Achilles was dishonoured by the Greeks he announced that he would return home; no such recourse is available to Ajax, since he cannot bear the thought of having to look his

³⁸ 'Stop! You are still the master, you know, if you let your friends vanquish you' (παῦσαι· κρατεῖς τοι τῶν φίλων νικώμενος, 1353; translated by Alan Sommerstein). Cf. Agamemnon's expressed reason for agreeing to Odysseus' request: 'Well, be sure that I would do for you an even greater favour than this' (ἀλλ' εὖ γε μέντοι τοῦτ' ἐπίστασ', ἐγὼ | σοὶ μὲν νέμοιμ' ἂν τῆσδε καὶ μείζω χάριν, 1370-1).

³⁹ Cf. Knox (1961) 10 = (1979) 133: 'in time, friends turn into enemies and enemies into friends. The *Ajax* itself is a bewildering panorama of such changed and changing relationships'. See also Goldhill (1986) 85-8.

father in the eye.⁴⁰ In this speech Telamon is the only member of his family whom he mentions. Tecmessa's reply encourages him to consider a wider range of relationships and responsibilities – one of which is his responsibility for his son, Eurysaces. Ajax, too, is a father, and by killing himself partly as a result of failure to match the status of his father, he will be abandoning the son who still relies on his protection.⁴¹ Telamon does feature in her speech, but as a weak and pitiable old man, not the dread, matchless figure of Ajax's imagination.

In response Ajax does show a certain concern for his son's fate: his half-brother, Teucer, will henceforth look after him, although he is presently away and the boy may be in imminent peril (560-4). He prays for his son's success, hoping that he will be 'more fortunate than [his] father, but in all other respects the same'.⁴² Ajax has only just lamented his failure to reach the standard attained by his father, Telamon; this prayer implies that he regards this failure simply as a piece of bad fortune, not something bound up with his own character, attitudes, and actions. Nor indeed does he wish to be surpassed by his son, as he is surpassed by his father. Many in the audience will have contrasted Hector's more generous prayer for his son Astyanax in the *Iliad*: 'And may someone say, "This man is much better than his father"', as he comes back from conflict'.⁴³

⁴⁰ Hom. *Il.* 9.356-67; *Aj.* 462-6.

⁴¹ 499, 510-13.

⁴² ὦ παῖ, γένοιο πατρὸς εὐτυχέστερος, | τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ὅμοιος, 550-1.

⁴³ καί ποτέ τις εἴποι "πατρός γ' ὅδε πολλὸν ἀμείνων" | ἐκ πολέμου ἀνιόντα, Hom. *Il.* 6.479-80. The encounter between Hector and Andromache, from which this prayer is taken, is frequently alluded to in the scene from *Ajax*.

New light is thrown on the relationship between Ajax and Telamon in the Messenger's speech, as discussed above. In response to Telamon's advice that he should 'desire to triumph with the spear, but to triumph always with a god's help'⁴⁴, Ajax makes an 'arrogant and mad' response: 'Father, with the gods even a worthless man can acquire success. I am confident that I will win this glory even without them'.⁴⁵ Telamon no longer represents simply a standard of valour which Ajax has failed to match: he turns out to be a donor of wise advice which Ajax has failed to heed. If Ajax had not treated his father's words, and Athena's too, with contempt, he might now be in a position to emulate him instead of being crushed by disgrace.

This theme does not come to an end with Ajax's death. When Teucer delivers his lament over the body of his half-brother, his thoughts too naturally turn to Telamon, his father as well as Ajax's (1008). He imagines his reaction not to news of his son's death, but to his other son's return: he describes at length the insults which he, Teucer, will receive as a result of his 'betrayal' of his brother (1008-21).⁴⁶ The passage recalls not only Ajax's attitude to his father, but more particularly the earlier passage in which Ajax had explained why he could not return home to Telamon in disgrace (460-6). This transferral of apprehension underlines how Ajax's suicide has left all kinds of issues unresolved: now it is Teucer who has failed his father and must contemplate his wrath.

⁴⁴ "τέκνον, δορὶ | βούλου κρατεῖν μὲν, σὺν θεῶ δ' αἰεὶ κρατεῖν", 764-5.

⁴⁵ ὁ δ' ὑψικόμπως κάφρόνως ἡμείψατο· | "πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἂν ὁ μηδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ | κράτος κατακτήσαιτ'·
ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχρα | κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ' ἐπισπάσειν κλέος", 766-9.

⁴⁶ By comparison, his reference to more immediate troubles at Troy lasts less than three lines (1021-3).

This is not Teucer's last word on the subject. Faced with Agamemnon's contempt for his allegedly barbarian origin (1259-63), Teucer retorts by boasting of his parentage. Telamon's great deeds at Troy now become a subject of pride for his son (1299-1303), rather than an unmatchable standard. Agamemnon's father, by contrast, is associated with the unspeakable crime of the dreadful banquet, in which Thyestes unsuspectingly consumed the bodies of his own children (1293-5). As the play moves towards its conclusion, the relationship between fathers and sons now at last turns in favour of Ajax's house. During this exchange, and indeed for the last 250 lines of the play, Eurysaces is clasping his father's body, where Teucer has directed him to remain as a supplicant (1171-81). Having abandoned his son in life, Ajax is at least protecting him in death. The reversal of this thematic idea contributes to the rehabilitation of Ajax which the audience witness in the closing scenes.

More themes could be identified,⁴⁷ but the three discussed above should be enough to establish the point that themes are used to connect different parts of the play, both before and after the suicide. As a particular idea recurs in varying forms, the audience is encouraged to set later recurrences alongside earlier ones as they assess the characters; each recurrence makes sense in isolation, but means more when set in a wider context. Thus in his employment of connecting themes, as well as his presentation of the characters and the handling of the structure, Sophocles ensures that the drama forms a satisfying unity. The departure of the dominating figure at such a relatively early point presented Sophocles with a dramaturgical challenge, which he more than met by deftly employing several of the weapons in his creative armoury.

⁴⁷ For example, Hesk (2003) 48 analyses how the ideas of bigness and smallness recur throughout the play, particularly with regard to Ajax.

Bibliography

- Biggs, P. (1966) 'The disease theme in Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Philoctetes* and *Trachiniaiæ*', *CP* 61, 223-35.
- Brumoy, P. (1785) *Théâtre des Grecs. Nouvelle Édition. Tome Second* (Paris). [Revised by G. D. de Rochefort, G. de La Porte du Theil, P. Prévost, and A.-C. Brottier; 1st edition 1730]
- Burian, P. (1972) 'Supplication and hero cult in Sophocles' *Ajax*', *GRBS* 13, 151-6.
- Cairns, D. L. (2001) (ed.) *Oxford Readings in Homer's Iliad* (Oxford).
- Christodoulou, G. A. (ed.), *Τὰ ἀρχαῖα σχόλια εἰς Αἴαντα τοῦ Σοφοκλέους* (Βιβλιοθήκη Σοφίας Ν. Σαριπολου 34; Athens 1977).
- Davies, M. (1981) 'The Judgement of Paris and *Iliad* book XXIV', *JHS* 101, 56-62.
- Foerster, <R.> (1869) 'Ist des Aias des Sophokles das Glied einer Trilogie?', *Zeitschrift für die Österreichischen Gymnasien* 20, 715-24.
- Gardiner, C. P. (1987) *The Sophoclean Chorus. A Study of Character and Function* (Iowa City).
- Garvie, A. F. (1998) *Sophocles. Ajax* (Warminster).
- Goldhill, S. D. (1986) *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge).
- Goward, B. (1999) *Telling Tragedy. Narrative Technique in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides* (London).
- Heath, M. F. (1987) *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (Stanford).

- Hesk, J. (2003) *Sophocles. Ajax* (London).
- Hester, D. A. (1979) 'The heroic distemper. A study in the Ajax of Sophocles', *Prometheus* 5, 241-55.
- Hubbard, T. K. (2003) 'The architecture of Sophocles' *Ajax*', *Hermes* 131, 158-71.
- Knox, B. M. W. (1961) 'The *Ajax* of Sophocles', *HSCP* 65, 1-37. [= (1979) 125-60]
- (1964) *The Heroic Temper. Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Sather Classical Lectures 35; Berkeley and Los Angeles).
- (1979) *Word and Action. Essays on the Ancient Theatre* (London and Baltimore).
- Rapin, R. (1674) *Reflexions sur la poetique d'Aristote, et sur les ouvrages des poetes anciens & modernes* (Paris).
- Rutherford, R. B. (1982) 'Tragic form and feeling in the *Iliad*', *JHS* 102: 145-60. [= Cairns (2001) (ed.) 260-93, with addendum]
- Scullion, J. S. (1994) *Three Studies in Athenian Dramaturgy* (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 25; Stuttgart and Leipzig).
- Winnington-Ingram, R. P. (1980) *Sophocles. An Interpretation* (Cambridge).