

Eating from the Tables of Others: Sophocles' *Ajax* and the Greek Epic Cycle¹

Athenaeus in his *Deipnosophistai* remarks that “Sophocles took great pleasure in the Epic Cycle and composed whole dramas in which he followed the Cycle’s version of myths” (ἔχαιρε δὲ Σοφοκλῆς τῷ ἐπικῷ κύκλῳ, ὡς καὶ ὅλα δράματα ποιῆσαι κατακολουθῶν τῇ ἐν τούτῳ μυθοποιίᾳ, *Deipnosophistai* 277c).² This statement is equally apposite for his *Ajax Philoctetes*, *Oedipus* (both *Tyrannus* and *Coloneus*) and *Antigone*. However, while examining in depth the plot and the construction of some of the characters in Sophoclean tragedy, one realizes that Sophocles, although indebted to the poets of the Epic Cycle for his plots, feasts at Homer’s table as well, reminding us of what Aeschylus said about his tragedies as being slices from Homer’s great dinner parties (τὸ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ λαμπροῦ Αἰσχύλου, ὃς τὰς αὐτοῦ τραγωδίας τεμάχη εἶναι ἔλεγεν τῶν Ὀμήρου μεγάλων δείπνων, Athenaeus *Deipnosophistai* 347e).

The second point I would like to make refers to a methodological principle. I subscribe to the view that a playwright of fifth c. BCE Athens not only “feasts” at the tables of others but freely transforms and adapts his borrowings to the new ideology of his genre and the social and political circumstances of his time.³ In Sophocles’ time, there is the *polis*, with a value system that has evolved gradually but steadily, from the Homeric, through the archaic, down to the classical period. Moreover, Sophocles, as with all poets, had a particular style and personal preoccupations that characterize his work.⁴

¹ I would like to thank the participants in the Greek Epic Cycle Conference, held in ancient Olympia on 9–10 July 2010, for their useful comments on the oral presentation of the present paper. In particular, I am grateful to Malcolm Davies and Nanno Marinatos for their perceptive comments and discussions on the subject. I am also thankful to my student Eustathia-Maria Athanassopoulou, whose essay on Ajax and his relationships to the gods in the *Iliad* and the Sophoclean tragedy made me consider, in the long fruitful discussions with her, this interesting aspect of Ajax’s story.

² Davies begins his book on the Epic Cycle 1989:1 with reference to this passage from Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistai*; I use his translation of the relevant passage.

³ The long debate on the political discourse of ancient Greek tragedy dates at least from the time of the French School (Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Nicole Loraux) that argued strongly for its political character. I shall refer only to a few seminal works on the issue. From recent years there should be noted the debate on this matter between Griffin 1994:73–94 and Seaford 2000:30–44. See also the important work by Pelling 1997 where his contribution is titled: “Conclusion: Tragedy as Evidence, Tragedy and Ideology” 213–235; also Pelling 2000; Meier 1993; Euben 1986; Carter 2007. From numerous articles I only include a short selection: Goldhill 2000, where there is relevant bibliography in notes 1, 3 and 5; Rhodes 2003; Pozzi 1991; Hesk 2007; Said 1998, especially 278–280.

⁴ Knox in his *Heroic Temper* (1964) explores a personal preference of Sophocles by drawing an integrated picture of the Sophoclean hero: lonely, isolated, asocial and intransigent,

In the present paper I shall try first to detect what Sophocles in his *Ajax* borrowed from where, and second, how he elaborated the old material to produce a play reflecting on the new ideological structures and the value system sustaining the *polis*.

Ajax

Ajax, the hero, is very brave; he is not the “best of the Achaeans”, but he is the second best after Achilles (ἀνδρῶν αὖ μέγ’ ἄριστος ἔην Τελαμώνιος Αἴας / ὄφρ’ Ἀχιλεὺς μῆνιεν, *Iliad* 2.768–769).⁵ Symbolically, in the deployment of the Greek camp, he holds the left end while Achilles holds the right.⁶ And since Achilles eschews the battlefield for more than three quarters of the Homeric account of the Iliadic war (he returns to the battle in book 19 of the *Iliad*), it is Ajax who shoulders the burden of the defense of the Greek army; the Homeric formula for Ajax is ἔρκος Ἀχαιῶν, the bulwark of the Achaeans. And indeed, true to his Homeric characterization, he many times steadied the Greeks when their line was pressed by the advancing Trojans. Almost singlehandedly he tried to save the Greek ships from fire (book 15 of the *Iliad*). In book 17 of the *Iliad*, where there is a fierce struggle over the corpse of Patroclus, Ajax performs a great deed: he fights the rearguard action against the Trojans, allowing Menelaos and Meriones to bear the body to safety. Moving now to the Greek Epic Cycle, in the *Aethiopis* by Arctinus,⁷ where the death of Achilles is recounted, it is Ajax who

obsessively attached to his/her goal. Whitman (1951) in the title of his book on Sophocles advocates a specific “heroic humanism” as the kernel of the Sophoclean drama; Winnington-Ingram 1980:312–313 detects a “heroism of human beings, which give the picture of a hero who is wronged in some ways and fights against his/her ‘enemies’ and a divinely sent-destiny”. Bowra 1944:376 suggests that the Sophoclean hero learns his mortal limitations and accepts them.

⁵ See also *Iliad* 18.279–280, 19 192–193, *Odyssey* 12.469–470, 12.550–551, 12.556–558, 24.17–18. Ajax in the *Iliad* performs the deeds that were normally the role of Achilles: he fights Hector in a duel (book 7), clashes with him twice in a generalized battle (books 14, 15), and, together with the other Ajax (Oileus), fights off Hector from the walls of the Greek camp in book 12; he also retrieves the body of the dead Patroclus (book 17). In Sophocles, Ajax claims that if Achilles were alive he would have given him his arms (*Ajax* 442–444). For Ajax as second best to Achilles see Nagy 1999:31–32.

⁶ *Iliad* 8.225–226.

⁷ In five books by Arctinus of Miletus. There is some controversy regarding the dating of the epics of the Cycle. Davies 2001:3 deals with the issues of date (and authorship) of the poems; he dates most of the epics of the Cycle not earlier than the second half of the sixth century; also Davies 1989:89–100, where he explores the linguistic evidence of the direct quotations of the poems—late or post-Homeric to a great extent—as evidence for their dating. West 2003:14 places the stabilization of the epics of the Cycle “after the completion of the *Iliad*”, which in turn is dated by the author “in the middle decades of the seventh century” (2003:12n56). In this paper he also explores the intricate connection in subject matter and structure between the *Iliad* and the *Aethiopis*. Griffin 1977:39n9 dates the composition of the epics in general in the late seventh century. In a sense, we need to stabilize the date of the composition of the *Iliad*

recovers, carries off and saves the body of the slain hero while Odysseus fights off the Trojans. This is an intriguing reversal of what happens in book 17 of the *Iliad* in the struggle over the corpse of Patroclus, which is a scene mirroring the scene evoked in *Aethiopsis*.

This reversal could have been coincidental, insignificant or merely a narratological choice. However, it proves to be a very significant deviation from the Homeric scene. In the *Ilias Parva* by Lesches⁸ we are told of the crucial moment in Ajax's heroic career, which is the Judgment of Arms, the debate between Ajax and Odysseus over the arms of Achilles. In Proclus' *Chrestomatheia* we learn that Lesches stated the following: a. according to Athena's will (κατὰ βούλησιν Ἀθηναῖας) the arms of Achilles are granted to Odysseus b. Ajax becomes enraged (ἐμμανής) and attacks the flocks of the Greek army, and c. he kills himself. We have no idea how Homer would have dealt with the Judgment of Arms; he gives us only the famous scene in the Nekyia where the soul of Ajax walks away from the apologetic Odysseus without uttering a word to him. There, in book 11 of the *Odyssey*, we learn that the Judgment was decided by the Trojans and Pallas Athena (παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη, 11.547). We learn nothing more. What was exactly the "judgment" of the Trojans? Who were these Trojans? Men or women? Was it a fair judgment? Was it a fair trial?

The two relevant works of the Epic Cycle (*Aethiopsis* and *Ilias Parva*) provide some sparse information about the story. First, the Scholiast on the above passage of the *Odyssey* (11.547) reports that Agamemnon, unwilling to decide between the two rival heroes, asks some Trojan prisoners which of the two did them most harm. This version of the story might have been included in the *Aethiopsis*.⁹ The version of the *Ilias Parva* comes from the Scholiast on Aristophanes' *Knights* (verse 1056), who reports that the Achaeans, following the suggestion of Nestor, sent spies to the walls of Troy to eavesdrop on the enemy. There, two maidens (*parthenoi*) debate the matter: one suggesting Ajax, who retrieved the body of Achilles as the braver (Αἴας μὲν γὰρ ἄειρε καὶ ἔκφερε δηϊοτήτος / ἥρω Πηλεΐδην, οὐδ' ἤθελε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς, F2^A Davies); the other, guided by Athena, challenges this as a lie (πῶς ἐπεφωνήσω; πῶς οὐ κατὰ κόσμον ἔειπες / ψεῦδος; F2^A Davies). The decisive argument concerning this version is provided by verse 1056 of Aristophanes' *Knights* (on which the Scholiast is commenting) which states that even a woman can carry a burden, if ordained by a man, but she would not fight (καὶ κε γυνὴ φέροι ἄχθος, ἐπεὶ κεν ἀνὴρ ἀναθείη· / ἄλλ' οὐκ ἂν μαχέσαιτο, *Knights* 1056–1057). Thus, it seems that the act of bravery described by Homer (a hero fighting off the enemy while

first, because most scholars agree that the poems of the Epic Cycle were composed (or written, West 2003:11) in order to fill in the gaps left by the narratives of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

⁸ In four books by Lesches of Mytilene. In subject matter it overlaps considerably with the *Aethiopsis* and the *Iliou Persis* by Arctinus (Davies 1989:60). The Judgment of Arms, the first event narrated in the *Ilias Parva*, must have been treated also by Arctinus in the *Aethiopsis* (Davies 1989:61).

⁹ Hesk 2003:26; Davies 1989:62.

another—considerably less brave—retrieves the body) is reversed in the Epic Cycle to render Ajax a lesser hero. Now, he is the one doing woman’s work, while Odysseus defies the enemy.

Would this demoted hero suit Sophocles’ purpose? At a first glance it seems that the playwright connects not with the Epic Cycle but with Homer and also with Pindar, since both poets support the heroic stature of Ajax, as does Sophocles. Pindar in his eighth *Nemean Ode* (c. 459 BCE) states that the secret vote of the Danaoi favored Odysseus (κρυφίαισι γὰρ ἐν ψάφοις Ὀδυσσῆ Δαναοὶ θεράπευσαν, verse 26). In connection with this tradition, Sophocles puts a similar accusation into the mouth of the half-brother of Ajax, Teucer, aimed at Menelaos in the fourth epeisodion of *Ajax* (1135–1136):

TEY. Κλέπτῃς γὰρ αὐτοῦ ψηφοποιὸς ἠύρέθῃς.

ME. Ἐν τοῖς δικασταῖς, κοῦκ ἐμοί, τόδ’ ἐσφάλῃ.

(Teucer: you were shown to have cheated in the voting

Men.: This set-back was the work of the judges, not mine).¹⁰

The cheating in the voting in Sophocles corresponds to the secret vote in Pindar that favors “deceiving lies” (μέγιστον δ’ αἰόλω ψεύ- / δει γέρας ἀντέτατα, *Nemean Ode* 8.25). In both cases there is an unfair trial, the moral responsibility for which lies with Ajax’s comrades in arms. There is no meddling by Athena, nor is the “tittle tattle” of the Trojans an important factor compromising the judgment. The same line of thought (a judgment decided by Ajax’ peers) might have been Aeschylus’ invention (or influence) in his tragedy (the first of a trilogy) *The Judgment of Arms*.¹¹ One may argue, of course, that this is a plausible alteration of the original story,¹² considering that we are in mid-fifth c. BCE when the legal system is fully developed in the Greek poleis and the administration of justice—at least in Athens—is done by large numbers of citizens. Thus, it seems that we are moving away from the *Aethiopsis*, *Ilias Parva* and also the *Odyssey*.

However, the connection of the Sophoclean text with the Epic Cycle is more intricate than mere reflections in the details of the story. In Sophocles’ *Ajax*, it might be said, Athena does not falsify the results of the trial. She is not a petty goddess who intervenes in favor of Odysseus, and metes out injustice to Ajax; but, is this true?

In order to answer this question we need to think of the overall framework of Sophocles’ *Ajax* and to consider the intentions of the playwright. Sophocles explores a

¹⁰ All translations of Sophocles’ *Ajax* are by Lloyd-Jones.

¹¹ The other tragedies being *The Thracian Women*, and *The Women of Salamis*. Date uncertain. March 1991–1993 supports the view that the frequency of vase paintings depicting a judgment by Ajax’s peers in the first quarter of fifth c. BCE might be due to the influence of the Aeschylean text.

¹² Unlike Davies 1989:62 who supports the view that being judged by one’s peers is the “straightforward” version, thus the oldest.

situation of crisis, just after the Judgment of Arms. He borrows the elements of his plot from the cyclic tradition but transforms them into a frame of thought and action that suits his purpose. The decision about the arms of Achilles is clearly the outcome of a trial decided by the leaders of the Greeks (νῦν δ' αὐτ' Ἀτρεΐδαι φωτὶ παντουργῶ φρένας / ἔπραξαν, ἀνδρὸς τοῦδ' ἀπώσαντες κράτη; *Ajax* 445–446); thus, the injustice lies with the hero's comrades in arms. What then of Athena? In my opinion, the favoritism of the goddess and her “pettiness” towards Ajax are fully explored in the magnificent prologue of the play, where Athena shows herself vindictive, malicious, and bitterly ironic towards Ajax (*Ajax* 51–133). She gloats over the fallen hero and invites Odysseus to mock him when he is still deranged and humiliated: οὔκου γέλωσ ἡδιστος εἰς ἐχθροὺς γελαῖν; (is not laughing at one's enemies the most delightful kind of laughter? *Ajax* 79). With what Sophoclean concept of the divine this picture of Athena fits, it is hard to say.¹³ Up until the middle of the drama the spectator has the intense feeling of a goddess who must be respected out of fear. Even Odysseus is appalled and terrified by the malevolence of his beloved goddess when she invites him to witness the degradation of Ajax (*Ajax* 121–126):

...ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν
 δύστηνον ἔμπας, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ,
 ὀθούνεκ' ἄτη συγκατέζευκται κακῆ,
 οὐδὲν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦμόν σκοπῶν.
 Ὅρω γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν
 εἶδωλ', ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν, ἢ κούφην σκιάν.

(I pity him in his misery though he is my enemy, because he is bound fast by a cruel affliction, not thinking of his fate but my own; because I see that all of us who live are nothing but ghosts, or a fleeting shadow).

¹³ Most critics agree that the goddess Athena here is malevolent and cruel; “there can be no doubt that Athena is an utterly malign deity,[...]. The venom and vindictiveness with which she is portrayed in the opening scene are utterly unlike anything in the rest of Sophocles' work [...]. Athena toys with her victim before destroying him – or rather driving him to commit so humiliatingly senseless an act of wanton savagery against the cattle that his acute feeling of abased honor requires him to destroy himself,” Podlecki 1980:53, 55. Evans 1991:71 claims that she resembles more the demonic gods of the magical papyri. Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:482–500 and Parker 1999:12 agree that Athena in *Ajax* stands halfway between the gods in Aeschylus, who interfere in dramatic action, and in Euripides, where they form a distanced framework for human action in prologue and as *dei ex machina* (with the obvious exception of Aphrodite, Hera and Dionysus in *Hippolytus*, *Hercules Furens* and *Bacchae* respectively). Pucci 1994:27 sees in the invisibility of Athena (which is visible for the audience) the “tragic vision of man's powerlessness.” For the interaction of Ajax with Athena and the one day limit for her anger see Erp Taalman Kip 2007.

Here, Odysseus rises to the occasion, showing compassion and pity to the fallen hero, as he realizes the pervading frailty of the human condition.

Such divine cruelty on the part of Athena needs solid justification in the context of a tragic work; for this reason, two instances of downright hubristic behavior of the hero are constructed by the playwright. First, Ajax scolds his father for his advice that he rely on the aid of the gods for victory in battle; he replies “boastfully and stupidly” (ὕψικόμπως κάφρόνως, *Ajax* 766) as follows (*Ajax* 767–769):

Πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἄν ὁ μηδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ
κράτος κατακτήσαιτ’· ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα
κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ’ ἐπισπάσειν κλέος

(Father, together with the gods, even one who amounts to nothing may win victory; but I am confident that I can grasp this glory even without them).

Secondly, he scorns Athena’s help when she appears to aid him in battle (*Ajax* 774–775):

Ἄνασσα, τοῖς ἄλλοισιν Ἀργείων πέλας
ἴστω, καθ’ ἡμᾶς δ’ οὔποτ’ ἐκρήξει μάχη.

(Queen, stand by the other Argives; where I am, the enemy shall never break through).

This behavior is clearly an invention of Sophocles.¹⁴ A reader of Homer would have great trouble finding a single fault in Ajax’s behavior. A reader of the Epic Cycle could perhaps

¹⁴ Fisher 1992:325 interprets these particular remarks as a form of hubris, but “as mild a form as could easily be entertained”, and that “are better seen as a sign of the pervasive and foolish blindness to the general limits of human endeavours that is itself a consequence of his single-minded and unyielding pursuit of *arête* and *timê*” (327). I strongly disagree with the “mild” notion of Fisher’s remarks, since such an arrogant rejection of divine aid expressed by Ajax is rare in extant archaic and classical literary sources and it seems that Sophocles took great pains to make his hero look so cold-bloodedly self confident. Over boasting or “thinking big” are terms that refer to the “subjective, dispositional aspect of hybris” and ultimately hubris and terms such as *mega phronein* “can amount to the same thing” (Cairns 1996:11). On the other hand, I agree with Fisher 1992:328 when he notes that the hubris of Ajax is a complex issue, not confined to the reckless boasting aimed at Athena and the gods, but consisting also of a “blindness to the human condition, and, more seriously and disastrously, the consequential attempt to inflict savage revenge on those friends he believed had wronged him”; and all of them come as a result of his “own interpretation of heroic values” and his “desperate pursuit of *timê* and *arête*”. Another line of interpretation is put forward by Gasti 1992:83 who sees the hubris of the hero as military, representative of Homeric values in contrast to the “cooperative, civilized, rational values of the hoplite fighting ethic, represented in this case by Odysseus and Athena”; however, she does not distinguish between the Homeric values represented by Hector and Ajax (in the *Iliad*), fighting for their personal honor and the good of

glean some clues to justify the arrogance and disrespect shown by the hero in the Sophoclean drama; but this is mere speculation, since we lack sufficient evidence to support this view. But definitely, the reader of Sophocles understands how the outspoken arrogance of Ajax stirs up the anger of Athena and precipitates his own downfall. A hero in epic poetry can be arrogant and self centered, as is Achilles, without attracting divine retribution. In tragedy, however, there is often a strong causal relation between hubris and a punishment inflicted by society or by offended god(s).¹⁵ Thus, with this new component of arrogant boasting aiming at the gods is the hubris of Ajax fully developed and completed. However, regardless of the brashness of his arrogance, the appearance of the angry Athena in the opening scene of the tragedy is so violent and appalling as to produce terror both in Odysseus and the audience. Taking all this into consideration, I suggest that Athena's constant intervention in favor of Odysseus and against Ajax, which is a consistent feature of the Epic Cycle, is taken up by Sophocles, transformed to fit the general plan of his tragic work, and imbues his text.

I will now go back to a point which I mentioned earlier in this paper as a feature of the Epic Cycle: the degradation of the heroic stature of Ajax. In the *Ilias Parva* it is Odysseus and not Ajax who fights off the Trojans in the battle over the corpse of Achilles; as a result of this action, one young Trojan woman (the “judges” of the dispute over the arms) equates Ajax with a woman. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, however, the hero retains the heroic valor established by Homer. The hero in Sophocles is degraded not because he is not brave enough, but because he, with Athena's intervention, loses his clarity of sight; he is crushed by a blindness of mind and directs his anger (a justified anger according to the Homeric heroic value system) towards animals instead of the Achaeans. This second humiliation is worse than the first because the hero becomes the laughing stock of his enemies (*Ajax* 367): Οἴμοι γέλωτος, οἶον ὑβρίσθην ἄρα (Ah the mockery! What an insult I have suffered!). (See also the following passages: κείνοι δ' ἐπεγγεῶσιν ἐκπεφυγότες, and they have escaped and are laughing at me, *Ajax* 454; <τέκνον Λαρτίου> ἧ̄ που πολὺν γέλωθ' ὑφ' ἠδονῆς ἄγεις, [son of Laertes] how you must be laughing in

the community, and those represented by Achilles, whose personal honor overrides the good of the community. For more approaches on Ajax's hubris see Whitman 1951:67–70; Winnington-Ingram 1980:40–42; Crane 1990:99–101; Zanker 1992:21–22n6.

¹⁵ Defining hubris and its connection to retribution is a very complex matter, especially in tragedy. Fisher challenges the widespread belief that an offense against the gods (in some cases unintentional) may arouse divine jealousy or anger and result in the punishment of the human agent (what he labels the “traditional view” of hubris, 1992:2–3). Cairns 1996:10–22 refutes this view and Herman 2006:102–103 warns us about the danger of applying modern concepts on ancient terminology. Without wishing to enter this debate now, I would like to note that in the genre of tragedy there is a causal connection between violation of value codes observable by the members of the society (whether or not this is termed hubris) and punishment (by death or exile) of the “offender”. This is not to say, though, that this is a rigid pattern applicable to all extant tragedies; variations and nuances are to be seen in the whole spectrum of the surviving Attic drama.

your own delight, *Ajax* 382.) This last offense is what leads Ajax to his suicide. The justification of the hero's suicide is explored fully only by Sophocles. In Homer Ajax was angry (κεχλωμένος), in the *Ilias Parva* he is overtaken by mania (ἐμμανής). What happens in Sophocles?

The opening scene of the tragedy shows a hero in frenzy; he has killed several animals and captured others which he intends to torture before killing them. His act of vengeance is ruined by Athena, as we have seen; and when the confusion (κῦμα φοινίας ὑπὸ ζάλης, *Ajax* 352) is lifted from his mind, Ajax realizes his utter humiliation. In a sense, he becomes like the animals he has captured and killed, a victim of Athena's hunting (the hunting metaphors of the opening speech of the goddess speaks eloquently for the case, *Ajax* 1-8). And in a poignant dramatic reversal, while he intended to torture Odysseus at the beginning of the play, it is he who is now tortured by Athena: ἀλλά μ' ἄ Διός μ' ἄλκίμα θεὸς ὀλέθριον αἰκίζει (but the daughter of Zeus, the mighty goddess, tortures me to death, *Ajax* 401-402). The word used by Ajax to describe Athena's torture is *aikizein*, which is also the technical term to describe the maltreatment of the dead body of an enemy. In this context, the action of *aikizein* presupposes that you are dead, a lifeless body thrown as prey into the hands of the enemy, which is the most utter humiliation that a Homeric hero may dread (remember Hector at the hands of Achilles).

When Ajax realizes his situation, he wonders what path of action is left open to him. To the question: καὶ νῦν τί χρὴ δρᾶν; (and now what must I do? *Ajax* 457) Ajax gives two possible options: a. returning home without any spoils of war, thus disappointing his father with his heroic reputation in ruins; and b. assaulting the walls of Troy single handed, thus winning *kleos* but giving joy to the Atreidai by his death. The hero rejects both as unworthy of him. However, there is a third option that is implied in the final clause of his speech (*Ajax* 479-480):

ἀλλ' ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι
τὸν εὐγενῆ χρὴ. Πάντ' ἀκήκοας λόγον.

(The noble man must live with honour or be honourably dead; you have heard all I have to say).

This last sentence brings us to the realization that we have come full circle back to Homer. Ajax, obedient to his own axiom, kills himself not because he is angry, or bitter, or deranged, but because his heroic *timê* is irreparably ruined. As we all know, Achilles in the *Iliad* chooses personal honor over long, ordinary life. Seen in this light, Ajax in Sophocles is the duplicate of Achilles in the *Iliad*. The similarities go far beyond the simple fact that Ajax takes over while Achilles has retired or that he is constantly described as the second best of the Achaeans. The most important point of convergence is that both heroes are self-centered and

that personal honor and glory override the good of the community.¹⁶ Both heroes, in their own personal and distinct stories, harm their friends and help their enemies.¹⁷ The *proemion* of the *Iliad* clearly states that the anger of Achilles brought many afflictions upon the Achaeans (ἦ μὲν ἄχαιοις ἄλγε' ἔθηκε, 1.2) by sending his fellow-warriors to Hades.¹⁸ In Sophocles' tragedy Ajax directs his anger against his fellow-Achaeans; both heroes are angry (κεχολωμένοι) and they represent a deviation from what should be expected from a proper hero; to be brave and supportive of his community, as were Ajax and Hector in the *Iliad*.¹⁹ I think the following

¹⁶ Some similarities between Achilles and Ajax are put forward by various scholars. The grounds on which the similarities are compared are usually the isolation and destruction they brought upon themselves (Whitman 1951:64), the traumatized self-esteem and the ensuing anger (Knox 1964:51), the attack to the Atreidai and the harm they brought about to their communities (Jouan 1987:71, Sorum 1986:375). These remarks are evidently true; although the ultimate one is not pursued further to establish the main point of convergence between Ajax and Achilles, although some scholars (even if briefly) recognize affinities in ethos (behavior and thoughts) between Ajax and Achilles (Lloyd-Jones 1983:17; Winnington-Ingram 1980:15–16; Kirkwood 1958:174).

¹⁷ Although in the present paper the hold of the maxim “helping friends and harming enemies” in *Ajax* is not thoroughly examined, it is undoubtedly one of the central parameters of the story. The tragedy opens with an attempted “harming friends” coup (the reversal of the maxim proper) and it ends with a fierce debate over the ambiguous status of Ajax; shall he be treated as a friend or as an enemy? In between, the exquisite and highly ambiguous statement of Ajax in his deception speech lies, that proclaims a strong reversal of the maxim: ἐπίσταμαι γὰρ ἀρτίως ὅτι / ὅ τ' ἐχθρὸς ἡμῖν ἐς τοσόνδ' ἐχθαρτέος, / ὡς καὶ φιλήσων αὐθις, ἕξ τε τὸν φίλον / τοσαῦθ' ὑπουργῶν ὠφελεῖν βουλήσομαι, / ὡς αἰὲν οὐ μενοῦντα· τοῖς πολλοῖσι γὰρ / βροτῶν ἄπιστός ἐσθ' ἐταιρείας λιμήν (for I have lately learned that our enemy must be hated as one who will sometime become a friend, and in helping a friend I shall aim to assist him as one assists a man who will not remain a friend forever, since for most mortals the harbour of friendship cannot be trusted, 678–683). For the reversal of the maxim see Belfiore 2000:101–116. The classic study of this maxim is the book by Blundell 1989. Interestingly, Herman 2006:278 claims that the influence of the maxim “helping friends and harming enemies” upon Athenian behavior in classical times is negligible, something shown by the exercise of other qualities such as forgiveness, moderation and self-restraint. It is also evident in the forensic speeches of the fourth c. BCE that “lay claim to the principle of not harming enemies which is expected to be regarded as a virtue”. This, according to the author, marks a transition from the Homeric society to the Athenian classical city. However, we should bear in mind that in Sophocles both can coexist; the affirmation of the maxim as a strong reminiscence of the bygone era of the Homeric heroes, and the negation of the principle in the civic preoccupations of the classical polis. At any rate, in Sophocles' *Ajax* the debated maxim is restored when, at the end of the drama, Ajax is allowed to be buried, thus allotting him the treatment of a *philos*. See also Hesk 2003:90–91 for relevant discussion on the matter.

¹⁸ An idea which is repeated time and again in the *Iliad* since this is the wider framework within which the action of the poem is placed.

¹⁹ This last remark opens up an interesting and (thus far) open-ended discussion regarding the notion of the Iliadic hero. Studies on Homeric morality cannot but include the case of Achilles

oxymoron epitomizes Ajax's position and character in our tragedy: Ajax in Sophocles is more "Homeric" than in Homer.

To recap:

Sophocles had the choice of various versions of Ajax's story. The details of the Judgment of Arms are drawn mainly from the Epic Cycle (*Aethiopis* and *Ilias Parva*), although the episode was not unknown to Homer. In the Epic Cycle we should note three important deviations from the Homeric Ajax: a. the abased heroic stature that is shown in the rescue of Achilles' body b. the Judgment of Arms which is decided by Trojan captives or young *parthenoi* and c. the constant intervention of Athena in favor of Odysseus. In Homer, on the other hand, Ajax is a hero of elevated status, respected by his fellow-Achaeans, feared by the Trojans, protected by the gods. It seems that Sophocles moves between the two pictures of the hero by borrowing elements from both and adopting them to fit his purpose. I have suggested that the debased status of Ajax in the Epic Cycle and the favoritism of Athena are adopted by Sophocles and transformed into the fallen hero and the malevolence of Athena at the beginning of the play. But this is not the end of the story, since Sophocles goes back and "eats" from the table of Homer as well. This is done masterfully as Sophocles creates his own hero not on the pattern of the Homeric Ajax but on that of Achilles, thus giving us his *Best of the Achaeans*.²⁰ Sophocles constructs his own Achilles with elements implicit in the Homeric and cyclic tradition radically transforming them, however, to give us his own hero: a hero who is brave, proud, faithful to the value system he has been brought up in; but who is also intransigent, arrogant,

in the examination of heroic behavior and ethics. One may wonder how he is placed on the spectrum of cooperative and competitive values, to recall the renowned dichotomy explored by Adkins (1960, 1972). On the other hand, many studies on Achilles in particular have noted the peculiarity of his character and position in the *Iliad* (the best of the Achaeans, Nagy 1999:26–41; both divine and bestial, King 1987:2–27; as having an evolving character shifting from anger to pity, Schein 1984:89–167; withdrawing from suffering and receding to the politics of pity, Hammer 2002:207–229; representing the internal ambiguity of the heroic code consisting of the values of cooperation and their erosion, Zanker 1994:42). However, no matter how integral to the Homeric value system the case of Achilles seems to be, one should not forget that Achilles violates this very system that he is supposed to represent. He does not act in the way expected of him, as the speeches of the members of the embassy to Achilles (book 9) prove. He puts his heroic *timê* above the well being of the Achaeans, and as a result he spurns the battle; and when he goes back, he violates all conceivable aspects of the heroic code in a cumulative frenzy of killing (book 21), and finally treats the body of the dead Hector in blatant defiance of both human and divine laws (books 22–24). Conversely Hector, who supports the Trojans with his heroism, and Ajax, who shoulders the defence of the Achaeans with his strength and bravery, are model heroes of the Iliadic war, and are highly praised by the *aidos*.

²⁰ This is an obvious reference to the title of the classic book by Nagy *The Best of the Achaeans* (see above n. 17); I shall be arguing in much greater detail elsewhere about Ajax and the appropriation of this title.

disrespectful, unyielding and self-centered to the extent that he can no longer serve the good of the community.

These remarks bring us to the last consideration of the present paper. What did Sophocles want to convey to his audience by creating his own Ajax? Although trying to answer this question might be a wild goose chase, I will venture to suggest some lines of interpretation for *Ajax* and the Sophoclean tragedy as a whole. Sophocles was an intellectual who almost outlived the fifth c. BCE. At almost the middle of this century he produced *Ajax*.²¹ Athens was at its zenith; the Peloponnesian war had yet to become a cloud on the horizon. What marked the Athenian life at that time was characterized by intense intellectual activity reflecting on all the issues related to the formation of the political system of a new democracy (in 462 BCE the reforms of the radical wing of the democratic party led by Ephialtes are dated). “Political” is a term which is used here not in its narrow modern sense but as a general term denoting what refers to and concerns the polis—i.e. the political structures of the city and the life of the citizens.²² The Athenian democracy was a unique political system with the body politic both administering the system and creating its structures.²³ There was constant debate among intellectuals about everything concerning the activity of the citizens in war and in peace, as is well attested in Herodotus, Thucydides, Aristophanes, and the many works of the sophists, whose preoccupations were recorded later by Plato. This debate is also imprinted in the works of the Athenian tragic poets who reflect on contemporary issues while using old mythical material. Within this framework, Sophocles in *Ajax* feels free to borrow extensively from the earlier tradition in order to give us a study of the Homeric heroic system in extremis. This is why his Ajax is more “Homeric” than in Homer. Sophocles’ preoccupation includes also the political discourse articulated by Menelaos and Agamemnon in the second part of *Ajax*. The sons of Atreus represent a political ethos that is cruel and inconsiderate of the totality of the value system of their society. So, in *Ajax* we have the two extremes: on the one hand, a self-centered hero ignoring the good of the community, on the other, two political leaders ignoring the wider system of values of the community. In the middle, stands Odysseus attempting to

²¹ The date of the performance of *Ajax* is uncertain. According to most critics it falls between the years 450 and 440 BCE (Hesk 2003:200).

²² See Carter “Problem: What do we mean by ‘political?’” (2007:64–73). A distinction should be made between the working definition put forward in this paper (and in many works mentioned above n. 1) and the “narrow” sense of the term, which is the contemporary use of the word, i.e. “what refers to the administration (management) of political power in a society, along with the discourse that explains the principles of that administration”.

²³ The society of the democratic system of Athens manifests itself as a *societas instituans* (and not as a *societas instituta*) in the sense that it is in the process of constantly creating, and recreating, its own institutions in the socio-historical reality of the time; it also establishes mechanisms of controlling the suitability of the institutions for the well being of the citizens of the polis. The body of citizens enjoying the benefits of the institutions is the selfsame body enacting them (Castoriades 1995:125; Castoriades 1975:197, 218).

reconcile the two extremes and representing the common sense of justice that dictates the following: a great hero, no matter how violent and destructive, deserves a proper burial, while a political leader should learn moderation and compassion. Only then, can a community of citizens enjoy prosperity and be at peace with itself. The old myth serves the new ideals and this is why Sophocles transforms the riches of the past into a new discourse (*logos*) that promotes communal instead of individual values.

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