

THE HEROIC DISTEMPER *
A Study in the Ajax of Sophocles.

By comparison with other plays of Sophocles, the Ajax seems at first sight to present few problems. It is generally agreed to be among the earliest of his extant plays (1), though there are dissentient voices; among the more reliable stylistic criteria invoked are the frequent use of 'heavy' compounds in dialogue and of 'doublets' of the "assembled and met together" type (Earp), and the failure to make full use of the three-actor technique, so that scenes which have three actors usually show them in a series of duologues (Listmann). The *hybris*-motif has also been viewed as an Aeschylean theme and hence as evidence for an early date. Attempts (put forward with greater or less conviction) to find contemporary political references have not been convincing (2). The question of the relative priority of this play, the Antigone, and the Trachiniae, seems insoluble; fortunately this question is not important to our understanding of the play.

The play also seems to lack the moral dilemmas (3) characteristic of Sophocles' plays. One person dominates the play, and he apparently fits the classic formula (deduced, at some risk, from Aristotle) of the great man who has fallen a victim to a fatal flaw of character, in this case pride or *hybris*. Ajax, it may be said, had developed dangerous habits of self-reliance and of scorning divine aid; Athena therefore deprived him of the arms of Achilles, an act which was at once a punishment and a

* With apologies to Professor Knox.

(1) See espec. F. R. Earp, *The Style of Sophocles*, Cambridge 1944, *passim*; K. Listmann, *Die Technik des Dreigesprachs...*, diss. Giessen 1910, 13-38; G. Mistrotis, *Welches ist das älteste Drama des Sophocles*, Paris 1901; H. Siess, "WS" 36, 1914, 244-94 and 37, 1915, 27-62; to the contrary e.g. W. Buchwald, *Studien zur Chronologie*, diss. Königsberg 1939.

(2) E.g. by H. Grégoire, "AIPHO" 13, 1953, 653-63 (with P. Orghels) and "BAB" 1955, 187-98; N. Brown, "TAPhA" 82, 1951, 1-28; and B. Stumpo, "Aevum" 30, 1956, 1-19.

(3) For studies on character and morality see especially W. E. Brown, "CJ" 61, 1965, 118-21; R. Ebeling, "Hermes" 76, 1941, 282-314; G. B. Elftmann, *Nobility of Birth*, diss. Pennsylvania 1973, 108-148; G. M. Kirkwood, 'Essays H. D. F. Kitto', London 1963, 53-70; M. MacGregor, *Leaves of Hellas*, London 1936, 80-109; A. Müller, *Aesthetische Kommentar*, Paderborn 1904, 337-373; G. Pavano, "AAPal" 1942, 539-605; E. Petersen, *Die Attische Tragödie...*, Bonn 1915, 215-23 and 388-94; G. Ronnet, *Sophocle*, Paris 1969, *passim*; V. J. Rosivach, "CJ" 72, 1976, 47-61; J. C. Stephens, *Odysseus in Sophocles*, diss. Yale 1966; E. Wolf, *Griechisches Rechtsdenken*, II, Frankfurt 1952, 203-16.

warning. So far from heeding the warning, he embarked on a plan to kill the Greek leaders, which was foiled only because Athena intervened to turn his wrath on to animals. Restored to sanity, he is offered a last chance of reconciliation with men and gods. With men he cannot be reconciled, and so must die. But because he achieves a measure of reconciliation with the gods, Athena (through her agent Odysseus) intervenes to save his honour, though not his life.

This neat pattern (though not usually expressed as crudely as I have put it) represents what may be called the orthodox interpretation of the play. Perhaps I may say at once that if Sophocles intends us to bear it in mind throughout, he has certainly made a rare mess of his exposition. The first item on the catalogue — Ajax's spurning of divine aid — does not come in until lines 766-777. The second item — Athena's depriving Ajax of the arms of Achilles — does not come in at all. Sophocles had a perfectly good version of the judgement of the arms available in which Athena was responsible (4) in *Odyssey* XI 543-64, assuming that the key line 547 *παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Πάλλας Ἀθήνη* stood in his text of Homer; there is no real reason to doubt this, as against the rejection of the line by Aristarchus must be set the supporting evidence of the scholiasts on this line and on Aristophanes *Knights* 1063, who rely on the epic cycle (especially the *Little Iliad*). But Sophocles does not use this version, following instead the version of Pindar *Nemean* 7. 20-31 and 8. 23-38; the decision was by ballot of the Greek leaders. (Whether he also follows Pindar in making the decision an unjust one has been much disputed; I shall return to this point later). The element of divine reconciliation is also very debatable (depending chiefly on the interpretation of the notoriously difficult 'deception-speech' of lines 646-692), and so is the role of Athena in the sequel (the relevance of which is another celebrated 'crux'). All in all, the advocates of the orthodox view can be charged with trying to fit the play to a bed of Procrustes, stretching the text or lopping it off as necessary.

It seems necessary to look again at the play and in particular to see which features of the legend Sophocles is concerned to emphasize at various points. Perhaps, before starting this operation, I had better make my own prejudices clear (5). I believe (with Tycho von Wilamowitz and

(4) On the mythological background see especially P. Ansorge, *Objective and Subjective Tradition...*, diss. Michigan 1973; D. Bassi, "RFIC" 18, 1889-90, 289-364; and the editions of R. C. Jebb (Cambridge 1896, p. ix-xxiii), J. C. Kamerbeek (Leiden 1963², 1-6), W. B. Stanford (London 1963, p. ix-xxiv).

(5) See also D. A. Hester, "Mnemosyne" 24, 1971, 11-59. Major discussions of the plot are: S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright*, Toronto 1957, 23-41; F. Al-

others) that Sophocles' plays should be looked at primarily in terms of the dramatic effectiveness of each scene, but reject his view that Sophocles is not concerned to maintain any sort of consistency of character between scenes. It follows that a given passage can always be looked at in two ways; in terms of its immediate effect (dramatic motivation), and from the point of view of the 'motives' of the persons involved in it, since they are presented as real characters, and Sophocles is concerned to make their actions psychologically plausible as well as dramatically effective.

This double kind of motivation is clear already in the prologue, of which the best discussions will be found in Linforth and Massa Positano. Odysseus and Athena have as their dramatic function to prepare us for the entry of Ajax, and it is interesting to see what form this preparation

lègre, Sophocle, Paris 1905, 51-105; W. N. Bates, Sophocles, Philadelphia 1940, 93-117; A. von Blumenthal, Sophokles, Stuttgart 1936, 132-145; C. M. Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, Oxford 1965, 16-62; R. Camerer, "Gymnasium" 60, 1953, 289-327; L. Coraluppi, "Dioniso" 42, 1968, 115-142; L. R. Cresci, "Maia" 26, 1974, 217-225; F. Dirlmeier, "NJAB" 1, 1938, 297-318; M. Funke, Die sogenannte tragische Schuld, diss. Köln 1963, 146-8; R. G. Geldard, Sophoclean Drama, diss. Stanford 1972, 11-32; G. H. Gellie, Sophocles, Melbourne 1972, 3-28; T. D. Goodell, Athenian Tragedy, New York 1920, 216-223; G. Grossmann, "MH" 25, 1968, 65-85; E. Howald, Die griechische Tragödie, München 1930, 93-101; J. Jones, On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy, London 1962, 177-91; H. D. F. Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama, London 1956, 179-98; I. Kott, The Eating of the Gods, (tr. B. Taborski), London 1974, 43-77; R. Lattimore, The Poetry of Greek Tragedy, Baltimore 1958, 57-80; V. Leinaks, "CJ" 69, 1974, 193-201; F. J. H. Letters, The Life and Work of Sophocles, London 1953, 123-46; I. M. Linforth, "Univ. of California Publications in Class. Philol." 15, 1954, 1-28; A. Maddalena, Sofocle, Torino 1956, 3-49; L. Massa Positano, L'unità dell'Aiace, Napoli 1946; G. Méautis, Sophocle, Paris 1957, 13-49; E. T. Owen "UTQ" 5, 1936, 231-50; H. Patin, Etudes sur les tragiques grecs, II, Paris 1865, 1-54; G. Perrotta, Sofocle, Messina 1935, 123-84; E. Petersen, Die attische Tragödie, Bonn 1915, 215-223 and 388-94; M. Pohlenz, Die griechische Tragödie, Göttingen 1930, 173-86; K. Reinhardt, Sophocles, Frankfurt 1947, 18-41; Ronnet, op. cit.; I. Roveri, "Vichiana" 1, 1964, 22-34; E. Schlesinger, "Poetica" 3, 1970, 359-87; W. Schmid. - O. Stählin, Geschichte der Griechischen Literatur, München 1934, 329-43; P. Sgroi, I poeti del quinto secolo, Messina 1963, 135-45; C. Steinweg, Sophokles, Halle 1924, 115-34; R. M. Torrance, "HSPH" 69, 1965, 273-81; E. Turolla, Saggio sulla poesia di Sofocle, Bari 1934, 35-54; J. Tyler, "AJPh" 95, 1974, 24-42; M. Untersteiner, Sofocle, Firenze 1935, I 36-92; A. J. A. Waldock, Sophocles the Dramatist, Cambridge 1951, 49-79; T. B. L. Webster, An Introduction to Sophocles, Oxford 1936, passim; H. Weinstock, Sophokles, Leipzig 1931, 40-65; L. T. Welles, Time past and the hero, diss. Washington-Seattle 1959, 12-37; C. H. Whitman, Sophocles, Cambridge Mass. 1951, 59-80; M. Wigodsky, "Hermes" 40, 1962, 149-58; T. von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles, Berlin 1917, 51-68. See also notes 8, 9, and 12.

takes. Their psychological motivation is also interesting, and very diverse views have been held of it. Odysseus has been seen as the unheroic man (as opposed to the heroism of Ajax) by Ronnet, Torrance and others, but as the prudent man (as opposed to the *hybris* of Ajax) by Kitto, Perrotta and others; Athena is to some (e. g. Webster) the personification of justice, to others (e. g. Turolla) demonic. The holding of such opposite views might suggest that the text was not clear on these matters, and this, indeed, seems to be the case. In fact Odysseus and Athena form a partnership easily recognisable from *Odyssey* XIII 221-351 — a cautious, cunning and tricky pair. Athena's opening compliment to Odysseus strongly recalls that of *Odyssey* XIII 291-9, a passage no doubt familiar to the audience, and Odysseus' response is at once a natural reaction and a useful piece of exposition. Her motivation emerges in line 51 (cf. also 1055-61); she is, as in the *Iliad*, the champion of the Greeks. There is no suggestion yet that she claims to have been personally injured by Ajax; when she uses the word 'enemy' in line 79 it is the enmity of Ajax and Odysseus she refers to, though the scene with Ajax which follows will show that she is not averse from the mockery to which she invites him. The scholiast on 79 comments that she is not subject to human rules (*σκληρὸν μὲν τὸ λέγειν ἐπεγγελάων τοῖς ἐχθροῖς, ἀλλὰ θεὸς ἔστω οὐκ εὐλαβουμένη τὸ νεμεσητόν*). Odysseus' attitude should also not be overstressed. It serves the dramatic function of preparing us for the horror to come; he is cautious rather than cowardly (as the scholiast on 76 puts it, he shows *τὸ εὐλαβέες* rather than *ἡ δειλία*); we are not intended to see him as either an ignoble adversary of the great Ajax or as a paragon of *sophrosyne*; our main attention is not on him at all.

The entry of Ajax is worthy of the preparation, and his scene with Athena is so effective a specimen of that dramatic irony in which Sophocles excels as to hardly require comment; this is combined with the deliberate irony of Athena. The scene is, of course, very important to us for forming an estimate of the character of Ajax; but it is not surprising that reactions to it differ. Two points must surely be beyond dispute. The first is that Ajax is mad, and so not to be judged by normal standards. The second is that he is terrible; the whole preceding dialogue has prepared us for this; it is confirmed by his delight in the slaughter, his proposed treatment of Odysseus, and his brusque giving of orders to Athena in lines 112 and 116 (this particularly horrifies the scholiast, who comments that Sophocles is deliberately depriving Ajax of the sympathy of the audience, which his disaster would otherwise have won for him). But it is still not clear that we have a stock example of *hybris*. Ajax's present attitude to Athena may be excused as part of

his madness, and her comment of lines 118-120 makes two points; the power (not justice) of the gods, and the previous good sense of Ajax (6). The conclusion we are invited to draw is that which Odysseus does in fact draw; that even the wisest of men is powerless in the fact of *ate* sent by god. Athena's reply stresses this point; since the gods are so powerful the only proper response is caution. Her remarks on *sophrosyne* seem to be general rather than to have special reference to a previous sin of Ajax; the reference to strength fits him, that to wealth does not. Any attempt to find such special reference seems to be based on hindsight from lines 748-779; such an attempt is made by the scholiast on 127, who lists three 'crimes' of Ajax, of which his insult to Athena is the first.

Be that as it may, the impression left by this scene can hardly be favourable to Ajax (Stanford's "On the whole the opening scene puts Ajax in an unfavourable light" is an understatement). Those of the audience for whom Athena was a 'norm' would have to condemn him; those who saw a battle between her and him would surely see the right as being on her side. And yet one problem remains. We have already had two references to the judgement of the arms as the cause of Ajax's lust for vengeance (lines 41 and 100): Ajax will revert to this topic, charging Odysseus and the Atreidae with malpractice (e. g. 442-9) and will be followed by Teucer (1135): they will deny the charge (1136, 1236-45). As we have seen, Sophocles has rejected the version of *Odyssey* XI and is following Pindar in making the decision depend on the voting of the Greeks. Is he also following Pindar in making the decision an unjust one? One would not expect Sophocles' audience to be as familiar with the Nemeans as they were with Homer, so if Sophocles can depart from the version given by Homer he is certainly not bound to Pindar. In fact he gives no indication of which version is correct (Ajax, Teucer, Menelaus and Agamemnon are interested parties, and what they have to say is in no way decisive). When we put the judgement in its dramatic context we see that the issue must be left unsettled. If the judgement of the arms was correct, Ajax is simply a villain, conceiving extreme vengeance for an imaginary wrong; the rest of the play shows us that this is not Sophocles' judgement. If on the other hand the verdict was false, Odysseus is disqualified from the mediating role he plays; one cannot see him as an innocent and naive beneficiary of a corrupt decision, so he must appear as an arrant hypocrite.

The entry of the chorus in fact serves to balance the unfavourable

(6) This seems to show that the picture of the Homeric Ajax as drawn by Stanford (basically the trier who was never quite adequate to the situation) is not relevant for Sophocles; one may have reservations about its validity for Homer also.

view we have formed of Ajax. The role of the Chorus is not difficult to understand (7) and is in fact well discussed by the scholiast on line 134, who draws a contrast with Aeschylus' Thracian Women, where the Chorus was made up of captives. As the Chorus is of Salaminians, they at once have a natural sympathy with Ajax's sufferings and a vested interest in the welfare of their leader. They are not, however, capable of comprehending the agonies into which his loss of honour throws him. They thus contrast with him as 'men-in-the-street' opposed to embittered nobility, but also serve to balance the picture by showing us a more favourable view of him, as the innocent victim of slander. This to some extent counteracts the prologue, but the audience knows that the 'slander' is true, and hence cannot identify itself with the views of the chorus, who here (as often in Sophocles) are as prone to human ignorance and weakness as the other characters of the drama.

Apart from the sympathy of the Chorus for Ajax, the most striking point for us is probably the reference in line 154 to *μεγάλων ψυχῶν*. This has inevitably suggested the *μεγαλόψυχος* of Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* IV iii. On the assumption that Aristotle seldom strays far from popular ethics, it is worth taking a look at this passage to see what are the characteristics of such a man. He is a man who claims, and claims rightly, an especial share of honour (*τιμῆ*: a favourite word of Ajax, already used in line 98). The rightness of his claim implies that he is good; his superiority to other men implies that even their honour is not of great account to him, as their judgement is inferior to his own. He thus shows a blind unconcern for any petty achievements and especially will not stoop to deceit. This is to us a chilling picture, but there is no reason to doubt that Aristotle's admiration of such a man was genuine; Christian humility was not a Greek virtue. At the same time, it is clear that if Ajax is this kind of man something is wrong either with the pattern (as argued eloquently by Knox and others) or with this particular example.

So far, then, the balance is decidedly against Ajax, and the scene with Tecmessa, in spite of her sympathy for him, does little to restore it. Sick he may be, but even sane he is fierce and terrible (205-6; Stanford is useful here). True, he 'loves' Tecmessa (212), but how far this 'love' indicates any understanding of her or willingness to listen to her is yet to be seen. She confirms the rumour of his slaughter of the cattle; at

(7) See especially C. Becker, *Studien zum sophokleischen Chor*, diss. Frankfurt 1950, 17-27; I. Errandonea, "Emerita" 10, 1942, 28-65, "Helmantica" 7, 1956, 401-25, and "Mnemosyne" 52, 1924, 299-38; M. Untersteiner, "RFIC" 11, 1953, 299-314; Ronnet and Shaw, *ops cit.*

the same time she tells us of his return to sanity (8). She also makes it clear that, mad or sane, his treatment of her has been anything but considerate (see especially lines 291-2, 312). His collapse into unmanly lamentations (316-22) suggest that of Heracles (Women of Trachis espec. 1070-5, a passage also relevant to the deception speech). His chief emotion now is shame, in that he is a laughing-stock (366-82): his chief wish is for revenge followed by death (387-411). He is unresponsive to the prayers of Tecmessa and the Chorus, and makes it quite clear that his resolve for vengeance was prior to his madness (446-8) and still continues. Unwilling to live with his honour lost, he resolves on suicide, and Tecmessa's appeal to him — to consider the fate that will befall her and of his son after he is dead — apparently falls on deaf ears. Even the scene where he holds his son in his arms contrasts with its model in Iliad VI; Eurysaces is to be reared to bring vengeance on his father's foes (557), not to be better than his father. His farewell to Tecmessa (583-95) is singularly devoid of any trace of affection for her, the remarks of Adams, Ebeling and Ferguson to the contrary notwithstanding.

The first stasimon creates no difficulties; the Chorus not only understands Ajax's determination on suicide (though not the reasons for it) but is resigned to it. But a dramatic change is to come, and with it a portion of the play which, although a mere 47 lines, has probably attracted more discussion and dispute than all the rest of the play.

Ajax re-enters and announces that all things change, and that he, too, has changed with them. But in what does this change consist? We can, I think, take it as agreed that there is a dramatic reversal; the chorus and Tecmessa will believe that Ajax has abandoned his plan of suicide, and this belief will be skilfully exploited in the sequel. But there is also the question of personal motivation — what is it that makes Ajax speak as he does, and what are his real thoughts? I would tentatively classify the interpretations as follows (9): A) The change is purely verbal: Ajax is

(8) Lines 257-62; this should be sufficient refutation (if refutation is needed) of the theory that Ajax is mad throughout the play, for which see Collinge, "BICS" 9, 1962, 49; H. Musurillo, *The Light and the Darkness*, Leiden 1967, 7-26; E. Vandvik, 'Serta Eitremiana', Oslo 1952, 169-75. This theory has the sole merit of freeing us from the need to make sense of the 'deception-speech' (see. n. 9).

(9) A very tentative classification of views by author would be:

A) Verbal change only: Allègre, E. Bignone ("RFIC" 1923, 145-9), von Blumenthal, W. Büchner (Ueber der Aias, Offenbach 1894), C. Conradt ("NJPhP" 155, 1897, 33-36), Coraluppi, Dalmeyda ("REG" 46, 1933, 1-14), Dirlmeier, U. Parlavantz-Friedrich (Täuschungsszenen..., Berlin 1969, 7-24), Funke, G. Grossman ("MH" 25, 1968, 65-85), Howald, Kamerbeek, Méautis, Petersen, Pohlenz, Ronnet, C. Thirlwall

(for some reason) deceiving us as to his real opinions and intentions. B) There is a change of perception: Ajax can now see for the first time the case for yielding, but remains convinced that it is not a real option for him. C) There is a change of attitude: Ajax cannot only see the case for yielding, but is also to some extent influenced in his own attitudes to the gods (and perhaps also to men) by it. However, he remains determined on suicide. D) There is a change of intention: Ajax has changed his mind about his course of action. E) The speech is so miscellaneous that it fits no one of these classifications.

A) The first view is that of the scholiast on line 646 – Ajax is making a deliberate pretext in order to gain for himself solitude, to enable his suicide. The scholiast adds a comparison with the speech of Deianira in Trachiniae 437-469; the parallel is not close, but that is rather a problem in the interpretation of the Trachiniae; the scholiast at least thinks that both speeches are deliberately deceptive. There is apparently direct support for this view in Sophocles' text (line 651 "My *mouth* has become womanized", spoken by Ajax, and line 807 "I know I have been deceived by my man", spoken by Tecmessa; but, of course, Tecmessa may still not fully understand the situation). To lie – or, if he avoids direct lies, at least to deceive – seems quite uncharacteristic of Ajax; to present an inconsistent character seems (*pace* T. von Wilamowitz and Waldoek) quite uncharacteristic of Sophocles. There is no adequate personal mo-

("Phil. Museum" 2, 1833, 509-24), Torrance, Waldoek, Wellein, Wilamowitz.

B) Change of perception: Camerer, Elftmann, K. von Fritz ("RhM" 83, 1934, 113-128 = Antike und moderne Tragödie, Berlin 1962, 241-55), Gellie, Kitto, Linforth, Maddalena, G. A. Markantonatos ("Platon" 24, 1972, 106-11 and 27, 1975, 269-72), Massa Positano, Reinhardt, T. G. Rosenmeyer (The Mask of Tragedy, Austin 1963, 153-198), Schmid-Stählin, Sgroi, Sicherl ("YCS" 25, 1977, 67-98 = "Hermes" 98, 1970, 14-37), Untersteiner, Weinstock, Whitman.

C) Change of attitude: D. Cohen ("G & R" 25, 1978, 24-36), G. Dronke ("NJPhP" suppl. 4, 1861, 90-95), Ebeling, I. Eichen-Iselin (Interpretationen und Untersuchungen... diss. Basel 1942, 142-5), J. Ferguson ("Dioniso" 44, 1970, 12-29), A. Jacob (Questiones Sophocleae, I, Warsaw 1821, 193-5), Jebb, Letters, J. Moore ("YCS" 1977, 47-66), W. Schadewaldt (Neue Wege zur Antike, 8, Leipzig 1929, 69-82), M. H. Shaw (Sophocles' Ajax, diss. Austin 1971), M. Simpson ("Arethus" 2, 1969, 88-103), F. G. Welcker ("RhM" 3, 1829, 43-92 and 229-264 = Kleine Schriften, II 264-335), Wolf.

D) Change of intention: Ansorge, Bowra, I. Errandonea ("LEC" 26, 1958, 21-40 = Sófocles, Madrid 1958, 303-324 = H. Diller, Sophokles, Darmstadt 1967, 268-94), B. M. W. Knox ("HSPH" 65, 1961, 1-37), van Leeuwen (Commentatio de Aiakis... authentia..., Utrecht 1884, 85-92), Ronnet (as alternative).

E) Miscellaneous: Perrotta, Turolla, the advocates of Ajax's madness (see n. 9), and 'passim' comments by Jebb and others. Of course, the boundaries between these views – especially between B) and C) – are hard to define.

tivation for Ajax to act in this way; the pity he expresses for Tecmessa in line 651 is not enough for him to yield to her pleas and refrain from suicide, and there seems to be no physical or psychological barrier to his immediate suicide. If Sophocles is determined to avoid immediate suicide for dramatic convenience or even by dramatic convention he seems to have taken no real trouble to provide Ajax with adequate motivation for this speech.

B) We come to the view — which is especially fashionable nowadays — that Ajax has undergone a change of perception but not of attitude. For the first time, it is argued, Ajax sees what *sophrosyne* means; he becomes aware of a world in which change and compromise are normal and emerges from his blind isolation. But this perception makes no difference to his resolution — as Gellie puts it “What Ajax does is to speak for another world while being totally committed to his own”.

This view has the great merit of adding another level to our appreciation of the speech as an element in the drama. It becomes not merely a crude device to produce a double reversal in the action, but a vivid contrasting of Ajax's world of heroic isolation with the socially-orientated world of the fifth-century *polis*. On it Sophocles has lavished what is perhaps the finest poetry he ever wrote. But when we descend from these elevated heights to ask the crude questions of what Ajax means by what he is saying, and when he is sincere, when ironical, and when deliberately deceptive, we see that this view, whatever it may contribute to our dramatic understanding of the play, leaves some basic problems of personal motivation unsettled.

C) We now come to a view which is also widely held, the classic statement of which is probably that of Schadewaldt. Ajax is (in part at least) sincere; he has undergone a kind of conversion to *sophrosyne* (line 677); he will in future know how to yield to the gods (line 667), and will seek purification (655) and reconciliation; reconciliation at least with the gods, even though he cannot be reconciled with men. He remains resolved on suicide, but his suicide is no longer a last resource, as it was in 430-480, but his atonement, for which he will in the sequel be rewarded with honour and due burial. The chorus and Tecmessa misunderstood his talk of yielding as an expression of his abandonment of the idea of suicide, which is false; but in a deeper sense his words are true. As Dronke put it many years before Schadewaldt “Nun kehrt dem Helden, da er seine Schuld erkannt, den frommen Sinn wieder. Er will nicht in Entzweiung mit der Göttern aus dem Leben scheiden. Versöhnen will er die Gottheit durch das freiwillige Opfes des eigenes Blut; in der Selbstbestrafung findet er den edelsten Ausdruck seiner Reue”. This is in many ways an attractive view — perhaps too attractive, as its similarity to

Christian ethics may be a danger-sign. Are we not making the same mistake as is often made in the interpretation of the *Antigone*, turning Sophocles into a prophet? Study of the text confirms these doubts; the promise to "know how to yield to the gods" is followed immediately by "we will learn to venerate the Atreidae" (a singular choice of words as the scholiast does not fail to point out: he also comments on 667: *μμεῖται τὸν σῶφρονα, κекύηται δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους*). Line 677 may well be translated not "Must we not learn discretion" (Jebb) but "How shall I not be forced to learn discipline" (Knox); and the element of reconciliation is notably absent from the speech Ajax makes immediately before his suicide.

D) We come to the most radical solutions — that there is a change of intention in Ajax. The mildest of these theories is that of Ronnet, who puts it forward as a tentative hypothesis; Ajax, who had intended to kill himself on-stage, in pity for Tecmessa decides to do so off-stage. This change of intention hardly seems significant enough to justify such a speech. Knox (who has been largely anticipated by Van Leeuwen) thinks that in the first part of the speech (which, according to him, is in effect a soliloquy) Ajax is debating the possibility of giving up suicide, but by 684 has abandoned this possibility. But, as Knox admits, the wording used by Ajax does not suggest that he views the alternative of yielding in any very friendly light; could it have ever been a real alternative? Errandonea (followed in part by An sorge and Simpson) thinks that the basic change is from a glorious death, in which Ajax will slaughter the Atreidae and be cut down himself (but also bring ruin on Tecmessa and his son) to suicide; the interpretation of Ajax's former speech, especially of 479-80, is hardly convincing. Finally, Bowra follows a lonely course in thinking that Ajax has given up the idea of suicide, but reverses his decision later under the malevolent influence of Athena — a view which is sufficiently refuted by his choice of words in lines 666-7 (see above) and by 687-692, which is clearly a last will and testament (so D. L. Page, in an unpublished lecture, and others).

E) Finally, we come to the viewpoint which abandons any attempt to make sense of the speech as a whole. This is clearly a desperate last resource; it shares with A and B the virtual admission of Sophocles' incompetence as a presenter of a consistent character.

If it is possible to sum up such a diverse collection of views, the summary would be something like this. We can understand the dramatic function of Ajax's speech; we cannot understand his personal motivation. Why not? It may be suspected that we have fallen victim to a change of taste. As I have argued elsewhere, to understand the *Antigone* we need to get rid of Christian ideas and to assume — with Sophocles' audience —

the basic inferiority of women. To understand the Ajax, we have again to get rid of Christian ideas (which have dictated the misconceptions of C above) and to assume two things: a heroic ideal very different from our own, and (again) the basic inferiority of women.

For the heroic ideal, we must surely turn in the first place to the *Iliad*, which was very much in Sophocles' mind when he was writing the *Ajax*. That Achilles is presented as embodying the heroic ideal, and that he is intended to win our sympathies, I imagine nobody would deny. Yet Homer, without any apparent sense of incongruity, has presented him as acting in ways very contrary to our ideal of heroism. In his quarrel with Agamemnon he displays petulance, a craving for booty, blind fury, petty destructiveness, and childish grief; he rejects with scorn the best recompense Agamemnon can offer, and announces his intention of running away home; when he relents sufficiently to allow Patroclus to enter the battle, it is still for the sake of Achilles' own honour and profit, and Patroclus must not be so successful as to make Achilles "more dishonoured"; not only does he maltreat the body of Hector, but he slaughters prisoners on Patroclus's pyre (10). Although the Greek leaders are (for their own reasons) concerned to settle the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, in other respects this conduct goes mainly uncriticized; it seems to be almost expected of him, as the appropriate behaviour in a hero who has been deprived first of his honour, and then of his closest friend.

If behaviour that we would classify "childish pique" is not to be viewed as inconsistent with the heroic ideal, but even as the hero's normal response to loss of honour (his normal response to gain of honour, as portrayed by Aristotle in the passage already cited, seems equally repugnant to us), we can look again at this speech of Ajax. Ajax himself gives us sufficient clues as to how we are to take it. "The terrible oath and the stubborn mind is vanquished". The reference to an oath is a warning; can Ajax possibly approve of this kind of mutability? No; he tells us at once what has happened to him; "I too, who was just now terribly obstinate like tempered steel, am feminized in my mouth by this woman: I'm sorry at leaving her a widow among my enemies and my son an orphan" (649-53) (11). We know what Ajax thinks of women: their duty is to obey (527-8) and be silent (292-3), instead of which

(10) *Iliad* I 149-171, 188-192, 245-6, 348-56; IX 307-429; XVI 84-90; XXII 395-404; XXIII 175-183.

(11) After writing this article I saw Shaw's dissertation. He rightly stresses the 'feminizing' of Ajax, but is (in my opinion) giving his own view and not that of Ajax (or of Sophocles) when he regards this process as desirable.

they go in for foolish lamentations (580) and arguments (591-5). For Ajax to speak of himself as "feminized" is not a return to prudence; it is on the contrary the bitterest term that pique and self-mockery can suggest. So too in the Trachiniae Heracles laments most bitterly not only that he has fallen victim to a woman (1050-62), but that he is himself reduced to bellowing like a woman (1070-75; we think of Ajax 317-321; Ajax, too, had thought crying aloud to be a weakness reserved for women). The context of Heracles' *θήλυς ηὔρημαι τάλας* is the same in essentials as that of Ajax's *έθελύνην*; each is lamenting his loss of manhood, and as Heracles bewails the destruction of his martial ability at a woman's hand, Ajax compares himself to a blunted sword. It is astonishing that the passage has been so undertranslated (e. g. Jebb's "Even I... felt the keen edge of my temper softened by you woman's words"). And Ajax *does* talk like a woman; he pities (652) as Tecmessa had asked him to, and uses her own argument; he talks of purification (*ἀγνίσις* in 655 should *not* be thought of as a kind of atonement), of burying his sword, of yielding and reverence, of the beauty of nature, of having to learn discretion (a feminine virtue, cf. 586), and of changing friends (the point of this remarks on friendship is in the last line; friendship is for most men an untrustworthy refuge. The passage of course looks forward dramatically to Odysseus' 1359, but such a change for the better is not in accordance with Ajax's present feelings). All this is woman's talk, and marks the bitterest depths of Ajax's degradation. There are sufficient clues, of which 651-2 and 666-7 are the clearest, that these words are being spoken in pique and are not to be taken seriously; the audience is unlikely to misunderstand, especially in view of the 'testament' of 684-92, when Ajax recovers his calm, but Sophocles is able to provide both that Tecmessa and the chorus shall be deceived and that the opposite view shall be put, even though it is put with the bitterest irony. Whether Ajax himself is concerned with the consequences of the deception is unimportant; until 684 he seems hardly to care what anyone may think.

Apart from the closing scene of the Trachiniae the nearest parallel to this scene seems to be Antigone 891-928. All three scenes have been found difficult; if we can bring ourselves to remove from the heroic ideal the British "stiff upper lip" and the Christian "love your enemies", and try to understand a more basic and more primitive reaction to a combination of anger, dishonour, and grief, we may succeed in appreciating what Sophocles has presented rather than seeking to explain it away.

The chorus follows with a brief song of joy — a frequent device in Sophocles (e. g. Antigone 1115-1152, Oedipus Rex 1086-1109) as a prelu-

de to the catastrophe. We note again that this chorus does not in any sense stand above the action or display a knowledge beyond that of the actors.

A messenger now enters and suggests that the rejoicing is premature; Teucer has returned, but there is talk of an ominous prophecy. Calchas has warned Teucer not to allow Ajax to leave the house if he wished to see him alive again, since "On this day alone the wrath of divine Athena is driving him on". Calchas went on to speak of two cases of Ajax's insolence to the gods (the second to Athena in person). The scene is not without its difficulties; if the point is to show the ὕβρις of Ajax and to justify Athena the prologue would, as Funke points out, have been a far better place (to him the passage is "eine nachtragliche Rechtfertigung der morderischen Tat der Göttin und dienen der Theodizee des Dichters"): Goodell, Lindforth, Massa Positano and Ronnet also criticize the passage, and Errandonea goes further and with characteristic boldness condemns it as spurious. Wigodsky, who discusses at length the various interpretations of the passage, himself gives what I am convinced is the right one; the point lies in the ambiguous oracle; its meaning is taken to be that Ajax's suicide may be averted for ever if it is averted for one day; the sequel shows that the true interpretation was that Athena's anger would not pursue him after his death. Again the Trachiniae provides the parallel (lines 166-8, 1169-72): Heracles was to find rest from his troubles "at this time": the rest is subsequently seen to have been the rest of death. So too Ajax (cf. especially 692, 802). This scene is not the most appropriate in the play, but it serves the dramatic functions of delaying the catastrophe and removing the chorus from the scene (see Gellie on this), and the messenger's appearance is no more 'unmotivated' than are those in the Oedipus Rex.

There follows the suicide of Ajax — remarkably, on stage. The scholiast on 815 tells us that in Aeschylus' Thracian Women, it was announced in the normal way a messenger-speech. Bowra sees in it a return to madness after the sanity of Ajax's preceding speech. Ajax himself would see it in exactly the opposite light; after his unmanly fit of pique he is now himself again; there is a brisk and competent arrangement of the sword, the appropriate heroic prayer for a speedy death and the interment of his body, the equally appropriate curses on those whom he holds responsible; the curse of a dying man is powerful, and is now the last weapon of revenge that Ajax has. The passage is, of course, embarrassing to those who see Ajax as dying *sophron*; not only is he failing to "venerate the Atreidae" in a rather conspicuous way, but he seems to have forgotten the necessity of making any remarks to Athena. With the traditional farewell Ajax falls on his sword. Like most Sophoclean heroes,

he cannot merit our full approval; of our sympathy there is no doubt, and it is confirmed in the *kommos* that follows.

There remains the debate over the burial, which has been criticized in both ancient and modern times (12). The scholiast on 1123 observed "These sophisms are not appropriate to tragedy; after the suicide, (Sophocles) wanting to prolong the play, became frigid and lost the tragic pathos". Following this view, Bergk wished to delete the Agamemnon-scene, and Bernhardy, Hoadley, and Steinweg proposed to go farther and also delete the scene with Menelaus. Van Leeuwen suggested that the prologue and closing scenes were late additions by Sophocles himself to an earlier shorter play. Such radical deletions are not in fashion today, but others find the conclusion unsatisfactory (so especially Campbell-Abbott, Perrotta and Turolla).

Of course, defenders are not lacking, and the situation is such (unlike the 'Deception speech') that the various defences reinforce one another rather than contradicting one another. Some defences, it is true, seem untenable: for example, Croiset, Letters, and Stanford are surely wrong in importing the notion that burial of the body was essential to enable the soul to reach Hades; this notion is not only not in the text, but seems to be contradicted by 1343-5 (so Kitto). And it is (as I have already observed) unwise to overstress the importance of Odysseus, as is done especially by Untersteiner: "Non è questi un carattere, ma la rivelazione della verità". The idea of posthumous triumph can also be overstressed (as by Ebeling: "Der Tote bleibt als Sieger über die Widersacher zurück"). But, if we are willing to hold fast to Ajax as the main character, there is still sufficient justification at the logical level for these scenes; the theme of reversal (stressed by Ajax in 656-665 and by Teucer in 1028-1035) seems to require that Ajax should emerge from the low-point of his despair and win true recognition of this former glory; his status as a local hero and the importance of burial are matters which

(12) See T. Bergk, *Griechische Literaturgeschichte*, III, Berlin 1884, 375-89; G. Bernhardy, *Grundriss der griechischen Litteratur*, Halle 1880³, II. 2, 360-6; P. Burian, "GRBS" 13, 1972, 151-6; M. L. Campbell - E. Abbott edition, Oxford 1875, p. 8; M. L. Campbell, in 'Mélanges Weil', Paris 1898, 17-24; A. M. J. Croiset, *Oedipe Roi*, Paris 1932, 51-2; A. De Propriis, "Dioniso" 12, 1949, 123-8; H. Draheim, "WKPh" 33, 1916, 447-541; C. Del Grande, *Essenza e genesi...*, Milano-Napoli 1962², 90-97; H. Hoadley, *The Authenticity... of the Ajax*, Lancaster Pa. 1909; F. Mayerhoefer, *Ueber die Schlüsse...*, diss. Erlangen 1908, 54-6; A. Patin, *Aesthetische-kritische Studien*, Paderborn 1911, 101-9; A. C. Pearson, "CQ" 1922, 124-36; A. Platt, "CR" 25, 1911, 101-4, as well as the works cited in footnote 5, and van Leeuwen (op. cit. in footnote 9).

were more important to the Greeks than to us; and there could well be various undertones, such as patriotic indignation against Sparta (n. 2), the reconciliation of state and individual (Gellie), or the implicit condemnation of violence (Del Grande). And there are no problems of personal motivation.

When all this is said, there will still be many who agree with the scholiast that the debates are cold and untragic. Teucer seems, in the first place, worried about his reception at home (1006-1020); Menelaus is concerned by the challenge to his shaky authority (1066-1090), and Teucer's reply involves him in an undignified squabble over their relative military powers (1120-1123). Some dignity is restored by Tecmessa and the chorus, but the scene with Agamemnon, apart from being a 'doublet' of that with Menelaus, seems to follow it in its undignified tone; Agamemnon is not above taunting Teucer with ignoble birth and speech (1259-1263): Teucer, in his reply, raises the parentage of Agamemnon (1290-9); even Odysseus seems to be motivated largely by self-interest (1367); and the gnomic finale of 1418-20 seems to have the sole merit of signifying that the play has ended.

And yet there are two points still to be made. The first, stressed especially by Jebb, is the dramatic effect of the presence of Ajax's body on stage. The second is well put by Knox: "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... has often been criticized as an artistic failure; surely it is deliberate". This would not be the only instance where Sophocles' judgement is preferable to that of his critics.