



## AIAS IN ATHENS: THE WORLDS OF THE PLAY AND THE AUDIENCE\*

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### ABSTRACT

Athenian tragic poets were careful to separate the 'heroic' world from the world of their fifth-century audience, and they did so by deploying the twin dynamic of 'distance and difference'. This dynamic encoded cultural lessons and allowed the audience to sympathise with the dilemmas facing the characters on stage, and thus to evaluate and understand the way they went about dealing with those dilemmas. The *Aias* of Sophocles is used to make the point, demonstrating that the playwright attempted to construct a unity from his character's rather mixed history, in doing so to appeal to his audience's sense of their own place in the world.

**T**HE relationship between politics and literature in Athenian tragedy is one of the most well-explored issues in Classical scholarship, and modern criticism has been powerfully influenced by the debate between two diametrically opposed positions: one holds that the tragic poets were uninterested in contemporary social questions or events, and looked instead to artistic and moral universals; the other believes that the playwrights were intensely political and sought to question, undermine or subvert their audience's values, through a thinly disguised representation of their failures as enacted by the heroic individuals on stage.<sup>1</sup> Though many scholars would not now identify entirely with one or other position,<sup>2</sup> the effect of this polarity can be seen in the still widespread assumption that tragic politics

\* This article and its ideas have had a long gestation, being first presented at a seminar held in Brasenose College in 2005, and those to whom thanks are owed are too numerous to be named in full; signal amongst them are Bill Allan, Penny Bulloch, Lyndsay Coe, Bob Cowan, Patrick Finglass, Sophie Gibson, Mark Griffith, Jasper Griffin, Sarah Harden, Malcolm Heath, Matthew Leigh, and Laura Swift; students and audiences in Oxford, Manchester, St Andrews and Cambridge; and the two anonymous referees of this journal. None of them should be presumed to agree with the current thesis (though see p. 62 n. 3 below).

<sup>1</sup> The bibliography is predictably enormous, and continues to grow; cf. the essays in Carter 2011; Allan-Kelly 2013, 78-79 for a survey, and Goldhill 1997 and Wilson 2007, 1-2 for narratives.

<sup>2</sup> However, for recent and relatively straightforward adherents of the first type of response, cf. Garvie 2007 and 2009; Finglass 2011; for the second, Cuny 2007; Barker 2009 and 2011; Hesk 2011.





–if such a thing exists<sup>1</sup> – must essentially be a matter of mapping the play and its issues directly onto the world of the audience.

The present article argues that this is entirely the wrong basis on which to approach the issue. Athenian tragedy, it will be suggested, was predicated on the understanding that the democratic present was ultimately a positive development on the heroic past, and in this sense it was a highly ‘political’<sup>2</sup> art form. But the playwrights were not merely giving their audiences lessons in how to be a good citizen. That hardly accounts for the contemporary concentration on the quality of the poetry, the magnificence of the staging, and the depth of the audience’s emotional response. So this article, and its focus on the way in which the cultural assumptions of the Athenian audience can be deployed in an interpretation of Sophocles’ *Aias*, does not aim to discuss every element of interest or importance in the play, but instead to advance the thesis that tragedians emphasised heroic ‘distance and difference’ from the contemporary world of fifth-century Athens in order to deepen the audience’s understanding of, but also their sympathy with, the errors of the great figures from the past.<sup>3</sup> Thus, to foreshadow the following discussion, Sophocles’ invocation of the war-orphan institution in the scene between Aias and Eurysaces aims to underline the terrible situation into which the hero’s dependants are about to be placed, by comparing that situation with the circumstance familiar to the audience in contemporary Athens.

The *Aias* is particularly suitable for this thesis because it was the centrepiece of the *fons et origo* of modern political readings of tragedy (in Anglophone scholarship at least), Simon Goldhill’s seminal paper ‘The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology’.<sup>4</sup> This article reminded us of the festival and

<sup>1</sup> This encapsulates the position of ‘apolitical’ critics, who argue that (i) the institution / theme on stage is not exactly the same as that found in fifth-century Athens and so cannot be considered properly political (for an example, cf. below, p. 63 n. 5), and / or (ii) the institution / theme is found elsewhere and so cannot be particularly redolent of the Athenian context: cf., e.g., Griffin 1998, 46 and Rhodes 2003, *passim*; also below, p. 64 n. 1.

<sup>2</sup> This term is used in its broadest sense, to denote the dramatic presentation of basic ethical and moral principles about the individual and his / her relationship to his / her family and / or society. For another sense to the term as used in scholarship on tragedy, cf. below, p. 65 n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> This perspective has recently been advanced elsewhere: cf. Allan 2008, 4-10; Kelly 2009, 9-25; Swift 2010, 55-60; Allan-Kelly 2013. It builds upon the work of many others, especially Richard Seaford and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, though it is less convinced than the former about the role of the ‘Dionysiac’ (cf. Friedrich 1996 and Scullion 2002 for the counter-case), and more inclined than the latter to generalise the errors and difficulties of the tragic characters (cf. Foley 1995) for a response to Sourvinou-Inwood’s 1989 treatment of the *Antigone*).

<sup>4</sup> Goldhill 1987 ~ 1990, restated in Goldhill 2000, 44-47. Though itself a landmark work, it was part of a much broader movement across the scholarly world of situating tragedy





civic context of Athenian drama: before the first performance, libations were poured by the ten generals of that year; the city's benefactors were publicly rewarded;<sup>1</sup> the tribute from Athens' 'allies' in the Delian League was displayed before the audience; and the orphans of citizens who had died on military service were paraded and presented with their first suit of armour (having already been supported by the state since their fathers' demise). These highly visible symbols of Athens' power and prestige were on display not only for the citizenship but the metics, allies and foreigners who came from all over the Greek world to view the magnificent spectacle on offer.

A range of ancient evidence attests to the festival's extravagant scale, since the wealthy of Athens strove to compete in their support for the tragedies and other choral performances at the City Dionysia by paying for the costumes and training of the chorus.<sup>2</sup> Community participation went well beyond this, or the ordinary citizens watching in the audience, or the state's provision of *honoraria* and prizes to the poets and payment of the actors, since as many as 1200 citizens were required as choreuts every year.<sup>3</sup> Finally, at the end of the festival, an assembly was held in the theatre of Dionysus, in which its conduct was scrutinised.<sup>4</sup> The Dionysia's tragedies were deeply and specifically Athenian in their personnel, presentation and processes.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequent scholarship has thus reinforced Goldhill's general case, but more controversial was the second half of his original article, where Goldhill tried to relate these features to an interpretation of the tragedies themselves, pointing out several ways in which the *Aias* engages with the pre-play ceremonies.<sup>6</sup> A prime example is the depiction of Eurysaces as an heroic analogue for contemporary Athenian war-orphans (*Aias* 545-595), which

within the *polis*; for some of the more important works (beyond the Anglophone), cf. esp. Vernant - Vidal-Naquet 1972-86, *passim* but esp. I 13-17, 19-40 = 1988, 1-5, 6-27; Citti 1978; Rösler 1980 and Meier 1988 = 1993; also above, p. 61 n. 1 for narratives.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wilson 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wilson 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Revermann 2006. On the dithyrambic contests, which drew famous poets from all over the Greek world and offered tremendously valuable prizes, cf. Pickard-Cambridge 1988, 74-79; also 1962, 31-38; D'Angour 1997, 334-343, 346-350. It is notable that almost none of these poets were Athenian, whilst all the famous tragic poets were.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Pickard-Cambridge 1988, 68-70.

<sup>5</sup> Critics of an 'Athenocentric' reading have become accustomed to making the observation that many, if not most, of these features can be found in performances of tragedy all over the Greek world; cf. esp. Rhodes 2003. Aside from the fact that it all began in Athens, and these other festivals are clearly parasitical on that original setting, these authors neglect the central fact that no non-Athenian festival reproduced all the elements of the City Dionysia; cf. Wilson 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. esp. Friedrich 1996, 263-268.





Goldhill argued had a subversive or questioning function, exploring the “tension between the texts of tragedy and the ideology of the city”.<sup>1</sup> The tension, he suggested, had something to do with the transgressive nature of Attic drama, which was related to Dionysus as the honorand. Thus, the play encourages the audience to ‘question’ the civic values apparently represented in the war-orphan ceremony, though subsequent analyses in this vein have veered unsteadily between describing tragedy as a form which encourages such questioning as a civic value in a democratic society, and one which undermines or criticises the values of that society.<sup>2</sup>

As a foundational part of the ‘Social Function School’ of Athenian tragedy,<sup>3</sup> Goldhill’s article generated fierce debate, but he is surely right to point out differences between the worlds of the play and its audience.<sup>4</sup> The contentious issue is the purpose of that difference. How does the audience

<sup>1</sup> Goldhill 1987, 69. As a good example of apolitical responses (see above, pp. 61 n. 1 and 62 n. 1) to Goldhill, Finglass 2011, *ad* 574-576, 304-305, denies the invocation or relevance of the war-orphan institution to this scene in the play, in sum because Sophocles has failed to retroject the institution *tout court* into the heroic world. Finglass’ specific arguments are (i) Eurysaces does not get a whole suit of armour as the orphans did; (ii) a similar scene in Euripides’ *Suppl.* does not focus on *trophe*; (iii) the institution itself is only reliably sourced in the middle of the fourth century; and (iv) the play might not have been performed first or even at all at the Dionysia. Though the final two arguments are expressed with more caution (‘may’, ‘might’) than the first pair, neither individually nor together do they convince: (i) no direct, absolute reflection of contemporary custom is to be expected on the heroic stage (even in the *Oresteia*, the Areopagos does not proceed on stage in the way it did in the audience’s world); (ii) Euripides’ use of the theme implies, still less demands, no conclusions about Sophocles’ prior treatment; (iii) almost all of our information about Athenian ritual postdates the Classical period, and the fourth century sources explicitly retroject the custom into the Classical period (cf. Wilson 2009, 17); (iv) the play would not need to have been performed at the Dionysia in order for the audience to make the connection, since the institution existed beyond its exhibition at that festival.

<sup>2</sup> On the common slippage in such treatments between ‘questioning’ and ‘calling into question’, cf. Allan-Kelly 2013, 85. It is not unrelated to a scholarly penchant for ambivalence and ambiguity, as e.g. Goldhill 2000, 51, who criticises Seaford 1995 for suggesting that answers and resolution are to be found in the *Oresteia*, on the grounds that such a view does “not ... do justice to what the questions might be, what might constitute an answer, and how difficult it is to ‘resolve the conflicts’ of a political system”. This is merely doubt for doubt’s sake. Some readers have suggested to me that Goldhill’s position is oversimplified or distorted here, though he was not himself of that view when he listened to the paper on which this article is based. In any case, both of the above conceptions of his position share the essential and, in my view, erroneous predicate of ‘questioning’; cf. below, pp. 65-66 with p. 65 nn. 3-4, and (esp.) p. 66 n. 4 for Socrates, who sits ill with the notion that a critical duty was encouraged by the Athenian democracy.

<sup>3</sup> The term was coined by Griffin 1998.

<sup>4</sup> He is not alone in this; cf. Mikalson 1991 for a similar argument about religion, though his conclusion (that the tragic gods are purely literary constructs) has been demolished by Parker 1997 and Sourvinou-Inwood 1997.





bridge the gap between their reality and the one constructed by the tragic poet? If we follow a majority of those scholars who are inclined to political interpretations, contemporary issues and concerns are to be read off the stage in a more or less direct manner: in the *Aias*, if something is wrong with the passing of military values from Aias to Eurysaces, not to mention Telamon to Aias, then the poet may be implying that there is something unsettling about, or wrong with, the analogous process in fifth-century Athens. This 'one-to-one' method of interpretation has a natural, and widespread, extension into the rest of the corpus,<sup>1</sup> and is fundamentally related to an older, narrower view of tragic politics, where criticism aimed to uncover the particular contemporary event on which the playwright was trying to comment.<sup>2</sup> However, and this is the current point of departure from Goldhill and those who have followed his lead in seeing tragedy as political, how likely is it that any ancient state should expend so much energy and time on getting its citizens to question its values? Though several scholars have suggested that questioning of some sort is central to the Athenian conception of the ideal citizen (now almost the *communis opinio* about Athens),<sup>3</sup> it is more than a little anachronistic:<sup>4</sup>

[t]hat the citizen of a democratic state has a duty to question its values may be what is believed by liberal thinkers in a modern democracy; it was perhaps maintained by Socrates; but one would like to see some positive evidence that the Athens of Aeschylus actually wanted to inculcate a duty of that kind. I see little likelihood that fifth-century Athens, a city whose patriotism was of a very straightforward kind, and whose proclamation of democracy was unambiguous, would have pursued, for a century, this extraordinarily oblique and ironic form of education against its own cherished values. That is certainly not what we find in the elaborate praises of

<sup>1</sup> Thus, if something is wrong with the conduct of the assembly in Euripides' *Or.* (409 BC), then the playwright is suggesting the same problems apply to the assembly in Athens; cf. Dunn 1996, 162-163; also Barker 2011 with further bibliography. Or if Aphrodite is cruel in Euripides' *Hipp.* (428 BC), the poet is implying that there is something fundamentally awry with the nature of the divine and its operation; cf. e.g. Yunis 1988, *passim*, but esp. 111-121; *contra* Lefkowitz 1980. Euripides in particular has suffered from a subversive or ironising interpretation (though the tide has been turning; cf. Gregory 1991; Wright 2010 and Torrance 2013) but even Aeschylus is not untouched by it: if the court of the Areopagos in the *Eumenides* (458 BC) is founded on what seems to be a dubious compromise between older and newer gods, Aeschylus wants his audience to infer that there may be problems with the way this (or any court) works in Athens; cf. Seaford 1995 for discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Zuntz 1955 for critique, Ferrario 2012 for a survey of such readings in Sophocles, and Ugolini 2000, 92-94 for the *Aias*. Bowie 1997 shows that this tradition was, at least relatively recently, alive and kicking; cf. Jouanna 2007, 68-72.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Euben 1986, 24; Heiden 1993, esp. 164-165 and 165 n. 40; Croally 1994, 45; Pelling 1997, 224-235; Barker 2009, 267-280.

<sup>4</sup> Griffin 1998, 49.





itself which the city was so fond of hearing, in the fifth and fourth centuries, in funeral speeches and elsewhere. There Athens appears as the sole historic defender and civilizer of mankind: no obliqueness and no irony.

Indeed, contemporary discussions of tragedy do not reflect a questioning function, at least not in the manner envisaged by modern scholarship. Though it is a truism that tragedy (like all poetry) has an educative purpose,<sup>1</sup> Plato's hostility to the form seems to have nothing to do with its supposed subversion of Athenian civic values; one might have thought that this quality, had it been present, would commend tragedy to him.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Plato excludes it from his ideal community because, *inter alia*, it imitates the wrong kind of person (*Resp.* 604e), is predicated on a lack of rationality (*Apol.* 22a-b), and encourages a loss of emotional self-control in its audience (*Resp.* 605cd). The relationship between the audience and the poet is a form of 'theatrocracy' (*Leg.* 700e-701b; *Gorg.* 502b-d), in which the ignorant mass is simply flattered by the poets, who 'want to win popularity among the crowd' and therefore cannot fulfil their duty as teachers.<sup>3</sup> Nowhere does Plato endorse the modern conception of questioning or subversive tragedy – except that it would be subversive to his ideal state.<sup>4</sup> As Finkelberg has commented,<sup>5</sup>

... it is only too rarely taken into account that for Plato and his circle contemporary drama was first and foremost a vulgar spectacle, specially tailored to appease the taste of the Athenian mob.

Aristotle, for his part, sees in tragedy an emotionally useful phenomenon, which brings the destructive emotions of fear and pity to the surface, and

<sup>1</sup> Cf., *contra*, Garvie 2009, xvii, who dismisses as merely jocular the treatment of the issue in Aristophanes' *Ranae* (405 BC). The present article lacks the scope to discuss this important play at any length, but once more, one looks in vain there for the questioning tragic poet: though 'Aeschylus' argues that 'Euripides' and his plays have reduced Athens to its present, parlous state, the fault of 'Euripides' lies in constructing his tragedies in order to foster specifically democratic values, not to question or undermine them (e.g. 951, 1019-1020 etc.).

<sup>2</sup> Again, the bibliography is enormous; cf., e.g., Else 1986, 3-64; Salkever 1986; Murray 1996, 1-30; Moss 2007; Burnyeat 2012; Destrée 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Plato's criticism of the crowd in these terms is echoed in Aristot. *Poet.* 1453a 33-35.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one could argue that 'subversive' or 'questioning' tragedy would be a rival to the Socratic ideal of the 'examined life', and hence the reason why Plato is so concerned with damning tragedy (though cf. *Resp.* 492a-c); cf., e.g., *Leg.* 817a-d. Yet tragedy is not consistently singled out for more critical attention in Plato than other forms of poetry (especially Homer), and one might also like to compare Socrates' avowed unpopularity (e.g., *Apol.* 38a 5) with the wild celebrity of tragedy and its poets. As Griffin 1998, 50 comments: "[Plato] thought that his Socrates was, in just that way (*viz.* in his relentless questioning), exceedingly untypical of democratic Athens".

<sup>5</sup> Finkelberg 2006, 24.





purges the individual of them in a harmless context.<sup>1</sup> Partially, this is a response to the Platonic attack on tragedy (and poetry in general), but the ‘questioning’ characterization of tragedy is conspicuous by its absence.<sup>2</sup>

Though subversive tragedy may not be confirmed in the ancient sources, the disjunction between the worlds of the play and the audience was noticed in antiquity. The separative capacity of Athenian tragedy, or its ability to ‘zoom in’ and ‘zoom out’ (Sourvinou-Inwood’s terms)<sup>3</sup> of the performative present, is sourced in Herodotos’ story that the tragic poet Phrynichus (active c. 511-476 BC) was fined after he dramatised the fall of Miletus (c. 494 BC) during the Ionian revolt, because he reminded the Athenians too much of “their own troubles”, (οἰκῆια κακά, 6, 21, 2). Being ‘ethnically’ related to, if not the origin of, the Ionian communities of Asia Minor<sup>4</sup> and having failed to free them from Persian subjection, the Athenian audience felt that the subject-matter of this particular drama was simply too close to the bone, and perhaps a little foreboding as well. The story aligns well with the fact that the playwrights generally chose distant, heroic subjects for their plays.<sup>5</sup> A range of ancient evidence, therefore, seems to suggest that it was, or became, the norm to separate the worlds of the play and the audience.

Temporal and/or spatial distance as well as difference, then, both factors together allowing an Athenian audience a certain measure of insularity from the events unfolding on stage. The purpose of this insularity is not merely to reinforce or work with a contemporary sense of Athenian supe-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lucas 1968, 273-290; also Halliwell 1986; Salkever 1986; Hall 1996. Elsewhere (e.g., *Rhet.* 1386a 17-24) Aristotle defines pity as an emotion which demands a level of distance from the object of that pity, whilst fear (*Rhet.* 1386a 25-29) is always felt for oneself. This perspective concords very well with the approach to Attic tragedy adopted in this article, in that the audience reflect on their own proximity to the actions, errors and impulses of the figures on stage (φόβος), whilst requiring sufficient distance from those figures so as to feel pity for them (ἔλεος), and thus to draw the appropriate inferences. As Rosenbloom 1993, 167, puts it: “... the audience must on the one hand identify with the complex of character, chorus and suffering as similar to itself, but it must also feel that this same complex is alien to it in order to experience pity”; cf. also Grethlein 2003, 43-46.

<sup>2</sup> That is not to say, as a reader suggests to me, that Aristotle does not recognize tragedy’s educative purposes or effects, merely that the questioning element is *entirely* absent from his description of those purposes.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 1989 and 2003, 1-66; also Easterling 1997 for the similar notion of ‘heroic vagueness’.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Zacharia 2003, 48-55; Swift 2008, 69-85.

<sup>5</sup> Aeschylus’ *Pers.* (472 BC) is the obvious extant exception (for others, cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 16-19), but in this play the Persian royal household looks like nothing so much as a Greek royal household, their lesson – *hybris* overtaken by disaster – nothing so much as a lesson enacted again and again on Greek heroes and kings in tragedy. The play demonstrates that the non-Greek ‘barbarians’ of the audience’s present are in many ways like the Greeks of the audience’s past. *Persians* thus exhibits the same type of contrast between present and past found throughout the tragic corpus; cf. Grethlein 2010, 75-79; Allan-Kelly 2013, 101-104.



riority, though this is undoubtedly part of the process, but instead to underline the particular difficulties of those on stage. For an example, let us return to the *Aias* and the issue of the war-orphans with which we began. Eurysaces is orphaned because of the ultimately selfish act of Aias, who kills himself with little final thought for the fortunes of his *philoi*, because his *τιμή* has been impugned and denied, as he repeatedly stresses, both before and after his decision to kill himself has been taken.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when he first declares his intention to die (430-480), he does not mention either Tecmessa or Eurysaces, though he does concede their interests in the famous *Trugrede* (646-692, at 650-653):

καὶ γὰρ γάρ, ὅς τὰ δεινὸν ἔκαρτέρουν τότε,  
βαφῆ σίδηρος ὡς, ἐθελύθη στόμα  
πρὸς τῆσδε τῆς γυναικός· οἰκτίρω δέ νιν  
χῆραν παρ' ἐχθροῖς παῖδά τ' ὄρφανὸν λιπεῖν.

Leaving aside the question of proportion, and the dubious truth-value of the speech as a whole,<sup>2</sup> this can hardly be taken at face value; even the slighting way in which Aias expresses his recanting (ἐθελύθη lit. “I was womaned”, 651) shows the ‘real’ attitude.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, at the close of the speech, the secondary nature of his concern for them is made clear (687-689):

<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g., *Aias* 98 (ὥστ' οὔποτ' Αἴανθ' οἶδ' ἀτιμάσουσ' ἔτι), 426-427 (τανῦν δ' ἄτι- / μος ὧδε πρόκειμαι), 440 (ἄτιμος Ἀργείοισιν ὧδ' ἀπόλλυμαι), 837-838 (μαθεῖν ἐμέ / πρὸς τῶν Ἀτρειδῶν ὡς διόλλυμαι τάλας), and Odysseus' speech to Agamemnon on the issue at 1339-1342 (ἀλλ' αὐτὸν ἔμπας ὄντ' ἐγὼ τοιόνδ' ἐμοὶ / οὐ τὰν ἀτιμάσαιμ' ἄν, ὥστε μὴ λέγειν / ἔν' ἄνδρ' ἰδεῖν ἄριστον Ἀργείων, ὅσοι / Τροίαν ἀφικόμεσθα, πλὴν Ἀχιλλέως. / ὥστ' οὐκ ἂν ἐνδίκως γ' ἀτιμάζοιτό σοι). For critical analysis of Aias' behaviour towards his dependents, cf. e.g. Blundell 1989, 86; Lawrence 2005.

<sup>2</sup> On the controversy over the *Trugrede*, cf. the recent summary in Finglass 2011, *ad* 646-692, 328-329 (adding Mambrini 2011). I follow, e.g., Stevens 1986 in believing that Aias is lying. Those who object that deceit would be contrary to Aias' nature (as, e.g., Knox 1961, 18; Gellie 1972, 12; Garvie 1998, 185), and more associated with Odysseus, should remember that Aias at the start of the play has attempted a night ambush, Odysseus' characteristic field of deceptive epic endeavour. Similarly Odyssean is the brilliance of Aias' speeches in the play, in stark contrast to his laconism in the *Iliad* and his stubborn silence in the *Odyssey* (11, 563-564); cf. *contra* March 1991-93, 18-22.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Finglass 2011, *ad loc.*, 331, who relates it to the preceding ironworking metaphor, whilst noting its ‘remarkable shift’: “... Ajax means that he will act on the basis of what he sees as feminine virtues, such as pity (58on.) and obedience”. It is important to add, however, that Aias' attitude to female pity in that earlier passage is dismissive, and the verb amounts to a denial not merely of a prior attitude, but Aias' gender identity and all that it implies; cf. Eur. *Erechth. TrGF* 360, 28-29 Kn. (τὰ μητέρων δὲ δάκρυ' ὅταν πέμπτη τέκνα, / πολλοὺς ἐθήλυν' εἰς μάχην ὀρωμένους) with Calame 2012, 144-148, who stresses Praxitheia's adoption and validation of a male perspective. One can only see Aias' adoption of ‘feminine virtue’ in this speech within the context of the speech as a whole, and what we know of his character before and after it. Such a character is hardly for softening.



ὕμεῖς θ', ἑταῖροι, ταῦτ' ἀπὸ τῆς δέ μοι τάδε  
τιμᾶτε, Τεύκρω τ', ἦν μόλις, σημήνατε  
μέλειν μὲν ἡμῶν, εὐνοεῖν δ' ὑμῖν ἄμα·

Whilst this is certainly more honest than the earlier reference to his thoughts for his family, it is nonetheless clear that his anxiety for Tecmessa, or the fate of his son, looms in his mind rather less prominently than his own honour.<sup>1</sup> Oliver Taplin has sought to save Aias from this very common tragic failing, suggesting that the speaker has realised that suicide is the best outcome for his dependents, even if they do not yet recognise it, but nowhere in the play does Aias say that, and we are surely not entitled to infer it.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, a drive for *time* as not an entirely negative thing, of course, but much depends on the way in which it is sought, and how it is articulated. It certainly becomes dangerous when, as in the messenger's speech (758-777), Aias' fate is drawn as the result of his personality and divine hostility, incurred by continuously hybriatic behaviour towards Athene, the very sort of behaviour against which his stern father Telamon had counselled (764-769) when Aias set out for Troy:<sup>3</sup>

τὰ γὰρ περισσὰ κἀνόνητα σώματα  
πίπτειν βαρείαις πρὸς θεῶν δυσπραξίαις  
ἔφασχ' ὁ μάντις, ὅστις ἀνθρώπου φύσιν 760  
βλαστῶν ἔπειτα μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῆι.  
κεῖνος δ' ἀπ' οἴκων εὐθύς ἐξορμώμενος  
ἄνους καλῶς λέγοντος ἠύρεθη πατρός.  
ὁ μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἐννέπει, "τέκνον, δορὶ 765  
βούλου κρατεῖν μὲν, σὺν θεῷ δ' ἀεὶ κρατεῖν".  
ὁ δ' ὑψικόμπως κἀφρόνως ἡμίψατο,  
"πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἂν ὁ μὴδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ  
κράτος κατακτήσαιτ'· ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα  
κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ' ἐπισπάσειν κλέος".  
τοσόνδ' ἐκόμπει μῦθον. εἶτα δεύτερον 770  
δίαις Ἀθάνας, ἦνίκ' ὀτρύνουσά νιν

<sup>1</sup> A reader remarks to me that Aias says nothing about his own honour in the *Trugrede* itself, but this is hardly surprising, given its purpose and internal audience.

<sup>2</sup> Taplin 1978, 129-130; for a larger argument to the same end, cf. Taplin 1979.

<sup>3</sup> This speech is worth quoting *in extenso*, since some critics continue to suggest that Aias is in some way right about what has been going on in the Greek camp, or in his general attitude to authority, or is entirely justified by the action of the play; cf. esp. Knox 1964; March 1991-93, *passim* but esp. 18 (on this very speech!); Rose 1995; Garvie 1998, *passim*; contra e.g. Finglass 2011, 42-43, and nn. *ad* 74, 421-426, 550-551, 774-775 [1028-1039]; also Fisher 1992, 325 (and 312-329 more generally on the play).





ἠὺδᾶτ' ἐπ' ἐχθροῖς χεῖρα φοινίαν τρέπειν,  
 τότ' ἀντιφωνεῖ δεινὸν ἄρρητόν τ' ἔπος·  
 “ἄνασσα, τοῖς ἄλλοισιν Ἄργείων πέλας  
 ἵστω, καθ' ἡμᾶς δ' οὐποτ' ἐνρήξει μάχη”. 775  
 τοιοῖσδέ τοι λόγοισιν ἄστεργῆ θεᾶς  
 ἐκτήσατ' ὀργήν, οὐ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῶν.

There can be little doubt about the depiction of Aias' *hybris* in this passage (note particularly the repetition *μη κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῆ*, 761 ~ *οὐ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῶν*, 777,<sup>1</sup> and the progress from the generalising subjunctive of the first example to the pointed, factual participle of the second), and his refusal to 'think like a mortal' hardly augurs well for the prospects of his soon-to-be-orphaned son,<sup>2</sup> even if we leave aside his father's rather dangerous hopes (545-551):<sup>3</sup>

αἶρ' αὐτόν, αἶρε δεῦρο· ταρβήσει γὰρ οὐ,  
 νεοσφαγῆ τοῦτόν γε προσλεύσσω φόνον,  
 εἴπερ δικαίως ἔστ' ἐμὸς τὰ πατρόθεν.  
 ἀλλ' αὐτίκ' ὠμοῖς αὐτόν ἐν νόμοις πατρὸς  
 δεῖ πωλοδαμνεῖν κάξομοιοῦσθαι φύσιν.  
 ὦ παῖ, γένοιο πατρὸς εὐτυχέστερος, 550  
 τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ὁμοῖος· καὶ γένοι' ἄν οὐ κακός.

Now, the pre-play ceremonies have shown that there were war-orphans in contemporary Athens. One can agree wholeheartedly with Goldhill and others that an Athenian audience would notice the contact between the two worlds here, but would they have felt that a negative comment on their own customs and practices was any part of the poet's purpose? Instead, by point-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. di Benedetto 1983, 59-60 and n. 62, where he connects this “duplice intenzionale” with the fate of Kapaneus (*οὐ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονεῖ*, *Sept.* 425).

<sup>2</sup> For Eurysaces' afterlife, and grant of Salamis to Athens (with or without his brother Philaios), cf. Scodel 2006, 66-67. His legal status in the play is a matter of some interest: Griffith 2011, 185-190 (and in personal communication) notes that a 5th-century Athenian noble family would well be able to look after a *nothos*, so that the audience would have viewed his position in more positive terms than I have presented it; similarly, OKell 2011, 217-222 argues that Eurysaces is figured as the legitimate heir (in the absence of legitimate [*gnēsioi*] heirs) by Aias' actions at 547-548 and 574, and by Sophocles constructing Aias' relationship with Tekmessa as a marriage. Both readings ignore the fact that, whereas these legal actions and stipulations would have been enough to achieve the desired ends in fifth-century Athens, they are definitely not sufficient in the play world, where everything relies upon the atypical actions of Odysseus at the end of the play. Once more, the 'zooming', this time of the *nothos* question, allows the audience to articulate the tragic situation in the terms they can readily understand, but in the end the contemporary terms underline the fundamental differences between the worlds of the audience and of the play, where these institutions do not, or not yet, have the same effect.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hesk 2003, 70-71.





ing out the differences and distances between the Greek camp in Troy and the Athenian present, Sophocles appears to be suggesting that the contemporary form of this shared theme is actually preferable to that envisaged in the heroic world.<sup>1</sup> One hastens to add that this isn't 'the point' of the *Aias*, or even this comparison: Sophocles did not sit down to write a homily about war-orphans. Instead, the predicate of the contemporary world allowed both poet and audience to make sense of the particular shape of the heroic world – in this case, to deepen their sense of the very real, threatening crisis into which *Aias*' dependants are being placed by his actions.

The prognosis of Eurysaces' fortunes thus reflects directly on our understanding of *Aias* as a character, but this is not the only way in which contemporary norms help to articulate the tragic experience in this play. Compare *Aias* and his attitudes with the terms in which an Athenian man might be judged by his fellow citizens. Though the idealised citizen Tellos (Hdt. 1, 30, 3-5) may not conform to the messy reality of life in the Classical polis, depictions of this sort have a discursive function which reveals much of the ideals promoted and rewarded in the democracy, especially in a military context.<sup>2</sup> Next to this image, *Aias* makes a powerful contrast. Firstly, fathers of Athenian war orphans generally haven't killed themselves in an exclusive search for personalised or individual honour,<sup>3</sup> or in anger at its frustration, or because they have continually abused a helpful deity. Instead, they perished on expeditions approved by an assembly of which they were members, led by elected citizens answerable for their behaviour, and conducted for reasons overseen by that assembly. A military expedition is not a democratic utopia, of course, a place where all decisions are debated and the general is like the Speaker of the House of Commons. Nonetheless, every soldier knew that, if his general's actions on the campaign were incompetent, he would be brought to account for it, just as every father knew that his de-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *contra*, e.g., the one-to-one conclusion of Ugolini 2000, 108-111, esp. 110: "Attraverso i paradigmi mitici di Aiace ed Eurisace da un lato e di Telamone e Teucro dall'altro, il tragediografo si schierava a favore della concezione arcaico-aristocratica, che dava importanza esclusiva alla linea padre-figlio, con tutte le implicazioni sul piano etico e politico che questa presa di posizione comportava. Il pubblico di Atene, in quel frangente, avrà potuto recepire da parte di Sofocle una contestazione e una polemica contro la legge, voluta da Pericle e sostenuta dai democratici, sulle condizioni di nascita per essere riconosciuti cittadini Ateniesi".

<sup>2</sup> Cf. recently Christ 2006 and Balot 2010 (both with much further bibliography) for the two sides to this coin.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that there is no contest for personal honour in contemporary Athens, simply that its expression and terms have altered; cf. the previous note. Christ 2006, 88-142 (entitled "The Cowardly Hoplite") even discusses sub-optimal military behaviour, including desertion (94-95) motivated by "anger at an officer or general", where "punishment was not certain".





pendents *would* be looked after by the state – a far cry indeed from Aias' rather unconvincing belief that Teucer alone will be able to protect his *philoi* (560-564).<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the Athenian attitude to its generals was really a trying one. As the fifth century progressed, the office was increasingly linked with political success, so we should not be surprised if Athenians were often hard on their military leaders.<sup>2</sup> After all, generals were elected to the post and, like other office holders, had to undergo εὐθύνη after it, as well as a process of oversight which could result in deposition and trial at any point during the year.<sup>3</sup> Consider the notable examples of those condemned for not recovering the dead after the Battle of Arginousae (406 BC), the punishment of Miltiades for failing to reduce Paros (490/89 BC), the exile of Cimon after the insult suffered by the Athenians at Mt. Ithome (462 BC),<sup>4</sup> Demosthenes' decision to delay his return from a disastrous campaign in Aetolia (426/5 BC),<sup>5</sup> or Thucydides' exile because of incompetence in Thrace against Brasidas (424/3 BC).<sup>6</sup> *Stratego*i were up for scrutiny on the comic stage as well, as with Aristophanes' sustained lampooning of Lamachos in the *Acharnians* (428 BC) and the *Peace* (421 BC), or his attack on Cleon in *Knights* (424 BC) so soon after the latter's victory at Pylos the year before.<sup>7</sup> This is not to argue that

<sup>1</sup> Sophocles makes of Teucer an underwhelming character, who hardly gives the impression that his abilities match Aias' faith in them; cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 61-62 with n. 11; Finglass 2012, 61; *contra* Ormand 1999, 108-110; Hesk 2003, 114-118. On Eurysaces' prospects, cf. above, p. 70 n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Hamel 1998, 130-131 suggests that prosecutions during the Peloponnesian War were directed, on average, at one of the *stratēgoi* every year; cf. also Hansen 1975, 58-65. Though knowledge of the process before that period is even more incomplete, scrutiny and punishment of the generals was a political commonplace in Athens at least by the final third of the fifth century BC, and far from unknown before then; cf. Hansen 1975, 11 (speaking of the period 432-355 BC): "This is an astonishingly high figure, especially considering the small number of Athenian citizens". Christ 2006, 131-132 suggests that the divorce between *rhetor* and *strategos* in the fourth century might have led to an increase in the expectation of accountability, but the evidence of the fifth century suggests that any such development was already taking place before then, and may indeed have influenced the separation between the two, as politicians decided that military command rendered them too liable to the risk of prosecution and conviction.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. esp. Hansen 1975; Hamel 1998, 122-160 and, more generally, Pritchett 1974, 4-33.

<sup>4</sup> He was exiled in 461 BC, but he had just been tried and acquitted on charges of bribery in 463 BC; cf. Hansen 1975, 71 (no. 5); Hamel 1998, 141 (no. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Thuc. 3, 98, 5 with Hamel 1998, 105-106.

<sup>6</sup> For a list of known depositions and trials from 501/0-322/1 BC, cf. Hansen 1975, 66-120; Hamel 1998, 140-157.

<sup>7</sup> One might add the attack on Pericles in the *Acharnians* (497-556), and supposedly in Cratinus' lost *Dionysalexandros* (cf. Bakola 2010, 180-208), and again in Hermippos, PCG fr. 47 K-A. For a very general study of military politics and comedy, cf. Konstan 2010.





the Athenians were inevitably disrespectful of their generals, or more so than other Greeks. But it is to suggest a far from uncritical context, in which one cannot imagine a figure like Aias, who sees his dilemma completely in personal terms and has little or no effective thought for his responsibilities to the contingent of Salaminians.<sup>1</sup> In this important respect, he is very much unlike what a contemporary Athenian general is expected to be.

So Aias is definitely not a fifth-century *strategos*,<sup>2</sup> yet the poet seems to suggest that we should be importing contemporary categories to understand the characters and their (military and other) situations: Sophocles makes both Aias and the chorus refer to Athens and Salamis a great deal,<sup>3</sup> and his transformation of the *laos* from the rowing warriors of Homer into the fighting sailors of tragedy certainly seems to ‘zoom’ into the military world of the audience.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the *genos* of the Salaminioi had an important role in the administration of Aias’ contemporary cult in Athens, and were also associated with Cape Sounion (mentioned by the chorus at *Aias* 1216-1222),<sup>5</sup> so it is not unreasonable to see in this relationship a pointed reminder of the audience’s present.<sup>6</sup> Once again, however, consider the central difference: the absolute reverence in which Aias is held by the chorus, their complete and total dependence on him (e.g. *Aias* 154-171), and their utter subordination to his personal desires, is quite different from that pertaining in an Athenian context, where a general is a fellow citizen, however

<sup>1</sup> For the practical responsibilities of the *strategos* after the campaign, which included negotiating terms of surrender, the distribution of booty throughout the army, and the securing of honours for the army once they returned home, cf. Hamel 1998, 40-58; Christ 2006, 112-118. There is, unsurprisingly, no word of this from Aias or the chorus in the play.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rose 1995, 69-74, though his broader argument (esp. 65: “the play’s rhetorical structure ... tends towards the validation of Ajax as the best available political leader”) is untenable. Nor is Aias simply an Homeric hero *tout court*, as Goldhill 1987 well discusses, though the epic background is not directly within the purview of this article. For a discussion of Agamemnon as simultaneously *strategos* and (esp.) *tyrannos*, cf. Fartzoff 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., e.g., *Aias* 596-598 (ὄ κλεινὰ Σαλαμίς, σὺ μὲν που / ναίεις ἀλίπλακτος εὐδαίμων, / πᾶσιν περίφαντος αἰεΐ\*), 859-61 (ὄ φέγγος, ὄ γῆς ἱερὸν οἰκείας πέδον / Σαλαμῖνος, ὄ πατρῶον ἑστίας βάρθρον, / κλειναί τ’ Ἀθῆναι, καὶ τὸ σύντροφον γένος), 1217-1222 (γενοίμαν ἴν’ ὑλᾶεν ἔπεστι πόντῳ / πρόβλημ’ ἀλίγλυστον, ἄκραν / ὑπὸ πλάκα Σουνίου, / τὰς ἱερὰς ὄπως / προσείποιμεν Ἀθάνας). Scodel 2006, 65-67 and Kowalzig 2006, 88-98 plausibly relate this both to historical claims over Salamis, the self-promotion of imperial ideology, and appeals to Athenian unity; cf. also Jouanna 2007, 175.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rose 1995, 70; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 277-278; Burton 1980, 6-7, however, makes the point (6) that “only once in the play are they referred to as warriors”. This reinforces their distance from the audience as potential or actual warriors.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kowalzig 2006, 89 with n. 42.

<sup>6</sup> On the Salaminioi, cf. Taylor 1997; Parker 1996, 57-59, 308-316; also 2005, 214-215; Scodel 2006, 65-67.





powerful and august, and his responsibilities are legally enforceable. The chorus' attitude to Aias is as absolutist, and as un-Athenian, as Aias himself.<sup>1</sup> Initial similarities give way, on reflection, to fundamental differences.

In any of these matters, can we say that the audience would make the subversive link that many modern scholars want them to make? Or would they, rather, have a deepened impression of the alterity of the play world, and the ways in which it was deficient when compared with their own? It is very important to repeat that the dynamic suggested here is not, or not simply, designed just to make the audience feel smug. Though arguing from different perspectives and to diverse ends, both Plato and Aristotle reveal that sympathy was an important part of the tragic experience, and Goldhill is once again right to note that "the political analysis of tragedy has sometimes repressed the emotional power of the plays".<sup>2</sup> This is all the more a missed opportunity, since the play's 'distance and difference' can actually allow the audience to sympathise more keenly with the circumstances of a world which lacks the institutional mechanisms and compensations rendering the crisis on stage (more) palatable when faced by a fifth-century audience.<sup>3</sup> The death of a father is still a terrible loss for an Athenian *oikos*, no doubt, but the war-orphan institution supports the afflicted household in a way impossible for the Greek army, Aias or Teucer, or anyone on stage. Thus, difference gives a particular clarity to the difficulties facing the characters when they make their decisions, i.e. generally without the compensations and comforts with which the Athenian audience was familiar. In the world constructed by Sophocles, the chorus are simply Aias' personal retinue stuck in the midst of a now hostile army, Eurysaces can count on nothing but the questionable power of Teucer, Tecmessa has no community support or family status to fall back on,<sup>4</sup> and Aias himself has no purpose beyond the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Burton 1980, 6: "Their dependence on Aias is absolute; they acquire strength only from him; without him they are defenceless; and when he is shamed and doomed they share his shame and expect a traitor's death by stoning ...". On the chorus in the play and Sophocles in general, cf. Burton 1980, 6-40; Rosenmeyer 1993; Budelmann 2000, 195-206; Goldhill 2012, 109-133. For Cuny 2007, 134-137, the chorus shows that Sophocles "semble croire à une harmonie possible entre riches et pauvres dans la société", while Cairns 2006, 103-111 points out that the chorus also take on elements of an epinician body, which would, given the aristocratic associations of the form, further distance them from the choruses of classical Athens; cf., differently, Swift 2010, 106-115.

<sup>2</sup> Goldhill 2000, 41.

<sup>3</sup> This is one reason why institutional endings are so common in the surviving plays, and why fifth-century tragedy was such an influential source of cultic information; cf. below, p. 76 nn. 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hesk 2003, 52-73; also, e.g., Easterling 1984; even Ormand 1999, 110-123, who argues (116) that "her social position improves with Ajax's death", recognises that all depends on Teucer (on which unsteady support, cf. above, p. 72 n. 1).





establishment and maintenance of his personal honour. The social deracination of all these characters, at least when viewed through the lens of an Athenian audience, adds powerfully to that audience's understanding of, and sympathy with, the situation on stage.<sup>1</sup>

These conclusions can readily be applied to other aspects of the play. As suggested earlier, Aias brings his doom upon himself by his insufferable pride and insulting behaviour towards Athene. This extremity of character is manifest in all his actions and most of his interactions, exchanges with Athene, Tecmessa and Eurysaces, his condemnation of Odysseus, his killing and torture of the animals whom he mistakenly believes are his human enemies, and so on. Aias is frequently drawn in extreme and negative terms, but the play also depicts a man who is in many ways admirable. He is powerful, strong, brave to a fault, and capable of great achievements.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when Teucer defends his half-brother before Agamemnon, the poet goes out of his way to show the events and qualities which make Aias great and worthy of admiration (1266-1289).<sup>3</sup> As Aristotle said, the tragic figure should be neither entirely good nor totally bad, and Aias is certainly someone whose fate arouses the famous mixture of 'pity and fear'.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Aias is a complex character whose fall seems to encompass much more than simple divine punishment for a moment or two of *hybris*. His is a very human story, though Sophocles and the other tragic poets were in-

<sup>1</sup> This has an easy extension into the rest of the tragic corpus, where the difficulty on stage can only be solved beyond the confines of that world, frequently in an institutionalised form at, and then after, the end of the play (cf. above, p. 74 n. 3): intra-familial vendetta cannot be ended, or better regulated, without evolved judicial intervention (*Oresteia*); decisions about burial for traitors cannot be decided by a single person (*Antigone*); foreign (i.e. non-Athenian, not merely non-Greek) women cannot be married to Athenian citizens (*Medea*); etc. Again, this analysis does not seek to account for the entirety of the plays, but it places an interpretative filter between the audience and the characters: Orestes, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Kreon, Antigone, Jason and Medea are all stuck in a world which offers them no solution, and the way in which their characters and individual drives then push them to disaster is rendered explicable *and* sympathetic. On the solutions presented by cultic foundations, cf. below, p. 76 nn. 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> To this extent, the usually extreme hero-worship of Garvie 1998, 11 is extremely apt: "Ajax fails not because he is wicked but because he is a great man, or rather because of the qualities which make him a great man".

<sup>3</sup> In effect, one might say that Sophocles here uses (embedded remembrance of) Iliadic episodes in order to counter the more (directly represented) 'cyclic' episodes with which the play opens.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Poet.* 1449b 27, 1453b 12; also Gorgias fr. 11 (9) D.-K.: τὴν ποίησιν ἅπασαν καὶ νομίζω καὶ ὀνομάζω λόγον ἔχοντα μέτρον· ἥς τοὺς ἀκούοντας εἰσῆλθε καὶ φρίκη περίφοβος καὶ ἔλεος πολὺδακρυς καὶ πόθος φιλοπενθήης, ἐπ' ἀλλοτρίων τε πραγμάτων καὶ σωμάτων εὐτυχίαις καὶ δυσπραγίαις ἴδιόν τι πάθημα διὰ τῶν λόγων ἔπαθεν ἡ ψυχὴ. On the further rationalisation of these concepts in the *Rhetoric*, cf. above, p. 67 n. 1.



terested in their characters not just as human beings to be found in any period, but specifically as representatives of an earlier heroic age, a time when men were closer to the gods. Making sense of these differences was fundamental for both the poets and their audiences, as a way of seeing where they had come from, and how they had progressed. One common way of doing this, but by no means the only one, was through the establishment of a cult.<sup>1</sup> The prefiguration of Aias's hero-cult at the end of this play,<sup>2</sup> though not entirely like that currently observed in Athens,<sup>3</sup> allows the audience to connect their civic present with the heroic past, and to do so in a way which actually affirms a positive picture of the contemporary – figures like Aias, great and powerful as they were, are no longer possible or desirable in the fifth-century setting.<sup>4</sup> Their undeniable power is, nonetheless, acknowledged and harnessed for the benefit of the community,<sup>5</sup> in this case through

<sup>1</sup> This type of ending is (*contra* Griffin 1998, 53) extremely common in the surviving tragedies: Sophocles more than suggests such cults at the end of the *Aias*, *Philoctetes*, *Trachinian Women* and *OC*, and Euripides puts one at the end of the *Medea*, *Children of Heracles*, *Hippolytus*, *Heracles*, *Electra*, *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, *Hecuba*, *Helen*, *Andromache*, *Orestes* (Neoptolemus' cult in Delphi is foreshadowed), *Phoenician Women*, and the *Bacchae* (and the lost *Erechtheus*). Other types of institution are also employed, such as the Areopagus court at the end of the *Oresteia*, the festival of the Prometheia at the end of the Prometheus trilogy (whether or not Aeschylean), the defence of marriage as an institution at the end of the Danaid trilogy, the Argive oath and the dedication of the sanctuaries at the end of Euripides' *Suppl.*, the Athenian aetiology of the Ionians in Euripides' *Ion*, the foundation of Arcadian Oresteion in Euripides' *El.* and *Or.* These endings represent a variety of ways out of the tragic dilemma – as, e.g., the Areopagus represents the only possible solution to the personalised vendetta which destroys the principal characters in the *Oresteia* – but they may also simply mark off that world from the present, providing nonetheless a link between the two. Yet an 'institutionalised' ending is not found in every tragedy, and many plays (Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* and *Persians*, Sophocles' *OT*, *Antigone* and *Electra*, Euripides' *Alcestis*, *Trojan Women*, *Iphigeneia in Aulis*) are content to dramatise the crucial (and usually disastrous) conflict between the tensions which have driven the drama; cf. Seaford 2000, 37-39. The plays should not be reduced to cultic narratives, as in Seaford 1994, but no interpretation can simply ignore them.

<sup>2</sup> Finglass 2011, 46-51 attempts, unsuccessfully in my view, to deny the significance of hero-cult in the play; cf. Henrichs 1993 for the classic statement, and Cairns 2006; Kowalzig 2006 and now Mambrini 2011.

<sup>3</sup> This is not an argument against the link, as Finglass (n. 2, above; cf. also p. 64 n. 1) and Mikalson 2012, 446 argue. Instead, as Scullion 1999-2000, 230-233 has pointed out, the depiction of cultic *aitia* needs to accommodate competing narratives, and socio-cultural developments which could influence or alter those narratives.

<sup>4</sup> For Aias in fifth-century Athenian religion and life, see Kron 1975, 171-176; Kearns 1989, 80-91, 141-142; March 1991-93, 3-4, 25; Kowalzig 2006, 85-91.

<sup>5</sup> As Avezzi 2003, 124 notes: "ma la polis che accoglie Aiace non è quella evocata dagli Atridi, l'istituzione inconciliabile con l'eroe anche dopo la sua morte, è invece Atene, che riesce a rappresentare la difficile conciliazione nel suo teatro".



the actualisation of the hero within the city's civic structure, and his protective power as an object of cult. This does not mean that the play is nothing but a cultic aetiology,<sup>1</sup> merely that the foreshadowing of the cult plays its part in the (future) resolution of the tensions on stage, since they *cannot* be solved in the world constructed on stage. After all, Odysseus is still excluded from the burial (*Aias* 1393-1401), despite his role in ensuring it.<sup>2</sup>

Applying the principles of difference and distance to the *Aias*, then, gives an interpretation of the tragedy which recognises the tensions enacted on stage, and sees the irreconcilable nature of those tensions as central to the way in which the poet and his audiences understood the great figures of the heroic past. This is how this play enacts the famous Aeschylean principle of 'learning by suffering' (πάθει μάθος, Aesch. *Ag.* 177), a principle which can hardly apply to the characters themselves, who usually fail to see or understand the process of their downfall. In sum, then, the current interpretative method for the *Aias*, and by extension for Athenian tragedy in general, is founded on the very simple notion that the *pathos* of the tragic characters leads to, or more accurately is predicated upon, the *mathos* of the audience.

This conception is immediately open to the charge that it could reduce tragedy to a straightforward representation of a dominant ideology, whose only artifice is a series of negative *exempla*, as in the following formulation:<sup>3</sup>

There is no reason to doubt that ordinary Greek citizens were indulging in delightful *Schadenfreude* when they saw the aristocratic forebears from whom they had wrested a giddy democratic autonomy go down in flames.

On the one hand, that is precisely how Isocrates took it; for him, it was greatly to Athens' credit that the crimes of the tragic heroes had taken place somewhere other than Athens (*Panath.* 121-123). Of course, his view is shaped by its rhetorical content and purpose, but Froma Zeitlin has repeatedly and rightly argued that Thebes, so often the setting for tragic stories, is deliberately constructed as an 'anti-Athens', where destructive conflicts are played out in a safely 'other' world.<sup>4</sup> This kind of focus on distance, as a

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cairns 2006 for good strictures on this kind of reductionist reading.

<sup>2</sup> Once more (cf. above, p. 76 n. 3), this partial or proleptic resolution maps very well onto the rest of the tragic corpus; all is not right at the end of each play, and more suffering is generally portended for individuals and communities, but the way is being pointed forward to a world in which the precise problems on stage have a different solution. For another example, cf. Taddei 2003 on the way in which the play's framing of *Aias* as an "assassino" (ἀντοχειρ, 57) and the consequent threat of stoning faced by his dependants help to enact "una transizione dal prediritto al diritto, e al tempo stesso una coesistenza delle due dimensioni nella realtà sociale contemporanea alla rappresentazione" (148).

<sup>3</sup> Depew 2007, 146.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Zeitlin 1986 ~ 1990.





means of rendering the audience entirely isolated or complacent in their reactions to the play and its issues, moves a long way in the right direction, but is perhaps too confident in the extent of the Athenian audience's separation from the suffering on show. There *has* to be some recognisable link between the community on stage and that represented by its audience, for otherwise there can be no sympathy, or indeed any of the emotional reactions to which both Plato and Aristotle are such eloquent witness.

Moreover, the representation and projection of a dominant ideology – if we were even able to define such a thing – is very rarely clear-cut, and democratic Athens famously lacked a straightforward enunciation of its values. The Athenians had to infer and engage in a 'sense of self' from many different sources and in many different ways.<sup>1</sup> So a simple 'indoctrinating' programme, of the sort regularly imagined by the opponents *and* proponents of the 'Social Function' school, is definitely not the point of Athenian tragedy. Instead, by presenting contemporary customs refracted through an heroic lens, the playwright is encouraging his audience to reflect on the reasons why they hold the values they do: why, as in the *Aias*, it is a good thing to have a custom protecting the war-orphans (look what happens when it is absent); why personal honour is not unlinked with the honour and success of the community as a whole (look what happens when it is so divorced); why persuasion is generally preferable to violence or anger divorced of reason; why no one man should be able to make a personal – and so, frequently paranoid – decision about burial rights and customs (while Agamemnon no doubt comes off worse in the exchange with Odysseus in this play,<sup>2</sup> look what happens to Creon and those around him in the *Antigone* when he does make such a decision), and so on.

Again, and also because many tragic crises are not caused merely by institutional failings,<sup>3</sup> one wonders whether the playwrights ever sat down to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Boedeker-Raaflaub 1998 for a survey. One might also suggest, as a reader has to me, that many value systems have contradictions which cannot, or need not, be elided out of existence. However, the poets seem to go out of their way to predicate their treatments on the most palatable versions of the social principles held by their audiences, in effect to create a theatrical and social unity out of that audience; cf. further below, esp. pp. 84-86, for the ways in which the Sophoclean character manages to create such a unity out of a series of potentially fatal contradictions.

<sup>2</sup> Yet Sophocles offers the very real possibility that *Aias* is not going to receive burial, which would be a considerable, if ultimately entirely counterfactual, obstacle to his future cultic status.

<sup>3</sup> It must be remembered, however, that the eruption into public significance of private wrongdoing – usually in the form of the excessive autocrat and the problems which emanate from that figure – the tragic world's institutional failing, in its broadest sense, is to blame.





‘instruct’ their audiences in such a monovalent and unimaginative manner. Instead, let us look at it this way: would it be surprising if an author raised in Athens, and composing for the favour of an Athenian audience (in a formal competition for that favour), were to shape heroic myth so as to appeal to, indeed even make sense to, that audience? Such a group of people would hold a series of social assumptions derived from their own practices and customs which might not necessarily cohere with those of others. On some issues, of course – as Isokrates’ little catalogue of horrors (above) – revulsion would be universal across the Greek world, and an easy mode of connection with the world of the play.<sup>1</sup> But on many others, Athenian particularity must play an important role.<sup>2</sup> Consider, as a simple example, the differences between the tragic and extant Pindaric treatments of the Oedipus story. In both traditions he is a great, clever and powerful figure, but there is a difference of emphasis between them: tragic poets focus on his disasters and suffering, and their ramifications for his family and community, while Pindar manages to find something positive to say of him, first his wisdom in *Pyth.* 4 (γνώθι νῦν τὰν Οἰδιπόδα σοφίαν, 263),<sup>3</sup> and then in *Ol.* 2 the reassurance (!) that Oedipus’ line has been passed on, through the descendants of Polyneices’ son Thersandros,<sup>4</sup> to the autocratic recipient Theron (43-46). The two traditions equally focus on those aspects which would find the most welcome, or least unwelcome, reception within their target audiences.

This unsurprising variation may also be detected in the back story to the *Aias* itself, the conflict between Aias and Odysseus for the arms of Achilles.<sup>5</sup> On several occasions, Pindar tells the story of Aias as a great man defeated by a lesser, firstly in *Nem.* 7, 20-30:

ἐγὼ δὲ πλέον' ἔλπομαι 20  
λόγον Ὀδυσσεός ἢ πάθαν διὰ τὸν ἄδυεπῆ γενέσθ' Ὀμηρον·

<sup>1</sup> See further below, pp. 83-84.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., similarly, OKell 2011, 209-210 (*à propos* family inheritance on the tragic stage): “visitors from other *poleis* would have comprehended the presentation of these issues differently from Athenian audience members”.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Braswell 1988, *ad* 263, 362; March 1989, 138 argues that the following excursus (263-269) alludes to Oedipus’ exile as well.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gantz 1993, 522-525 for his career, and Grethlein 2010, 26-28 for the link between Thersandros and Theron, although he feels it provides a darker, more unsettling background to the poem.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Brown 1951, whose historicism (in which Aias represents Cimon; cf. also Whitman 1951, 45-46, and p. 73 n. 2, above, on Rose’s arguments) is unpersuasive; also Hubbard 2000; and Cairns 2006, though at 126 n. 70 he explicitly disagrees with the general interpretation of the *Aias* being put forward in this article. Finglass 2011, 26-36 surveys the epic fragments of the pre-Sophoclean story; cf. also March 1991-93.





ἐπεὶ ψεύδεσσι οἱ ποτανᾶ <τε> μαχανᾶ  
σεμνὸν ἔπεστί τι· σοφία δὲ κλέπτει παράγοισα μύθοις. τυφλὸν δ' ἔχει  
ἦτορ ὄμιλος ἀνδρῶν ὁ πλεῖστος. εἰ γὰρ ἦν  
 ἔ τὰν ἀλάθειαν ἰδέμεν, οὐ κεν ὅπλων χολωθεῖς 25  
 ὁ καρτερός Αἴας ἔπαξε διὰ φρενῶν  
 λευρὸν ξίφος· ὃν κράτιστον Ἀχιλῆος ἄτερ μάχα  
 ξανθῶ Μενέλα δάμαρτα κομίσαι θοαῖς  
 ἂν ναυσὶ πόρευσαν εὐθυπ'νόου Ζεφύροιο πομπαί  
 πρὸς Ἴλου πόλιν. 30

And again in *Nem.* 8, Aias is the victim of an envy which 'feasts' (δάψεν, 23) upon him (24-34):

ἦ τιν' ἀγλωσσον μὲν, ἦτορ δ' ἄλκιμον, λάθα κατέχει  
ἐν λυγρῶ νείκει· μέγιστον δ' αἰδῶ ψεύδει γέρας ἀντέταται. 25  
 κρυφίαισι γὰρ ἐν ψάφοις Ὀδυσσῆ Δαναοὶ θεράπευσαν·  
 χρυσεῶν δ' Αἴας στερηθεῖς ὅπλων φόνῳ πάλαισεν.  
 ἦ μὰν ἀνόμοιά γε δάοισιν ἐν θερμῶ χροῖ  
 ἔλκεα ῥῆξαν πελεμιζόμενοι  
 ὑπ' ἀλεξιμβρότῳ λόγχῃ, τὰ μὲν ἀμφ' Ἀχιλεῖ νεοκτόνῳ, 30  
 ἄλλων τε μόχθων ἐν πολυφθόροις  
 ἀμέραις. ἐχθρὰ δ' ἄρα πάρφασις ἦν καὶ πάλαι,  
αἰμύλων μύθων ὁμόφοιτος, δολοφ'ραδῆς, κακοποιὸν ὄνειδος·  
ἃ τὸ μὲν λαμπρὸν βιάται, τῶν δ' ἀφάντων κῦδος ἀντείνει  
 σαθρόν. 34

Elsewhere, Pindar summarises the story as the victory of an underhand 'skill of lesser men' (καὶ κρέσσον' ἀνδρῶν χειρόνων / ἔσφαλε τέχνα καταμάρψαις', *Isthm.* 4, 34-35), though in this ode the poet asserts the essential nobility in Homer's treatment of Aias (somewhat against the thrust of *Nem.* 7). The Pindaric Aias, in short, is destroyed by the Pindaric Odysseus' capacity for clever, deceptive speech. The opposition between the two characters along these lines is also deployed, or rather augmented, by Sophocles,<sup>1</sup> who gives it prominent mention in the mouths of the chorus, Aias and Teucer (187-191, 442-446, 1135-1136):

**Χο.** εἰ δ' ὑποβαλλόμενοι  
 κλέπτουσι μύθους οἱ μεγάλοι βασιλῆς,  
 χῶ τᾶς ἀσώτου Σισυφιδᾶν γενεᾶς,  
 μὴ μῆ, ἀναξ, ἔθ' ὧδ' ἐφάλοισ κλισίαις  
 ἐμμένων κακὰν φάτιν ἄρη. 190

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brown 1951; Hubbard 2000, and Cairns 2006 for argument that Sophocles was directly responding to Pindar in these passages.





**Αι.** καίτοι τοσοῦτόν γ' ἐξεπίστασθαι δοκῶ, 441  
 εἰ ζῶν Ἀχιλλεύς τῶν ὅπλων τῶν ὧν πέρι  
 κρίνειν ἔμελλε κράτος ἀριστείας τινί,  
 οὐκ ἄν τις αὐτ' ἔμαρψεν ἄλλος ἀντ' ἔμοῦ.  
 νῦν δ' αὐτ' Ἀτρεΐδαι φωτὶ παντουργῶ φρένας 445  
 ἔπραξαν, ἀνδρὸς τοῦδ' ἀπώσαντες κράτη

—

**Τευ.** κλέπτῃς γὰρ αὐτοῦ ψηφοποιὸς ἠύρεθης. 1135  
**Μεν.** ἐν τοῖς δικάσταῖς, οὐκ ἐμοί, τόδ' ἐσφάλη.

The integrity of the judges' decision (and by extension the fact of Aias' defeat in the contest), asserted by Menelaos in the latter passage, is also picked up at greater length by Agamemnon (1239-1249):

**Αγ.** πικροὺς ἔοιγμεν τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὅπλων 1240  
 ἀγῶνας Ἀργείοισι κηρῦξαι τότε,  
 εἰ πανταχοῦ φανούμεθ' ἐκ Τεύκρου κακοί,  
 κοὐκ ἀρκέσει ποθ' ὑμῖν οὐδ' ἠσσημένοις  
 εἴκειν ἅ τοῖς πολλοῖσιν ἤρεσκεν κριταῖς,  
 ἀλλ' αἰὲν ἡμᾶς ἢ κακοῖς βαλεῖτέ που  
 ἢ σὺν δόλῳ κεντήσεθ' οἱ λελειμμένοι. 1245  
 ἐκ τῶνδε μέντοι τῶν τρόπων οὐκ ἄν ποτε  
 κατάστασις γένοιτ' ἂν οὐδενὸς νόμου,  
 εἰ τοὺς δίκη νικῶντας ἐξωθήσομεν  
 καὶ τοὺς ὀπισθεν ἐς τὸ πρόσθεν ἄξομεν.

Neither the general principle nor this current case of decision-making by vote is impugned here, since 'bad' characters in tragedy can voice positive sentiments even – or especially – when they proceed to act against them,<sup>1</sup> and this is another example of the way in which the audience's values and institutions can be summoned onto the stage, once more in somewhat altered form.<sup>2</sup> Can anyone be surprised that Aias is unconvinced by any judgement which places him anywhere other than second to Achilles, and so

<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g., Demosthenes' approval (19, 246-250) of Creon's famous speech in the *Antigone* (162-210), and the convenient summary in Hall 2011, 57-59, though she relates that approval to a strategy of belittling his opponent Aeschines with having played Creon on stage. What Demosthenes actually says, however, is that Aeschines failed to quote from the speech. March 1991-3, esp. 7-8 discusses the judgement in Sophocles and earlier treatments, but concludes wrongly that the play's rather ambiguous and *parti pris* evidence (Aias 445-446, Teucer 1135) confirms the charge of dishonesty in the process; cf. *contra* (and convincingly) van Erp Taalman Kip 1996, 524-531.

<sup>2</sup> On the way in which Menelaos and Agamemnon use laudable principles to sinister ends, cf. Cuny 2007, 311-328, though she concludes that "Sophocle semble mettre les spectateurs en garde contre ce que recouvrent les beaux discours de certains politiciens" (328).





first among his survivors? He says that no-one but Achilles is fit to judge him. So Aias rejects not merely the decision itself, but the very notion of a voting process.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary, fifth-century norms simply don't work in his tragic world, though they articulate its failings and disasters.

But the culmination of the 'value of speech' theme is also one of the great ironies of Sophocles' treatment of the story, in that Odysseus' skill at speaking and persuasion is the very thing, in fact the only thing, which gets Aias his tomb:<sup>2</sup> the dangerous facility which, in Pindar's vision, destroys true heroic greatness becomes, in Sophocles, the very thing required to confirm and commemorate that greatness.<sup>3</sup> Again, the contrast stresses the difference between the worlds of the play and of the audience, where the Athenians were proud of the openness of persuasion, the power of *logos*, and the worship of the goddess Peitho.<sup>4</sup> In the end, the Greek camp is not fifth-century Athens, for Odysseus is not allowed to enjoy his success by joining in Aias' funeral. Just as the latter's hero-cult, with its connotations of civic articulation and unity, is only foreshadowed in the play, so the man who wins his way by persuasion is left outside the community being constructed on stage.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> One might note that this attitude was shared by fifth-century Athenian aristocrats, especially in the oligarchic revolutions of 411 BC and 404 BC, though the question in both cases seems to be more about who gets to vote.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 57-72; also Raaflaub 2012, 478-479: "(Odysseus) displays new qualities needed in a community based on equal participation by all, and shows ways to overcome an old aristocratic value system that is based on stark contrasts, rigid claims to honour upheld at all costs, and preference for personal over communal considerations"; Hubbard 2000, 318 argues that Sophocles in fact makes Odysseus into the paradigm of the Pindaric poet; cf. *contra* (surely wrongly) Garvie 1998, 16: "all emphasis at the end of the play is on the vindication of Ajax, and Odysseus is merely a means to that end".

<sup>3</sup> Cairns 2006, 119: "... where Pindar excludes the problematic aspects of Ajax in the mythical and poetic traditions as part of his unmitigated praise of the Aeginetans and their polity, Sophocles extols, but also problematizes and contextualizes the qualities of the man whom the Athenians made a hero".

<sup>4</sup> Cf., e.g., Aesch. *Eum.* 885-886; 970-297 and Parker 1996, 234. On the political connotations of Peitho and her cultic link with Aphrodite *Pandemos*, cf. Buxton 1982, esp. 10-18 (on Athens), and 29-66 (more generally); Pirenne-Delforge 1991, esp. 402-403; Rosenzweig 2004, 13-28, esp. 25-27.

<sup>5</sup> Note that Odysseus is also misinterpreted by every character on stage, who all expect him to glory in Aias' downfall, from Athene (74-90) to Tecmessa (961-962), the chorus (148-150, 187-191, 955-960, 971; cf. 1317), Aias himself (445-446), Teucer (1382) and Agamemnon (1346-1373). This underlines his separation from the ritual envisaged at the end, and the anachronism he represents in some ways in the heroic world (cf. 1393-1399, 1400-1401). Odysseus is not a fifth-century politician in the heroic world (cf. Cairns 2006, 116-117) but his moderation is individual in that world, whilst also distanced from the contemporary, firstly by being housed in a good old-fashioned epic hero who is, secondly, excluded from a unifying ritual.





In all these cases, the predicates of fifth-century Athens shape the way in which themes and events are presented on stage. It is therefore crucial to understand the attitudes of the original audience, though not to the extent that “to understand fifth-century Athenian plays we need to understand the fifth-century Athenian audience – and no other”;<sup>1</sup> one should not overestimate the differences in group attitudes across the Greek world. Athenian tragedy became popular outside Athens even during the fifth century,<sup>2</sup> but this is not as surprising as it has often seemed to be. After all, they were all Greeks, and to some extent the social norms and priority of the *polis* were things you could hear espoused all over the world during this period. In this respect, the ‘ideology’ of Athenian tragedy is often not particularly Athenian, presenting instead the virtues of an exemplary *polis* culture:<sup>3</sup>

... while some tragedies seem to represent Athens as the place where problems can be solved, it is not always the case that Athens ‘*qua* democracy’ is necessarily implicated in a tragedy. A more general notion of Athens ‘*qua* best *polis* in Greece’ is sometimes the more plausible formulation.

Furthermore, any conception of the Athenian audience or community as a whole elides some significant differences within the structure so imagined; there were aristocrats, democrats, farmers, landowners, sailors, slaves, women as well as men – people of all sorts, and many different political convictions, within that community.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the social categorisations of an Athenian audience are those of any Greek city. However, far from showing the unimportance of tragedy’s original setting, the very variety within the audience, and the poetic need to countenance that difference, was actually the key to the success of tragedy as a genre beyond Athens.<sup>5</sup>

Let us recall, once more, that the playwrights were competing for their judges’ and audience’s favour, for the first prize in a competition. There was no certain way to predict who would be judging at any individual festival,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sommerstein 1997, 64.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., Taplin 1999; Allan 2001; Rhodes 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Hesk 2007, 78; cf., in particular, Rhodes 2003, with reply in Swift 2010, 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the notion of ‘audience studies’ in Griffith-Carter 2011, 6-7 (Griffith) and 7-10 (Carter), esp. 6-7: “[the] critic’s job is precisely to try to parse, unravel, dissect, and describe the various responses that a given expression (or interaction, or scene, or whole play) would have elicited from the various watchers and listeners in the theatre”.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rösler 1980, 23-32.

<sup>6</sup> Judges were picked by lot, one from each tribe, and from their votes five were selected again by lot to determine the winner of the competition. Bribery and influence, of course, were not ruled out by this procedure, but it “clearly is an attempt to minimise the possibility that such manipulation could be successful” (Osborne 1993, 33), and shows once again how democratic processes and assumptions were considered essential to the structure and governance of the festival.





so the best course for any playwright was to pitch his work at the widest possible cross-section of his community, in effect looking for those elements which would appeal to the potential audience as a whole, and eliding the differences within that community in order to emphasise what made them one. This did not, as one might think, rule out diversity or complexity in either the treatment of the story or the construction of character. Rather, it fostered it.

Consider the astoundingly multivalent appeal of Sophocles' Aias himself: in general terms, he is obviously attractive to the city's aristocrats, who liked to connect themselves genealogically with the heroic past but could differentiate their own behaviour from that of the heroic character(s) on stage, in e.g. their support for and participation in the festival itself.<sup>1</sup> As an exemplar of specifically infantry prowess, he appeals to the landowning hoplites; as the commander of a naval contingent, to the sailors and their officers. In the chorus, the ordinary sailors and soldiers get to see the sort of heroic analogue for themselves which is generally denied in epic narrative, where the *laos* is largely a voiceless mass. It is not a question of one-to-one mapping, in the sense that the aristocrats look on Aias as 'one of them', any more than the chorus sees itself directly reflected on the stage. Instead, the association is more indirect, with the heroic filter constantly preserving essential differences between the groups. But there are further, more precise levels to the identification. For example, all the members of the tribe Aiantis could feel pride in their famous eponym, whilst the members of other tribes come to 'own' his presence, for it was by appropriating such figures that Athens came to overcome its relatively poor showing in the great myths of Panhellenic epic.<sup>2</sup> Demosthenes reflects this quality when, in the Funeral Speech delivered after the defeat at Chaeroneia (338 BC), he refers to the way in which the Aiantidai used Aias' dishonour and disgrace as a spur to achieve great things in battle (60, 31).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is easy to forget that these people were an important constituency in the democracy. Indeed, Griffith 1995 and 1998 persuasively argues that the dramatic poets frequently depicted aristocratic ethics in a positive manner, which shows very clearly that tragedy was not constructed simply or monovalently on class lines. As Ugolini 2000, 111 well puts it: (Sophocles gives) "un messaggio sostanzialmente positivo di mediazione e conciliazione per una pacifica convivenza di tutti gli Ateniesi in un quadro politico governato dal demo, ma senza cancellare il patrimonio etico e culturale della trazione aristocratica". For the genealogical claims of the Athenian Philaid family on Aias, cf. Hdt. 6, 35 with Kearns 1989, 81-82; Scodel 2006, 66-67; Kowalzig 2006, 87 with n. 31; Fowler 2013, 477-479.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Parker 1996, 117-121.

<sup>3</sup> This passage may refer to an alternative tradition about Aias' death, where he was killed as he attacked the Trojans, a possibility rejected (and so, perhaps, alluded to) at *Aias* 465-466; cf. the hypothesis with Jebb 1896, 6; also Sophron fr. 31, 2 Hordern; Philostr. *Her.* 35,





Moving beyond narrow class or deme identities within the *polis* to the whole community acting imperially, Barbara Kowalzig has perceptively argued that “the Athenians laboured hard to make Ajax and his island theirs”, by reflecting their sixth-century claims over Salamis and their fifth-century conflict with Aegina (whose foundational figure Aiakos was Aias’ great-grandfather in some traditions)<sup>1</sup> in their formulation of Aias’ cult:<sup>2</sup>

... from early on and definitely by the beginning of the fifth century Salamis and its hero were already heavily loaded with a whole array of claims intricately associating Athens’ community values with its external standing.

The history of Athenian imperialism thus calls upon, and so reshapes, Aias’ mythology in its support, communalising in yet another way this wildly individualistic figure. Finally, the hero’s story is resonant for the rest of the community as a whole, which finds an enduring sense of justice in the inevitability of his fall from power, as well as reassurance that his protective power has been properly harnessed for their benefit in his hero-cult. This last element – his presence within the audience’s world as a saving power and symbol of the unity of Athens – helps to draw together the disparate groupings and units within the city, and make them into an audience. In sum, the playwright takes a character who could rub at and represent all the internal tensions of Athens (exactly as he does in Pindar), and creates from him and his story a specifically Athenian unity.

Crucially, the ‘Athenian’ quality of that unity is never overstated in the play. Aias’ hero-cult, the basis for his presence and function within contemporary Athens, is only prefigured, and most of the surviving plays of Sophocles (with the signal exception of the *OC*) are much more subtle in that regard than, for instance, either the *Eum.* of Aeschylus or the *Suppl.* of Euripides, where Athens itself becomes the setting of the action. The relative rarity of this context was another factor preventing tragedy from becoming a simple vehicle of ‘propaganda’, with pantomime villains to be booed and Stakhanovite heroes to be cheered. Hence, because the poets set their tragedies in the deep and mythical past, their work was able to move past its

12 (though it is not clear, *pace* Finglass 2011, *ad* 466-468, 273-274, that he does actually launch an attack in this passage, merely that the Trojans feared that he would do so). If so, the point remains that Athenians were deploying heroic mythology to inform and motivate their non-heroic present.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pherec. fr. 2 and 60 Fowler; also Fowler 2013, 477-479, 713, who suggests that Theseus may have been seen as Aias’ father – a version attested by both Plutarch (*Theseus* 29) and the François Vase (cf. Kron 1975, 172) – as early as Pherecydes.

<sup>2</sup> Kowalzig 2006, 86 (larger discussion 85-91); also excellent on this is Scodel 2006, 65-71.





original Athenian home into the wider Greek world, and to establish itself as one of the pre-eminent genres in the history of ancient literature.

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Sophocles' *Aias* shows that the tragic poet reshaped heroic myth in order to appeal to his diverse audience(s) and to win their approval and respect, and he did this because he shared the basic values which united and defined his community. The filter of 'distance and difference' helped to inform the relationship between the world of the play and the world of the audience, and encouraged that audience to reflect on why and how their values failed to operate in the world of heroes. This reinforced the operation of those norms, but it did so in order to recreate that older world for a new and different one. One cannot rule out the possibility that these values could also be questioned in a stronger sense than that used in this article, for the process of reflection or response cannot be entirely controlled even by the poets initiating it. Perhaps someone in the audience might follow Bernard Knox and Alex Garvie in thinking that, in a figure like *Aias*, something great and powerful had been lost in the transition from the heroic to the contemporary world, and that Sophocles was lamenting that loss. But the play as a whole seems to suggest that something else, not without its faults but certainly without those driving the crisis on stage, has been gained in its place.

To understand the tragedy of *Aias* – and, it is suggested, of any character on the tragic stage – we have to seek to know how the original audience understood those characters and their sufferings. The constant predicate of that process was the fifth-century community, its values, its views, and its institutions. Though many other elements were involved in the audience's response to the *Aias*, and we should never make the instruction of the citizens the only object of our interpretation, the principle of 'distance and difference' is an illuminating tool with which to approach the works of Athenian tragedy. We cannot deny the importance of the original environment for either the poet, his first audience(s), and the texts which joined them. Athens remains important.

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