

**Epic Heroes in Tragedy:
Genre, Ethics, and the Fifth-century Community**

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The aim of this discussion is to explore the interaction between two of the most prestigious and popular genres of ancient Greek literature, namely epic and tragedy. In particular, I want to consider how tragedy reworks key elements of epic heroism in order to define itself as a genre of fifth-century Athenian popular art. I shall examine specific examples of tragic figures (Ajax and Achilles) who are constructed in the light of their Iliadic past, and I shall try to show how the tragedians draw on their audience's familiarity with these Homeric characters in order to highlight not only tragedy's distinctiveness as a genre, but also its – in fifth-century Athenian terms – ethical and political superiority to Homeric epic.

Before we turn to look at the plays in more detail, let us first consider tragedy's place in fifth-century Athens. Contemporary scholarship on this issue is characterized by divergent and polarized views. At one end of the spectrum are scholars who are reluctant to tie tragedy too closely to its social or historical context. They focus instead on tragedy's aesthetic qualities as poetry and drama, on the pathetic suffering of its characters, and on the universal moral dilemmas that it poses.¹ At the spectrum's other end are critics who see tragedy as

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¹ Works with a focus on aesthetics or on tragic suffering and its moral impact: cf. e.g. E.-R. Schwinge, 'Griechische Tragödie: Das Problem ihrer Zeitlichkeit', *Antike und Abendland* 38 (1992), 48-66; J. Griffin, 'The Social Function of Attic Tragedy', *CQ* 48 (1998), 39-61; P. J.

intrinsically political, steeped in the many levels of discourse which helped to structure the Athenian community.² Perhaps the most influential direction in which studies from this perspective have progressed is avowedly subversive: in short, it argues that tragedy exposes the core values of fifth-century Athens to glaring scrutiny and finds them unsatisfactory.³

Indeed, the questioning of civic ideology has become a staple of tragic criticism in recent years, but while it has the advantage over the aesthetic approach of taking seriously tragedy's socio-political impact, its own insistence upon questioning and subversion is no less anachronistic. For such a view imposes a modern western liberal view of art – namely, that the best art challenges and subverts the values of the society in which it was produced and received – upon a very different culture. However, unless we abandon these post-

Rhodes, 'Nothing to do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the *Polis*', *JHS* 123 (2003), 104-19; A. F. Garvie (ed.), *Aeschylus: Persae* (Oxford, 2009), esp. xvi-xxii.

² Tragedy as intrinsically political: e.g. C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*,' *JHS* 109 (1989), 134-48; R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford, 1994); M. Griffith, 'Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the *Oresteia*', *CA* 14 (1995), 62-129; D. Carter, *The Politics of Greek Tragedy* (Bristol, 2007); P. Wilson, 'Tragic Honours and Democracy: Neglected Evidence for the Politics of the Athenian Dionysia', *CQ* 59 (2009), 8-29; D. Carter (ed.), *Why Athens? A Reappraisal of Tragic Politics* (Oxford, 2011).

³ Tragedy as subversive of civic ideology: e.g. many of the essays in J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (edd.), *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton, 1990). For criticism of this approach, see e.g. R. Friedrich, 'Everything to do with Dionysos? Ritualism, the Dionysiac, and the Tragic', in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford, 1996), 257-83, and Seaford's response in same volume (pp. 284-94); W. Allan, *Euripides: Helen* (Cambridge, 2008), 4-10.

Romantic and especially late 20th-century views of art, we shall fail to understand the appeal of tragedy for its original audience.

What I would like to suggest instead is that we focus on tragedy's status as a form of popular art and mass entertainment.⁴ Though this is an obvious feature of the genre, its important consequences have not yet been fully realized. By thinking about tragedy as a form of popular art we can open up the issue of tragedy's relationship to the world of its original Athenian audience in new ways. For if we accept that the audiences of tragedy represented a broad spectrum of fifth-century Athenian society, and not a narrow elite,⁵ the likelihood of a poet seeking to win first prize by setting at risk the core values of his audience is (I would argue) vanishingly small. On the contrary, tragedy aims to make mythological sense of the audience's world, and does so in a way that is both appealing and pleasurable. I do not mean to suggest that Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides consciously set out to endorse fifth-century Athenian values when they began to write a play, but that tragedy's very status as a form of popular art meant that their creations had to offer something for everyone in the

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of tragedy as popular art, outlining the ramifications of such an approach for the interpretation of the plays, see W. Allan and A. Kelly, 'Listening to Many Voices: Athenian Tragedy as Popular Art', in A. Marmorodoro and J. Hill (edd.), *The Author's Voice in Classical and Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2013), 77-122, upon which this discussion draws extensively.

⁵ A. Sommerstein, 'The Theatre Audience, the *Demos*, and the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus', in C. Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997), 63-79, argues for an increase in the entry fee in the mid-fifth century and an increasingly right-wing bias in both audiences and plays, but there is no support for this either in the texts of tragedy or in the surviving documentary evidence: cf. Rhodes (n. 1), 111; M. Revermann, 'The Competence of Theatre Audiences in Fifth- and Fourth-century Athens', *JHS* 126 (2006), 99-124.

audience,⁶ and that this is what they strove to do through their depiction of the heroic past, and specifically (as we shall see) in their treatment of heroic society as in many ways unlike the audience's own.

The two key factors here, and ones that will be crucial when we compare tragedy and epic, are what we might call *heroic distance* and *heroic difference*. The importance of distance between the play world and that of the audience is exemplified perfectly in the story told by Herodotus about the Athenians' reaction to Phrynichus' tragedy, *The Capture of Miletus*, which dramatized the city's recapture by the Persians in 494:

ἔς δάκρυά τε ἔπεσε τὸ θέητρον καὶ ἐζημίωσάν μιν ὡς ἀναμνήσαντα οἰκῆια κακὰ
χλίησι δραχμῆσι, καὶ ἐπέταξαν μηκέτι μηδένα χρᾶσθαι τούτῳ τῷ δράματι.

The audience in the theatre burst into tears and they fined the author a thousand drachmas for reminding them of their own evils, and they forbade anybody ever to put the play on the stage again. (Herodotus, 6.21)

All successful Athenian tragedies, by contrast, set horrific events safely in the heroic past. And it is no coincidence that the single surviving 'historical' play, Aeschylus' *Persians*, is thoroughly pro-Athenian.

⁶ For the influence of audience reaction on the judging process, see A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, rev. J. Gould and D. Lewis (Oxford, 1988), 97-8; E. Csapo and W. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 157-60; C. Marshall and S. van Willigenburg, 'Judging Athenian Dramatic Competitions', *JHS* 124 (2004), 90-107, at 91.

Besides heroic distance, I think we can also speak of *heroic difference*.⁷ For tragedy addresses current issues using an imaginary world of the past which is systematically and pervasively unlike that of the audience, and does so in a way that often confirms the validity of contemporary Athenian norms.⁸ However, it must be stressed, this tragic pattern of heroic difference does *not* constitute a simple *dichotomy* of then (all bad) versus now (all good), since nearly all heroic figures are admirable in some respect.⁹ In other words, the heroic and contemporary worlds exist as part of a *continuum* rather than a dichotomy, so that the heroes can be presented as more, or less, removed and different from the watching community; nevertheless, as we shall see, the world of the audience often emerges, in many respects, as better than that of the heroes.

The tragedians' attempt to represent heroic characters in terms that cast light on fifth-century values is particularly clear when it comes to characters who have a previous life in poetry, in particular Homeric epic. While we should be clear that Homer actually represents the individualism and heroism of his characters in sophisticated and problematic terms,¹⁰ it is

⁷ This is very similar to the notion of 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' proposed by Sourvinou-Inwood (n. 2; similarly in id., *Tragedy and Athenian Religion* (Lanham, MD, 2003)), but I would differ crucially in maintaining that distance is *always* fundamentally operative; the poet may choose to highlight that fact at any given point or not, but the predicated gap between the two worlds remains in effect at all times.

⁸ See Allan (n. 3), 7-8 and A. Kelly, *Sophocles: Oedipus at Colonus* (London, 2009), 20-5 on the importance of distance and difference.

⁹ There are very few out-and-out villains in extant tragedy (e.g. Lycus in *Heracles*, Polymestor in *Hecuba*) and they are never central characters.

¹⁰ On Homer's exploration of the complexities of heroism, see W. Allan and D. Cairns, 'Conflict and Community in the *Iliad*', in N. Fisher and H. van Wees (edd.), *Competition in*

in the tragedians' interests to represent themselves as recasting these figures for a modern age and highlighting the ways in which traditional heroism falls short. In the case of Sophocles' *Ajax*, dense allusion to the *Iliad* invites us to contrast tragic and Homeric concepts of the great individual and his relationship to the wider community.

The initial set-up of the *Ajax* is evocative of Achilles' crisis in the *Iliad* over his honour, but Sophocles casts Ajax in a much more extreme light: like Achilles, Ajax withdraws from the army because he feels dishonoured. But whereas Achilles is culpable for the deaths of the Achaeans by his failure to intervene, Ajax goes further, since he actively sets out to kill his fellow soldiers. In short, Ajax is presented as a new Achilles, but as an even more extreme and dangerous version of the self-obsessed hero, so that Achilles' Iliadic withdrawal from the community is transfigured into Ajax's active malevolence.

In the play's prologue, featuring Athena, Odysseus, and Ajax, the audience are led to see the differences between the Iliadic and the Sophoclean heroes, and the significance of those differences. Ajax's belief that Athena has helped him to regain his honour by killing the Greek leaders (ὦ χαῖρ' Ἀθήνα, χαῖρε Διογενὲς τέκνον, / ὡς εὖ παρέστης· καί σε παγχρύσοις ἐγὼ / στέψω λαφύροις τῆσδε τῆς ἄγρας χάριν, 'Hail, Athena! Hail, child of Zeus! / How loyally you have stood by me! I will bedeck you / with offerings of pure gold to thank you for this catch', *Ajax* 91-3) is ironic in itself – because he is completely wrong – but it also evokes the Iliadic Achilles, where Athena appears to him in the first book of the *Iliad* in order to prevent him from killing Agamemnon, and promises that the Achaeans will eventually honour him if he withdraws (*Il.* 1.193-222). In Sophocles' play the Iliadic Achilles' murderous potential is transferred to Ajax, and again it is only Athena's intervention (making Ajax delusional) that prevents the Greek commanders from being killed. Ajax, however,

the Ancient World (Swansea, 2011), 113-46; W. Allan, *Homer: The Iliad* (London, 2012), 35-47.

believes he *has* tortured and murdered them, and he even gloats over his victims, and so the evocation of the *Iliad* brings out Ajax's total alienation from his fellow Greeks in a particularly shocking way.

The relationship between Ajax, the powerful individual, and the wider Greek community lies at the core of Sophocles' play. Just as Achilles in the *Iliad* puts his claim to *timē* (honour) before the good of the Homeric *laos* (army and people),¹¹ so Ajax not only attempts to kill his fellow Greeks but also abandons those people who depend on him the most: his men, represented by the Chorus of Salaminian sailors who make up the Chorus, and his wife and son. And while the *Iliad* stresses the need for the hero to respect his community, the importance of this theme is still stronger in a fifth-century Athenian context, where democracy relied on the successful interaction of powerful individuals (like Pericles) and the people as a whole. Thus the Chorus insist on the symbiosis of leader and led:

καίτοι μικροὶ μεγάλων χωρὶς
σφαλερὸν πύργου ῥῦμα πέλονται·
μετὰ γὰρ μεγάλων βαιὸς ἄριστ' ἄν (160)
καὶ μέγας ὀρθοῖθ' ὑπὸ μικροτέρων.

CHORUS: Small men without the help of great men

are unsafe defenders of a bastion:

for little men are most successful when allied with the great

and the great when served by the little.

(*Ajax* 158-61)

¹¹ For the threat to social cohesion posed by Agamemnon and Achilles' attempts to push their claims to honour too far, see Allan and Cairns (n. 10).

Ajax's disastrous inability to be a community-oriented hero is most powerfully presented in his interactions with his wife, Tecmessa, in a scene that is the clearest example of Iliadic intertextuality in all surviving tragedy, as Sophocles evokes the meeting between Hector and Andromache in *Iliad* 6 to draw attention to Ajax's lack of compassion and his rigid focus on his own honour. Tecmessa's appeal reworks key aspects of the Iliadic scene:

καί τις πικρὸν πρόσφθεγμα δεσποτῶν ἔρει (500)

λόγοις ἰάπτων, “ἴδετε τὴν ὀμευνέτιν

Αἴαντος, ὃς μέγιστον ἴσχυσε στρατοῦ,

οἴας λατρείας ἀνθ' ὅσου ζήλου τρέφει.”

τοιαῦτ' ἔρει τις· κάμῃ μὲν δαίμων ἔλῃ,

σοὶ δ' αἰσχρὰ τᾶπη ταῦτα καὶ τῷ σῷ γένει. (505)

ἀλλ' αἰδεσσαι μὲν πατέρα τὸν σὸν ἐν λυγρῷ

γῆρα προλείπων, αἰδεσσαι δὲ μητέρα

πολλῶν ἐτῶν κληροῦχον, ἢ σε πολλάκις

θεοῖς ἀρᾶται ζῶντα πρὸς δόμους μολεῖν·

οἴκτιρε δ', ὦναξ, παῖδα τὸν σόν, εἰ νέας (510)

τροφῆς στερηθεὶς σοῦ διοίσεται μόνος

ὑπ' ὀρφανιστῶν μὴ φίλων, ὅσον κακὸν

κείνω τε κάμοι τοῦθ', ὅταν θάνης, νεμεῖς.

ἐμοὶ γὰρ οὐκέτ' ἔστιν εἰς ὃ τι βλέπω

πλὴν σοῦ. σὺ γὰρ μοι πατρίδ' ἤστωσας δορί, (515)

καὶ μητέρ' ἄλλη μοῖρα τὸν φύσαντά τε

καθεῖλεν Ἄιδου θανασίμους οἰκήτορας.

TECMESSA: Then one of my masters will address me hurtfully
with bitter words, ‘Behold the concubine
of Ajax, who was the army’s mightiest man,
and see what slavery she endures instead of being so envied.’
So someone will say, and fate will drive me off,
and these words will shame you and your family.
Come, show respect for your father, whom you
abandon in old age, and for your mother,
with her share of many years, who often
prays to the gods that you may return home alive.
And pity too, my lord, your son, if he is to be deprived
of childhood sustenance and endure life alone without you
under unfriendly guardians, and pity how much misery
you will cause him and me, when you die.
For I have no one to look to
except you: it was you who wiped out my country with
violence,
and another fate has taken my mother and father
down to dwell in death as inhabitants of Hades.

(*Ajax* 500-17)

Tecmessa’s speech evokes Hector – in her use of *tis*-speeches, imagining what people will say about Andromache’s or (as here) Tecmessa’s enslavement – and it also evokes Andromache, in the appeal (in lines 506ff.) to Ajax’s father, mother, and son, as well as to

Ajax's concern for Tecmessa herself, which recalls Andromache's famous words, 'But you, Hector, are to me father and honoured mother / and brother too, as well as my strong husband' (Ἐκτορ ἀτὰρ σὺ μοί ἐσσι πατὴρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ / ἠδὲ κασίγνητος, σὺ δέ μοι θαλερὸς παρακοίτης; , *Il.* 6.429-30). Thus Tecmessa's speech seeks to cast Ajax as a Hector figure – i.e. as a socially-focused hero. But note that it is Tecmessa (the Andromache figure) and not Ajax (the Hector figure) who is capable of thinking about other people here. In other words, although Hector in the *Iliad* pursues his honour even at the risk of his family's survival, his humanity and sympathy with them is shown by the fact that he makes clear in his speech to Andromache that he understands the risks and that he dreads the thought of her being enslaved. Conversely, it is Tecmessa in the *Ajax* who has to bring this up: Ajax himself represents only the selfish side of the Homeric Hector.

Another revealing aspect of this scene's transformation of the Homeric concept of heroism is the focus on Ajax's shield and Eurysaces' name:

ἀλλ' αὐτό μοι σύ, παῖ, λαβὼν τοῦπόνυμον,
Εὐρύσακες, ἴσχε διὰ πολυρράφου στρέφων (575)
πόρπακος ἐπτάβοιον ἄρρηκτον σάκος·
τὰ δ' ἄλλα τεύχη κοῖν' ἐμοὶ τεθάψεται.

AJAX: But you, my son, take this which gives you your name,
Eurysaces, wielding it by its well-sewn handle,
my unbreakable shield made of seven hides.
The rest of my armour will be buried with me.

(*Ajax* 574-7)

In the *Iliad*, Astyanax gets his name because of Hector's protection of his people:

τόν ῥ' Ἴκτωρ καλέεσκε Σκαμάνδριον, αὐτὰρ οἱ ἄλλοι
Ἀστυάνακτ'· οἷος γὰρ ἐρύετο Ἴλιον Ἴκτωρ.

Hector called him Scamandrios, but the others

Astyanax [Lord of the City], for Hector alone protected Ilios.

(*Iliad* 6.402-3)

Conversely, Eurysaces gets his name from his father's own personal prowess; and this more selfish focus is also shown in Ajax's explicit forbidding of anyone else to have or use his armour at 577 – it will all be buried, except for the shield which Eurysaces will get.

How would a fifth-century Athenian view Ajax, a man who puts his personal claim to honour before the interests of his own family and his own men? A fifth-century Athenian may admire heroes like Ajax, not least for the ways in which they are unlike contemporary people (stronger, braver, more resolute, and so forth), but the surviving plays of all three major tragedians point again and again to the negative consequences of their character and actions. There is a difference, after all, between admiring Ajax's blunt warrior ethic and actually wanting him along on an expedition. Ajax abandons his family and his men, despite their desperate pleading, so while he may be thought great in some respects, an Athenian would surely hope that his *philoï* (relatives or friends) and his *strategoï* (military leaders) would be more mindful of their duties and responsibilities.¹²

¹² On Ajax's relationships with his *philoï*, see M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge, 1989), 72-81.

Unlike *Iliad* Book 9, where Ajax's role in the embassy to Achilles underlines his persona as the man with the best interests of the army at heart, here in Sophocles' play he is at odds not only with the Greek leadership but with the army as a whole, and he dies cursing them all:

ἴτ', ὧ ταχεῖαι ποίνιμοί τ' Ἐρινύες,
γεύεσθε, μὴ φείδεσθε πανδήμου στρατοῦ.

AJAX: Come, you swift avenging Furies,
devour them, spare not the whole body of the army.

(*Ajax* 843-4)

The army is *pandēmos* (844), and so represents the people in conceptual terms, which stresses the harm done by Ajax to the ordinary citizens.¹³ In a society like Athens which valued dialogue and compromise (at least in theory) Ajax's blanket and inflexible ethics of love and hate, friend and enemy, is wholly out of place. A mixed society like Athens, full of tensions between democrats, oligarchs, and potentially tyrannical aristocrats, needs a system of checks and balances in order to survive. Of course Ajax also tries to murder his comrades-in-arms because of a personal slight, an act hardly in keeping with the Athenians' own ephebic oath or the hoplite ethos of sticking together come what may. So Ajax is from the very start a bad citizen who is a danger to the community, not just when he decides to kill himself.

¹³ Cf. R. C. Jebb (ed.), *Sophocles: Ajax* (Cambridge, 1896), xl 'It can hardly be said that the army at large were involved in the guilt of the award [of Achilles' arms]; they had nothing to do with it, and could not prevent or reverse it.'

Ajax's inability to change, to yield, to be flexible, is stressed throughout the play, most famously in his so-called Deception Speech (*Trugrede*), where he ironically claims to have learned how to adapt and *sōphronein* – ἡμεῖς δὲ πῶς οὐ γνωσόμεσθα σωφρονεῖν; ('How shall we not learn to be reasonable?', *Ajax* 677) – that is, how to be sensible and measured in his response to changing circumstances.¹⁴ Some scholars, especially the so-called hero-worshippers, see Ajax's inability to yield or to be flexible (a quality shared with other Sophoclean figures like Antigone or Philoctetes) as an emphatically admirable and positive thing, which sets them apart from the common run of mankind.¹⁵ But the disasters that ensue (or, in the case of Philoctetes, almost ensue) from their stubbornness show that these qualities are not simply awesome, they are also dangerous, and the flexibility of Odysseus emerges in the *Ajax* as the more appropriate quality. As Odysseus says in justification of his support for Ajax's honourable burial, 'It is not my way to approve of a rigid character' (σκληρὰν ἐπαινεῖν οὐ φιλῶ ψυχὴν ἐγώ, *Ajax* 1361). Of course such flexibility could be portrayed negatively as showing a lack of moral principle, as with the portrayal of Odysseus in Sophocles *Philoctetes*, but here in the *Ajax* it is a positive quality, which throws into relief Ajax's self-centredness and stubbornness and thus his threat to social cohesion.

As I said earlier, Ajax is undoubtedly an admirable figure. He embodies a potent fantasy of masculinity: a strong, brave, honourable, and decisive warrior, who has an appeal for all Athenians, not just the aristocratic elite. And so although Ajax's extreme self-

¹⁴ For a helpful analysis of this famous speech, see J. Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London, 2003), 74-95.

¹⁵ For a review of hero-worshipping approaches to Ajax and other Sophoclean protagonists, especially the influential studies of Sophoclean tragedy by Knox and the commentary of A. F. Garvie (ed.), *Sophocles: Ajax* (Warminster, 1998), see P. J. Finglass, 'Ajax', in A. Markantonatos (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles* (Leiden, 2012), 59-72, at 61-2.

centredness leads to his destruction, Sophocles deliberately plays up Ajax's admirable qualities, such as his bravery and loyalty at Troy:

χῶτ' αἴθις αὐτὸς Ἴκτορος μόνος μόνου,
λαχῶν τε κακέλευστος, ἦλθεν ἀντίος,
οὐ δραπέτην τὸν κληῖρον ἐς μέσον καθείς, (1285)
ὕγρας ἀρούρας βῶλον, ἀλλ' ὅς εὐλόφου
κυνῆς ἔμελλε πρῶτος ἄλμα κουφιεῖν;

TEUCER: Or what about when another time he confronted Hector all alone,
by lot and without being ordered, and faced him man to man,
having cast in a token that was no runaway,
no lump of moist earth, but one that would leap out
first from the crested helmet?

(*Ajax* 1283-7)

This recalls the famous scene in *Iliad* 7, where Ajax is chosen by lot to fight in single combat against Hector, but it is no coincidence that Sophocles emphasizes these positive attributes in the second half of the play – that is, *after* Ajax is dead – because he is looking forward to Ajax's future as one of the ten eponymous heroes of the Athenian polis.

Ajax had a statue in the agora, and a hero-cult (complete with shrine and festival) on the island of Salamis, which since the sixth century had been part of the Athenians' power base. Ajax's final words include a farewell to Athens:

ὦ φέγγος, ὦ γῆς ἱερὸν οἰκείας πέδον

Σαλαμῖνος, ὃ πατρῶον ἐστίας βάθρον, (860)

κλειναί τ' Ἀθῆναι, καὶ τὸ σύντροφον γένος,

κρήναί τε ποταμοί θ' οἶδε, καὶ τὰ Τρωικὰ

πεδία προσαυδῶ, χαίρετ', ὃ τροφῆς ἐμοί·

τοῦθ' ὑμῖν Αἴας τοῦπος ὕστατον θροεῖ,

τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐν Ἄιδου τοῖς κάτω μυθήσομαι. (865)

AJAX: O light, O sacred soil of my homeland

Salamis, O seat of my ancestral hearth,

and you, glorious Athens, and your race kindred to mine,

and the springs and rivers of this land, and the plains of Troy

do I address: farewell, you who have nurtured me!

This is the last word Ajax will speak to you,

the rest I shall utter to the shades in Hades below.

(*Ajax* 859-65)¹⁶

Indeed, Ajax's body is treated as if it were a sacred object even before his burial, as his corpse is able to shelter the suppliant Tecmessa and Eurysaces. Thus the closing tableau suggests Ajax's incipient hero-cult, and reminds the Athenian audience of Ajax's value to them as a protector – among other things, Ajax had helped the Athenians during the crucial battle of Salamis in 480, and the Athenians had dedicated a captured trireme to him in return:

Πρῶτα μὲν νῦν τοῖσι θεοῖσι ἐξεῖλον ἀκροθίνια ἄλλα τε καὶ τριήρεας τρεῖς Φοινίσσας,

¹⁶ On Ajax's final words and their hymn-like quality, cf. most recently S. Nooter, *When Heroes Sing: Sophocles and the Shifting Soundscape of Tragedy* (Cambridge, 2012), 50-1.

τὴν μὲν ἐς Ἴσθμὸν ἀναθεῖναι, ἣ περ ἔτι καὶ ἐς ἐμὲ ἦν, τὴν δὲ ἐπὶ Σούνιον, τὴν δὲ τῷ Αἴαντι αὐτοῦ ἐς Σαλαμίνα.

The first thing they did on reaching Salamis was to set apart for the gods, among other ‘first fruits’, three Phoenician triremes, one to be dedicated at the Isthmus (where it still was in my own day), the second at Sunium, and the third as an offering to Ajax at Salamis itself. (Herodotus, 8.121)

Thus the play’s resolution shows that heroes like Ajax can be incorporated into fifth-century Athenian society, but only as dead heroes, that is, as recipients of hero-cult who are honoured in return for their protection of Athens. Ajax, one of the ten eponymous heroes of the Athenian *polis*, is thus an excellent example of an approach to the powerful figures of the heroic past which we find throughout the tragedies produced in fifth-century Athens. The tragedians do not deny the admirable qualities of their aristocratic heroes, but they also show the disastrous consequences of their excessive self-regard. As with Cleisthenes’ reforms which created ten tribes of Athens descended from heroic stock, so too the tragedians deploy the heroes democratically, adapting the heroic past to appeal to as many Athenians as possible. They do this by insisting on the heroes’ positive as well as negative qualities, and by showing how the excessive figures of heroic myth can act for the good of the community – albeit only in death.

So, to conclude our discussion of the *Ajax*, we can say that it is a play whose interpretation relies on understanding fifth-century Athenian attitudes to the relationship between the powerful individual and the group, and that it is thus a deeply political play. Unfortunately, this is not seen in the otherwise admirable recent edition of the *Ajax*, whose

barely page-long treatment of ‘politics’ begins ‘Ajax mentions the *polis* twice.’¹⁷ Such reductionism of ‘politics’ to passages where ‘polis’ occurs is too restrictive – even if one can understand it as a conservative reaction to the tragedy-as-subversion-of-polis-ideology approach which has been influential in recent years. As I have tried to show, however, the *Ajax* (like all other tragedies) is a political drama, and one that transforms its epic raw material *not* to subvert Athenian ideology (*contra* the mantra of much recent scholarship), nor to freight it with myriad destabilizing ambiguities,¹⁸ but rather to reflect on how best to construct a harmonious society where people do not push their personal claims to *timē* too far, to the detriment of both themselves and their community.

Turning now to the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, I shall argue that we see here the splitting of the Homeric Achilles between the characters of Achilles himself and Iphigenia, whose choice between a short and glorious or long and inglorious life reworks in fifth-century and community-oriented terms the central dilemma of the Iliadic hero. The Euripidean Achilles, conversely, reflects many of the negative traits of the Homeric hero when viewed through the eyes of a fifth-century Athenian audience.¹⁹

As is well known, the text of the *Iphigenia at Aulis* is highly disputed, and there are certainly a number of passages, not least the prologue and the ending of the play, which have been reworked or added by later revisers, beginning with 4th-century BC actors and producers, but fortunately the passages which I shall be focusing on here are either accepted by most editors as belonging to the original performance text, which was staged soon after Euripides’ death in 407/6, probably in 405 BC, or they are at least the product of an early

¹⁷ P. J. Finglass (ed.), *Sophocles: Ajax* (Cambridge, 2011), 57.

¹⁸ *Pace* e.g. S. Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (Oxford, 2012).

¹⁹ The *IA* is the only surviving tragedy in which Achilles appears on stage: see P. Michelakis, *Achilles in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 2002), 84-143.

revision by fourth-century BC actors or producers, who were still living in a democratic Athens and so still reflecting a communal ideology.²⁰ (The final messenger speech, lines 1578ff. until the end of the play, where Artemis saves Iphigenia and a doe is sacrificed in her place, is beyond the scope of this paper; it is full of metrical flaws and was clearly written by a much later figure, probably between the 4th and 7th centuries AD, according to Martin West's study of the author's metrical practice.²¹)

When Achilles first enters the play (801ff.) he faces a complicated situation: after much changing of mind Agamemnon has finally determined that he has to go through with the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, but he naturally wants to hide the truth from Clytemnestra until after the sacrifice has taken place (538-42). Despite his best efforts, however, Agamemnon cannot persuade Clytemnestra to return to Argos and she insists on staying at Aulis to attend her daughter's supposed marriage to Achilles. It is at this point that Achilles enters the play, and his opening speech makes clear he is unimpressed by Agamemnon's handling of the army and their joint expedition:

ποῦ τῶν Ἀχαιῶν ἐνθάδ' ὁ στρατηλάτης;
τίς ἂν φράσειε προσπόλων τὸν Πηλέως
ζητοῦντά νιν παῖδ' ἐν πύλαις Ἀχιλλέα;
οὐκ ἐξ ἴσου γὰρ μένομεν Εὐρίπου πέλας;
οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἡμῶν, ὄντες ἄζυγες γάμων, (805)
οἴκους ἐρήμους ἐκλιπόντες ἐνθάδε

²⁰ For the interpolations of later actors and producers, see D. L. Page, *Actors' Interpolations in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1934); D. Kovacs, 'Towards a Reconstruction of *Iphigenia Aulidensis*', *JHS* 123 (2003), 77-103.

²¹ M. L. West, 'Tragica V', *BICS* 28 (1981), 61-78, at 73-7.

θάσσουσ' ἐπ' ἀκταῖς, οἱ δ' ἔχοντες εὔνιδας
καὶ παῖδας· οὕτω δεινὸς ἐμπέπτωκ' ἔρωσ
τῆσδε στρατείας Ἑλλάδ' οὐκ ἄνευ θεῶν.

ACHILLES: Where here is the Achaeans' general?

Which of his servants will tell him that Peleus' son,

Achilles, is looking for him at his gates?

For are we not all equally waiting around by the Euripus?

Some of us, being unmarried,

have left our houses desolate

and sit here on the shore, while others have left wives

and children; so terrible is the passion

for this expedition that fell upon Greece by the will of the gods.

(*Iphigenia at Aulis* 801-9)

The scene is reminiscent of Achilles' first appearance in the *Iliad*, where he speaks up and takes the initiative over things not going well for the Achaeans, who are being decimated by the plague caused by Agamemnon's dishonouring of Apollo's priest, Chryses. In his first words in the play Achilles seems to adopt a similar role, as a spokesman for the army as a whole, who is concerned for their general well-being: thus in line 804 he stresses the equality of the soldiers' situation (οὐκ ἐξ ἴσου γὰρ μένομεν, 'are we not equally waiting around?'), and in 805-8 he lists both married and unmarried men as being affected by Agamemnon's delaying.

But after this all-encompassing introduction Achilles says:

τοῦμὸν μὲν οὖν δίκαιον ἐμὲ λέγειν χρέος,
ἄλλος δ' ὁ χρήζων αὐτὸς ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ φράσει.

ACHILLES: It is right for me to speak about my own just claim,
another man if he wants can speak on his own behalf.

(*IA* 810-11)

These words make clear that this is an even more self-absorbed Achilles than his Homeric predecessor. Though the Achilles of the *Iliad* withdraws to only caring about himself and his fellow Myrmidons, the Achilles of the *IA* seems to start from this position, so that Euripides is highlighting the selfish side of the Iliadic Achilles' character.

The idea that Euripides wants us to think of the *Iliad* is also expressed by Achilles' insistence later in the scene that the Old Man who has come to reveal the truth to him and Clytemnestra cannot be his slave, 'for my possessions and Agamemnon's are separate' (τίνος; ἐμὸς μὲν οὐχί· χωρὶς τὰμὰ κάγαμέμνονος, 'Whose slave? Certainly not mine: for my possessions and Agamemnon's are separate', *IA* 859), which is again a reference to the quarrel at the start of the *Iliad* over the possession of slaves (Chryseis and Briseis). But Euripides evokes the model in order to point out the differences: the Iliadic Achilles mounts a principled protest about the abuse of his honour (as symbolized by the removal of his war-prize Briseis), whereas the Euripidean one is pedantic about his household possessions. The pettiness of Achilles is also expressed by his initial reaction to the news of Iphigenia's sacrifice: as in the *Iliad*, Achilles takes offence at the Achaean leadership over a perceived slight to his honour, but here his reaction is cast much less sympathetically, for in the *Iliad* we are encouraged to take issues of *timē* seriously, whereas in the *IA* there is a juxtaposition

between Achilles' pride – he sees the crisis as if it were all about himself and his good name
– and the real threat facing Iphigenia:

ἐγὼ κάκιστος ἦν ἄρ' Ἀργείων ἀνὴρ,
ἐγὼ τὸ μηδέν, Μενέλεως δ' ἐν ἀνδράσιν, (945)
ὡς οὐχὶ Πηλέως ἀλλ' ἀλάστορος γεγώς,
εἶπερ φονεύει τοῦμόν ὄνομα σῶι πόσει.

ACHILLES: So it seems I was the worst of the Argives,
a nobody, a Menelaus among men,
no son of Peleus but the product of an avenging spirit,
if my name is committing murder on your husband's behalf.

(*IA* 944-7)

When Achilles declares his readiness to protect Iphigenia even at the cost of fighting his fellow Greeks, we may sympathize with his efforts to defend the girl, but it is striking how Achilles' position is set up in terms of the individual at odds with the wider community, and this position is challenged by Iphigenia herself as she justifies her self-sacrifice with an appeal to community-based values. Indeed, she begins her speech by suggesting that it is not right for Achilles to be on the wrong side of the army:

τὸν μὲν οὖν ξένον δίκαιον αἰνέσαι προθυμίας·
ἀλλὰ καὶ σὲ τοῦθ' ὄρᾶν χρή, μὴ διαβληθῆι στρατῶι,
καὶ πλέον πράξωμεν οὐδέν, ὅδε δὲ συμφορᾶς τύχηι.

IPHIGENIA: It is right we thank the stranger for his efforts;

but you must also take care that he is not criticized by the army,
and we are no better off but he suffers misfortune.

(IA 1371-3)

Iphigenia's surprising change of mind is expressed in a speech full of Achillean language: she presents herself in lines 1374-80 as the best of the Achaeans and the individual on whom the fate of the army depends:

οἷα δ' εἰσηλθέν μ' ἄκουσον, μήτερ, ἐννοουμένην·
καθθανεῖν μὲν μοι δέδοκται· τοῦτο δ' αὐτὸ βούλομαι (1375)

εὐκλεῶς πρᾶξαι, παρεῖσά γ' ἐκποδὼν τὸ δυσγενές.
δεῦρο δὴ σκέψαι μεθ' ἡμῶν, μήτερ, ὡς καλῶς λέγω·
εἰς ἔμ' Ἑλλάς ἡ μεγίστη πᾶσα νῦν ἀποβλέπει,
κάν ἐμοὶ πορθμὸς τε ναῶν καὶ Φρυγῶν κατασκαφαί,
τάς τε μελλούσας γυναῖκας μὴ τι δρῶσι βάρβαροι. (1380)

IPHIGENIA: Listen, mother, to what has occurred to me as I pondered.

I am resolved to die: and this I want to do
with honour, dismissing all that is base.

Think about this with me, mother, and see how well I speak:
all of mighty Hellas now looks to me,
and on me depends the voyage of the fleet and the destruction
of Troy,
so that the barbarians will not harm our women in the future.

(IA 1374-80)

Then in 1383-4 she imagines the *kleos* to be gained by her death:

ταῦτα πάντα καθανοῦσα ῥύσομαι, καί μου κλέος,
Ἑλλάδ' ὡς ἠλευθέρωσα, μακάριον γενήσεται.

IPHIGENIA: All this I shall save by my death, and the fame I win
for setting Hellas free will be a blessed one.

(IA 1383-4)

We are reminded of Achilles' choice in book 9 of the *Iliad* between a short and glorious life or a long and inglorious one (*Il.* 9.410-16). But Iphigenia's focus is on the benefit of the community, not on *kleos* for its own sake: thus she dies to protect all Greek women (1379-80), and declares that she was born 'for all the Greeks in common' (1386):

καὶ γὰρ οὐδέ τοί <τι> λῖαν ἐμὲ φιλοψυχεῖν χρεών· (1385)

πᾶσι γάρ μ' Ἑλλησι κοινὸν ἔτεκες, οὐχὶ σοὶ μόνη.

ἀλλὰ μυριοὶ μὲν ἄνδρες ἀσπίσιν πεφαργμένοι,

μυριοὶ δ' ἐρέτμ' ἔχοντες, πατρίδος ἠδικημένης,

δρᾶν τι τολμήσουσιν ἐχθροῦς χυπερ Ἑλλάδος θανεῖν,

ἢ δ' ἐμὴ ψυχὴ μί' οὔσα πάντα κωλύσει τάδε; (1390)

IPHIGENIA: Besides, it is not right for me to be too much in love with life

for you bore me for all the Greeks in common, not for yourself alone.

What! Will countless warriors with shields tightly packed
and countless rowers, seeing that their country has been wronged,
find the courage to fight the enemy and die for Hellas,
and yet my one life will stand in the way of all this?

(*IA* 1385-90)

The explicit presentation here in lines 1387-8 of the Achaean army as consisting of hoplites and rowers evokes a type of fighting which is not only very fifth-century but also relies on co-operative effort.

Throughout her final appearance Iphigenia insists that her help is community focused: thus she will give herself to Greece (δίδωμι σῶμα τοῦμὸν Ἑλλάδι, ‘I give my body to Hellas’, *IA* 1397) and calls herself ‘the benefactor of Hellas’ (ὡς εὐτυχοῦσά γ’ Ἑλλάδος τ’ εὐεργέτις, ‘I am fortunate and the benefactor of Hellas’, *IA* 1446). And it is also striking how Iphigenia co-opts heroic language for her own ends: thus, as her ringing conclusion makes clear, she is interested in a memorial and in city-sacking, but her heroic self-assertion is geared towards the benefit of the Greeks as a whole:

θύετ’, ἐκπορθεῖτε Τροίαν· ταῦτα γὰρ μνημεῖά μου
διὰ μακροῦ καὶ παῖδες οὔτοι καὶ γάμοι καὶ δόξ’ ἐμή.
βαρβάρων δ’ Ἑλληνας ἄρχειν εἰκός, ἀλλ’ οὐ βαρβάρους (1400)
μητρὲρ, Ἑλλήνων· τὸ μὲν γὰρ δοῦλον, οἱ δ’ ἐλεύθεροι.

IPHIGENIA: Sacrifice me, and destroy Troy! That will be my memorial
for all time, that will be children and marriage and my good name.
It is right, mother, that Greeks rule over barbarians, not barbarians

over Greeks: for one sort are slaves, but the others are free.

(*IA* 1398-1401)²²

Following her desperate supplication of Agamemnon earlier in the play (1211ff.), Iphigenia's change of heart is both unexpected and appropriate.²³ Unexpected, because we see a shy young maiden transform herself into the saviour of Greece, and appropriate, because she returns the myth of the Trojan War, which was in danger of being derailed, to its familiar course.²⁴ But whereas the familiar myth is restored elsewhere by the intervention of a *deus ex machina* – Heracles in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, for example, or Apollo in Euripides' *Orestes* – here it is Iphigenia herself who makes the difference. Indeed, the contrast with the *Philoctetes* is particularly telling, since Iphigenia is flexible and community-oriented, whereas Philoctetes remains bitter and self-centred to the end. Iphigenia's conduct saves the plot (the Trojan War *will* take place), whereas Philoctetes' stubbornness requires divine intervention to make sure that Philoctetes reaches Troy and the war is won.

²² On Iphigenia's and the play's Panhellenism, see G. Mellert-Hoffmann, *Untersuchungen zur 'Iphigenie in Aulis' des Euripides* (Heidelberg, 1969), 74-89; P. Michelakis, *Euripides: Iphigenia at Aulis* (London, 2006), 76-8.

²³ For the importance of changes of mind to the development of the *IA*'s plot and its characters, see J. Griffin, 'Characterization in Euripides: *Hippolytos* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*', in C. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1990), 128-49.

²⁴ For the replacement of Iphigenia's marriage and motherhood by her 'parentage' of the Trojan War, see G. B. Walsh, '*Iphigenia in Aulis*: Third Stasimon', *Classical Philology* 69 (1974), 241-8.

Iphigenia's patriotic self-sacrifice – a pattern found in other Euripidean plays such as the *Children of Heracles*, the *Phoenician Women*, and *Erechtheus* – is a peculiarly overt example of tragedy's recasting of a famous epic episode (the dilemma facing the Achaeans at Aulis) in terms that appeal to a fifth-century Athenian audience. Like Sophocles' *Ajax*, Euripides' *IA* emphasizes the interdependence of the heroic individual and the wider community. Whereas the *Ajax* focuses on the dangers of excessive devotion to personal honour and stresses the value of Ajax after he is dead and gone, the *IA* presents the best form of heroism as that which is performed on behalf of the community as a whole and stresses the excellence of Iphigenia in freely choosing her own death.²⁵

In Homer too, of course, the best hero and leader is the one who can balance his own claim to *timē* with the good of the people as a whole, but tragedy makes the communal value of heroism even more central to its portrayal of the heroic past. Iphigenia too displays a heroic concern with honour and reputation, but her final choice underlines the value of community-oriented decision-making – an idea geared to appeal to a wide swathe of the fifth-century Athenian audience – and her patriotism should not be ironized out of existence, as it sometimes is by post-modern critics, who are uncomfortable with such popular sentiment, and who do not see how it underpins tragedy's popular appeal.

In conclusion, we have seen, firstly, that tragedy as a genre is interested in reflecting on and showing the benefits of contemporary society; and secondly, that in these plays, the *Ajax* and the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Sophocles and Euripides use figures with an epic past in order to evoke generic and normative differences between tragedy and epic, and do so in a

²⁵ On the integrity of Iphigenia's final decision, see M. McDonald, 'Iphigenia's Philia: Motivation in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*', *QUCC* 63 (1990), 69-84.

way that shows the ethical and political superiority of tragedy's handling of the heroic past, when viewed from a fifth-century Athenian perspective.