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THE FALL-OUT FROM DISSENT: HERO AND AUDIENCE IN SOPHOCLES' *AJAX*

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We first hear of Ajax's tragedy in the *Odyssey* (11.541–47):

> αἱ δ' ἄλλαι ψυχαὶ νεκύων κατατεθνηώτων
> ἔστασαν ἀχνύμεναι, εἴροντο δὲ κήδε' ἑκάστη.
> οἴη δ' Αἴαντος ψυχὴ Τελαμωνιάδαο
> νόσφιν ἀφεστήκει, κεχολωμένη εἵνεκα νίκης,
> τήν μιν ἐγὼ νίκησα δικαζόμενος παρὰ νηυσὶ
> τεύχεσιν ἀμφ' Ἀχιλῆος· ἔθηκε δὲ πότνια μήτηρ.
> παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.

And the other spirits of those who had died stood around in anguish, and each was asking about those dear to him. But alone the spirit of Aias, son of Telamon, stood apart, still angry at the victory that I had won over him in the judgement by the ships for the arms of Achilles. His revered mother had set them as a prize; and the sons of the Trojans and Pallas Athene cast judgement.

Having lost the contest for Achilles' armour to Odysseus, Ajax tries to kill the Greek leaders, whom he regards as having cheated him. When he fails, he commits suicide. Odysseus seeing his rival in the underworld, addresses him with 'gentle words' (*ἐπέεσσι μειλιχίοισιν*, 552). 'So I spoke,' Odysseus explains, 'but he answered me not a word' (*ὣς ἐφάμην, ὁ δέ μ' οὐδὲν ἀμείβετο*, 563). Ajax rejects Odysseus' attempts at persuasion. His silence marks a continuing challenge to the victory won by his rival. Silent in resistance, his dissent lasts from beyond the grave, eternal.

Being only somewhat less laconic in the *Iliad*,[1] Ajax appears an extreme figure to put on the dramatic stage, one little to do with democracy and its love of words.[2] He is, on the other hand, a particularly interesting figure because of his role in Athens.[3] He gave his name to one of the ten Attic

[1] For example in his speech in the embassy to Achilles (Homer, *Il.* 9.624–42). Pindar exploits the difference between Ajax and Odysseus on this basis: *Nem.* 7.20–30, 8.21–5; *Isth.* 4.35–9.

[2] That is not to say that tragic characters were tailored to democratic models, but it is interesting to note that Aristophanes' 'Euripides' criticizes his rival for depicting a silent Niobe (*Frogs* 911ff.). The literary evidence for versions of the myth prior to Sophocles' play are discussed by C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1944), 16–18; W. B. Stanford, *Sophocles: Ajax* (Bristol, 1981 [1963]), xii–xxiv; A. F. Garvie, *Sophocles: Ajax* (Warminster, 1998), 1–5.

[3] For details see H. A. Shapiro, *Art and Cult under the Tyrants in Athens* (Mainz, 1989), 154–7;

tribes and was honoured in cult.[4] As the hero of Salamis he was thought to have helped in Athens' naval victory over the Persians.[5]

At the end of Sophocles' play, Ajax's ritual is aetiologized as his body is carried off for burial. Yet events begin with Ajax surrounded by butchered animals, exulting in the belief that he has slaughtered the Greek leaders.[6] This disjunction is reproduced by the structure of the play. The first half focuses on Ajax's suicide; the second on the wrangling over his dead body.[7] The play, thus appearing like a 'diptych', poses a question: what are we to make of Ajax, butcher turned cult hero?

Many scholars have approached this question by regarding Ajax as the last of the heroes. They point to how his suicide leaves in its wake a stage full of lesser men, who, bickering over the body of the great man, seem to embody the pettiness of contemporary demagogues.[8] This worry is crystallized in the formal contest of words – the agon, which dominates the second half of the play. It is in relation to the *Ajax* agon that Reinhardt writes: '[A]s a method of representing the opponents, the *agon* appears to our minds to be unduly restricted by the formal nature of its construction. Instead of situations which develop from the *nature* of the pervading hostility, there is a ready-made *schema*, a mere

E. Kearns, *The Heroes of Attica* (*BICS* 57 Suppl., London, 1989), 46, 80–91, 141–2; D. J. Bradshaw, 'The Ajax Myth and the Polis' in D. C. Pozzi and J. M. Wickersham (eds.), *Myth and the Polis* (Ithaca, 1991), 99–125, especially 113–15. Cf. R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and fragments. Part VII. The Ajax* (Cambridge, 1896), xxx–xxxii; Garvie (n. 2), 5–6.

[4] Pausanias records that there was a statue of Ajax in Athens (1.5.1), as well as a temple in the agora and an altar to Eurysaces (1.35.3).

[5] Herodotus relates that before Salamis the Athenians prayed to Ajax (8.64), afterwards they dedicated a trireme to him (8.121).

[6] 'Ajax, at the beginning of the play, has been shown in the deepest humiliation . . . Yet this Ajax is the same to whom the Athenian spectators . . . had been taught to pay honours': Jebb (n. 3), xxx.

[7] The 'diptych' or divided play: T. B. L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles* (London, 1969 [1936]), 102–3; A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1951), 49–79. Cf. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1961 [1939]), 118–23. Unity: Jebb (n. 3), xxviii–xxxii; Stanford (n. 2), lxi–lxiv; M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London, 1987), 195–7, 204–8. J. F. Davidson, 'Sophoclean Dramaturgy and the Ajax Burial Debates', *Ramus* 14 (1985), 16–29, summarizes critical opinion on the diptych, as well as on the two debates.

[8] 'The purpose of the finale is . . . to contrast the genuine greatness of the tragic hero who was fated to die with the spuriousness and conceit of those who opposed him, triumphed over him, and lived on – their ingratitude, pusillanimity, envy, meanness and arrogance': K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles* (Oxford, 1979 [1947]), 30. Cf. B. M. W. Knox, 'The Ajax of Sophocles', *HSCP* 65 (1961), 1–37, especially 24ff.; H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London, 1964 [1954]), 183–4, 196–8. Recent critics have offered more sophisticated positions on this theme: R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), 57–72; C. P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilisation: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 109–51, especially 109f., 132f., 142f.; most recently, P. Michelakis, *Achilles on the Tragic Stage* (Cambridge, 2002), 144–50. P. W. Rose, 'Historicizing Sophocles' *Ajax*' in B. Goff (ed.), *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama* (Austin, 1995), 59–90, argues that the play drives towards 'a validation of Ajax as the best available political leader' (65).

substitute for it.'[9] On this interpretation the agon represents an unwarranted incursion of the Athenian love for debate into the tragedy of the hero.

Others, more sympathetic to the end of the play, have studied Ajax's heroism in terms of the cult context we see enacted.[10] They rightly emphasize the importance of burial and of the community coming to terms with it. Though this account does more justice to the drama of the second half of the play and the contest over Ajax's body, it too fails to explain adequately Ajax's radical shift from outcast to cult figure. In particular, the role of Athena in staging Ajax's shame sits uncomfortably with the hero's reception into her polis at the end of the play. Both approaches misunderstand, I suggest, the politics of the play and how it functions within the framework of the Athenian democracy.

I intend to approach this question by examining Ajax's refusal to accept the judgement of arms, his action against those who had enforced that decision, and, more loosely, his challenging of authority; that is to say, the issue of his dissent. In a remarkable move, Sophocles does not represent the judgement of arms itself.[11] Instead he dramatizes the aftermath, the consequences of Ajax's dissent from that decision. Clearly this displaces an authoritative view of that judgement, leaving the audience to piece together the events from the competing opinions of the characters.[12] But I wish to make a further point: that the way Sophocles represents this aftermath places the experience of being a spectator in the spotlight. I propose that this can be seen more clearly if we consider an epic precedent for Ajax's action: Achilles going for his sword in his quarrel with Agamemnon at the beginning of the *Iliad*.

[9] Reinhardt (n. 8), 32 (his italics). Cf. P. Holt, 'The Debate Scenes in the Ajax', *AJP* 102 (1981), 275–88, especially 281–2. The scholiast on line 1123 condemns the exchanges in the agon, saying that 'such clever things do not belong to tragedy': *τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφίσματα οὐκ οἰκεῖα τραγῳδίας*.

[10] First proposed by Jebb (n. 3). More recently: P. Burian, 'Supplication and Hero Cult in Sophocles' *Ajax*', *GRBS* 13 (1972), 151–6; P. E. Easterling. 'Tragedy and Ritual', *Metis* 3 (1988), 87–109; A. Henrichs, 'The Tomb of Aias and the Prospect of Hero Cult in Sophokles', *CA* 12 (1993), 165–80; R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford, 1994), especially 392–405; R. Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, 2002), 137–8. C. Miralles, 'Il tragico in Sofocle', *Lexis* 15 (1997), 33–44, wonders: 'E la morte di Aiace non istituisce, chiaramente, per gli Ateniesi un culto eroico che protegga la città?' (40). I attempt to locate Ajax's dissent in the institutionalisation of his ritual.

[11] Aeschylus, it seems, had done in the *Ὅπλων κρίσις*. According to J. March, 'Sophocles' *Ajax*: the Death and Burial of a Hero', *BICS* 38 (1991–3), 1–36, Aeschylus also innovated by making the judges of the contest not the Trojans (as at Homer, *Od.* 11.47) but the Greeks themselves (4–6). Whether or not the source for Sophocles is Aeschylus or Pindar (n. 1), the hints that the judgement is made by the Greeks (441–9, 1135–6, 1239–49) are already suggestive of the increased importance of the role of spectator that I am arguing for here, especially because we do not witness that vote.

[12] Rose (n. 8), 63.

My thesis is this: in a reworking of that opening Iliadic scene, Sophocles investigates the hero's dissent from the perspective of those looking on – how Ajax's dissent affects them. An essential part of this process is the contest of words between Teucer and the two Atreidae. This dual agon is not so much about the conflict between the characters as it is about the judgement of the audience. One way this is indicated is by the response of the group on stage – the chorus, who fail to endorse fully the position of any of the duelling characters. The intense focus on spectating reflects not only the spectacle of the theatrical performance but also, more generally, the new social conditions of democracy. In short, the play explores how the hero's dissent is democratized.

I shall briefly look at three episodes. The first is the opening scene between Athena, Odysseus, and Ajax. I argue that it recalls the beginning of the *Iliad*, where Athena had stayed Achilles' hand from striking down Agamemnon. On this occasion, however, the hero's dissent is not so much controlled as redirected, as Ajax slaughters the cattle. Crucially, too, we see things from the perspective not of the agent (Ajax) but of an audience (Odysseus).

My second episode is the agon between Teucer and the Atreidae over Ajax's body. I argue that the agon, though ostensibly about burial, confronts the issue of authority and the exercise of power. In defence of Ajax, Teucer seeks to justify paying due honour to his half-brother. At one level, Teucer is seen legitimately to resist the Atreidae's denial of burial. At another, the very means by which he achieves this – by drawing on anti-Spartan prejudice and Iliadic precedent – draws the audience in on his side to support the principle of dissent. The agon exceeds its dramatic frame and implicates the audience in re-viewing and re-evaluating Ajax's dissent.

There remains the final scene, in which Odysseus, the traditional enemy of Ajax, creates the conditions for burial to take place. Maintaining the focus on the spectator, I argue that this paradoxical conclusion has been brought about by the chorus. Faced by the impasse to which the agon had led, they turn to Odysseus to resolve the dispute. In this remarkable move, they foreshadow the role that we too must play, if we are to try to find a way out of the agon other than violence.

Falling-Out from Dissent: Staging Ajax's Shame

The opening of the play exploits a common feature of Sophocles' technique, the scene in which two characters introduce the plot of the play through dialogue. Odysseus enters in search of information about what had happened during night which has seen cattle (and herdsmen!) slaughtered (25–8). The bloody path leads him to Ajax's tent. There awaits the goddess Athena, ready to act as Odysseus' guide.

With a deity giving instructions, and with the mortal interlocutor clearly seeing himself in a position of learning (15, 33, 35), Sophocles immediately establishes a pedagogic model. In fact, with Athena playfully toying with her favourite, Odysseus, we could almost have landed on an Odyssean Ithaca: '*Always*, son of Laertes, I watch you, as you hunt to try to seize something from your enemies' (*ἀεὶ μέν, ὦ παῖ Λαρτίου, δέδορκά σε / πεῖράν τιν' ἐχθρῶν ἁρπάσαι θηρώμενον*, 1–2).[13] But Odysseus does not see Athena. He hears only her voice (*ὦ φθέγμ' Ἀθάνας*, 14). This is *not* an Odyssean world where the hero enjoys unrestricted access to the goddess. From his mortal perspective at least, it is an Iliadic world.[14]

Athena, playing the role of dramatist, invites Ajax out on to stage. Odysseus stands by in the wings, unseen by Ajax, looking on.[15] In this play within a play we witness Odysseus' responses as a spectator of the immediate aftermath of Ajax's dissent. That dissent has been extreme: Ajax boasts that he has stained his hands with the blood of the Achaean leaders, 'so that never again shall they refuse honour to Ajax' (*ὥστ' οὔποτ' Αἴανθ' οἵδ' ἀτιμάσουσ' ἔτι*, 98). Though such violence might seem shocking, Heath argues that Ajax's defence of his honour is not being condemned, citing the Homeric precedent of Achilles' impulse to kill

[13] For example, see Homer, *Od.* 13.221–440, on which see J. S. Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1983), 186–212.

[14] The Iliadic Odysseus only hears Athena as well: *ὃ δὲ ξυνέηκε θεᾶς ὄπα φωνησάσης*, Homer, *Il.* 2.182. Cf. 10.512. P. Pucci, 'Gods, Interventions and Epiphany in Sophocles', *AJP* 115 (1994), 15–46, argues that Athena's invisibility is made visible to the audience in order to stress the tragic vision of man (27). For questions of staging: D. Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* (London, 1982), 176 n. 3; Heath (n. 7), 165–6; D. J. Mastronarde, 'Actors on High: The Skene Roof, the Crane, and the Gods in Attic Drama', *CA* 9 (1990), 247–94, especially 278; Rehm (n. 10), 125–6.

[15] Athena as *didaskalos*: P. E. Easterling, 'Gods on Stage in Greek Tragedy' in J. Dalfen et al. (eds.), *Religio Graeco-Romana: Festschrift für Walter Pötscher* (*Grazer Beiträge.* Suppl. 5, 1993), 77–86. Odysseus as a spectator: C. P. Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 18. Cf. G. W. Dobrov, *Figures of Play: Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics* (Oxford, 2001), 57–69.

Agamemnon.[16] There Athena intervenes, he notes, but she does not suggest that Achilles is wrong to go for his sword.

Heath is certainly right to argue that Ajax's action should not be regarded as wrong in a moral (Christian) sense.[17] Equally, however, it seems hardly any more appropriate to say that it is being condoned. For one thing, Ajax, by turning on his comrades, has broken the bonds of *philia*; both Tecmessa and the chorus are shocked by what Ajax has done and foresee disastrous consequences for themselves.[18] Moreover, by turning to the Homeric precedent that Heath cites, we can notice what is at issue in our example.

In the *Iliad*, the Achaean assembly gets so out of hand that Achilles deliberates whether to strike down Agamemnon or check his wrath: 'And while he pondered these things in his mind and heart, and was drawing his great sword from its sheath, Athene came' (*ἦος ὁ ταῦθ' ὥρμαινε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν,/ ἕλκετο δ' ἐκ κολεοῖο μέγα ξίφος, ἦλθε δ' Ἀθήνη*, Homer, *Il.* 1.193–4). Athena intervenes to stop bloodshed in the assembly. By pulling Achilles back by the hair, she succeeds in keeping his sword safely sheathed. Athena may not *say* that Achilles is wrong; but her intervention serves to prevent his dissent from Agamemnon from transgressing into violence.

Returning to Sophocles' play, I suggest that we are indeed in an Iliadic world where Ajax plays the role of Achilles.[19] Frustrated by his perceived injustice at the hands of the Greek leaders, Ajax takes the matter into his own hands and ends up with blood on them. It is almost as if we have a window onto the beginning of the *Iliad*, where Achilles *does* draw his sword, where dissent *does* stray into violence. *But* the result

[16] Heath (n. 7), 173. Cf. Garvie (n. 2), 11–12.

[17] Many scholars have regarded Ajax's tragedy as punishment by Athena for his pride: Bowra (n. 2), 32–3; Kitto (n. 7), 122; Winnington-Ingram (n. 8), 13; Stanford (n. 2), xxvi. See, however, A. F. Garvie, 'L' Hybris, particulièrement chez *Ajax*' in A. Machin & L. Pernée (eds.), *Sophocle: Le Texte, les personnages* (Aix-en-Provence, 1993), 243–53, who points out that the language of hubris is most often applied to Ajax's enemies. The 'traditional' Ancient Greek ethical code: M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: a Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge, 1991 [1989]).

[18] The chorus (141ff., 182ff.), Tecmessa (214ff., 271ff.).

[19] Ajax as an Achilles: Knox (n. 8); S. D. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1986), 154–61. For the influence of the *Iliad* more generally, see G. M. Kirkwood, 'Homer and Sophocles' *Ajax*' in M. J. Anderson (ed.), *Classical Drama and its Influences: Essays presented to H. D. F. Kitto* (London, 1965), 53–70; G. Zanker, 'Sophocles' *Ajax* and the Heroic Values of the *Iliad*', *CQ* 42 (1992), 20–5. D. O'Higgins, 'The Second Best of the Achaeans', *Hermathena* 147 (1989), 43–56, argues that it is not so much the case of Ajax being slotted back into the *Iliad* as the *Iliad* being adapted to the circumstances of the play. Michelakis (n. 8), 18–19, 144–54, analyses Ajax as an Achilles, but looks beyond Homer to the fragmentary evidence of tragedies expressly about Achilles.

is not auspicious for the agent; he will suffer humiliation for this transgression. Ajax's armed defiance has miscarried; Athena has deflected his blow. The comparison with the *Iliad* underlines the point that taking individual action outside institutional means of redress – such as killing your leaders! – cannot and does not gain sanction.[20]

There is, moreover, a fundamental difference. The *Iliad* explores dissent from the agent's perspective, from Achilles' initial withdrawal to his rejection of the embassy. We learn only piecemeal what other Achaeans thought about his action.[21] Sophocles, on the other hand, puts the response of others under the spotlight.

It is worth taking a look at the way each episode ends to highlight the difference in emphasis. In the *Iliad*, Achilles himself draws the moral from his dialogue with Athena, commenting that 'whoever obeys the gods, they listen to him especially' (*ὅς κε θεοῖς ἐπιπείθηται, μάλα τ' ἔκλυον αὐτοῦ*, *Il.* 1.218). In Sophocles' play, it is Athena who draws the episode to a close by concluding that 'the gods love those who are moderate' (*τοὺς δὲ σώφρονας / θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακούς*, 132–3). Though similar in sentiment to Achilles' words, in effect it is quite different. Achilles' words had been a sign that he accepted Athena's intervention. When Athena with similar words rounds off the episode herself, the stress on what the human character has learnt is consequently less.

Indeed, it is not clear that the person for whom Athena has staged this scene, the on-looking Odysseus, has seen the events in her terms. When Athena invites Ajax on to stage, she expressly invites Odysseus to gloat at his enemy's fall from grace (79).[22] Yet, Odysseus' response to the spectacle is quite different (121–4):

> *. . . ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν*
> *δύστηνον ἔμπας, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ,*
> *ὁθούνεκ' ἄτῃ συγκατέζευκται κακῇ,*
> *οὐδὲν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοὐμὸν σκοπῶν.*

[20] 'The Achaeans could not but see a traitor in Ajax on account of his onslaught': J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles: Commentaries. Part I. Ajax* (Leiden, 1963), 14. Cf. Jebb (n. 3), xxix.

[21] The heralds go to take Achilles' prize 'unwillingly' (Homer, *Il.* 1.327); Thersites sees the quarrel as adding grist to his mill against Agamemnon (2.239–42); Nestor persuades Agamemnon to make recompense (9.104–11).

[22] 'Is not laughing at one's enemies the most delightful kind of laughter?' (Soph., *Aj.* 79). The scholiast on this line describes Athena's speech as *σκληρόν*, which contrasts with the note on line 82 (by a different scholiast?) that observes a distinction between the god – who can speak freely (*μετὰ παρρησίας*) – and Odysseus, who as a mortal 'sees the moment alone' (*τὸν καιρὸν ὁρᾷ*). J. de Romilly, *Sophocle Ajax* (Paris, 1976), more roundly condemns the Athena of the prologue as «une déesse cruelle» (22). Cf. Winnington-Ingram (n. 8), 170f.

I pity him in his misery, though he is my enemy, since he has been yoked in evil delusion, not looking out for his fate, but my own.

He rejects Athena's invitation to gloat, even as he acknowledges Ajax as an enemy.[23] In fact, Odysseus pities Ajax because he sees a relevance to his own mortal predicament (124). Faced by the shocking aftermath of Ajax's dissent, Odysseus' thoughts turn inwards. In this way, Sophocles invites us to regard Odysseus in a manner far removed from his usual tragic guise of a glib orator.[24] This in turn raises a further question: is there a possible social purpose to Athena's staging of the aftermath to Ajax's dissent?

The scene between Athena, Odysseus, and Ajax recalls the beginning of the *Iliad*, where Athena had stayed Achilles' hand. In this play, however, the goddess does not so much pull the hero back by the hair as redirect his assault. With dissent having transgressed into violence, Ajax is left precariously on the margins of society, exposed to legitimate reprisal. In addition, the scene initiates a change in focus, from the hero, as in the *Iliad*, to those looking on.[25] It is as if Sophocles has dramatized the responses of those affected by Achilles' dissent. Moreover, that response suggests the possibility of sympathy. Ajax's dissent has miscarried, but the opening scene of spectating sets in motion a narrative that explores how it might be recouped on the tragic stage.

The agon: Legitimizing Dissent

In coming to his senses, Ajax resists all attempts by his *philoi* (the chorus and Tecmessa) to turn from darkness. With nowhere to go Ajax retreats to a deserted beach and escapes from shame by committing suicide.[26] As

[23] Athena's advice would seem to suggest that we should take Ajax 'as a cautionary example and avoid any kind of arrogance towards the gods. But these are not the terms in which Odysseus himself "reads" the scene that he and we have witnessed': Easterling (n. 15), 82. 'The effect reminds [the audience], paradoxically, not of their security as distant, quasi-divine onlookers but of their involvement as mortal participants, capable of human pity which they, like Odysseus and in contrast to Athena, can still feel': Segal (n. 15), 6.

[24] See, for example, the portrait of the devious orator that the chorus paint when they enter (148–58). Some implications of this are unpacked in the last scene I study.

[25] That is not to say that Ajax is not given the opportunity to defend himself (335ff., especially 430–80), only that the play expressly explores the reactions of those affected. Interestingly, when Ajax does have his say, it is as a 'Hector': the hero whose personal relations are under focus in the *Iliad*. For the Ajax-Tecmessa scene as based on Hektor-Andromache, see P. E. Easterling, 'The Tragic Homer', *BICS* 31 (1984), 1–8; Zanker (n. 19), 22–3.

[26] Rehm (n. 10), 123–4, 130–3.

Ajax falls into silence, so does much of the commentary; yet little under half of the play still remains.

One reason that may account for the tailing off of interest may be the presence of two formal debates that see Teucer pitted against the Atreidae in a contest of words – or agon – over Ajax's body. The agon in tragedy is one feature that marks out the 'otherness' of Athenian drama to modern audiences.[27] One central problem is that, in spite of its formality, 'it rarely achieves anything'.[28] As Mossman has commented (in relation to Euripides' *Hecuba*), the agon 'serves only to explain the opposing positions and harden attitudes: neither side is convinced by the other's arguments'.[29] For Lloyd, who elsewhere compares Sophocles favourably with Euripides because he (Sophocles) 'avoids formality and incorporates *agones* into his plays in a more naturalistic way', the dual agon in the *Ajax* presents a similar problem by being 'more or less regular by Euripidean standards'.[30] Is Reinhardt right, therefore, to call this agon a mere 'substitute' for the pervading hostility?

What these previous studies of the agon have in common is the focus on the agon in terms of the contest between the characters, with a concurrent expectation that it ought to resolve the conflict. My proposal, in line with the focus on the spectator in this play, is that the agon can be understood better in relation to the responses of the audience. The dual agon in the *Ajax* provides a good example. Being ostensibly about the burial of the dead hero, the debates turn instead on the more general issue of authority: the audience are confronted with a very different representation of dissent from what has gone before, one that emphasizes its value. Critics are right to notice how the agon appears somewhat abstracted from the plot; but it is its capacity to exceed its narrative frame that involves the audience in a process of

[27] J. Duchemin, *L' ΑΓΩΝ dans la Tragédie Grecque* (Paris, 1968 [1945]), remains the only comprehensive study of the agon in tragedy. Most scholars who have entered the debate criticize Euripides because of the formality of the agon in his plays: H. Strohm, *Euripides: Interpretationen zur dramatischen Form* (München, 1957), 3–49; C. Collard, 'Formal Debates in Euripides' Drama', *G&R* 22 (1975), 58–71; M. Lloyd, *The Agon in Euripides* (Oxford, 1992). N. T. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic: The Trojan Women and the Function of Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1994), reads the agon in Euripides' *Troades* as throwing 'responsibility for deciding who won the war and who won the debate onto the audience' (160). He sees this, however, as proof of 'the quirky nature of Athenian ideology' (161) rather than what I am suggesting here: that the agon is fundamental to the *performance* of Athenian democracy.

[28] Lloyd (n. 27), 15.

[29] J. Mossman, *Wild Justice: A Study of Euripides' Hecuba* (Oxford, 1995), 56.

[30] Lloyd (n. 27), 2, 12. Cf. Duchemin (n. 27), 57. Contrast Collard (n. 27), 60, who argues that 'there is no stiffness, no lack of circumstance, no feeling of abstraction about these [the *Ajax*] debates'.

re-evaluating what Ajax stood for in his defiance of the Atreidae, before his body is ritually accepted into the community.

Menelaus and Teucer

Teucer is not given much time to lament his half-brother's fate; he is interrupted by an enraged Menelaus, who, on entering, immediately sets about berating Teucer: 'You, yes, I'm talking to you . . .' (*οὗτος, σὲ φωνῶ*, 1047f.). Bluntly forbidding burial, he asserts this command as: 'my decision, and the decision of the ruler of the army' (*δοκοῦντ' ἐμοί, δοκοῦντα δ' ὅς κραίνει στρατοῦ*, 1050). The clumsy repetition of *δοκοῦντα*, a term used in the prescribed formula for decision-making in the Athenian assembly, reveals how Menelaus perceives the relationship of the ruler and the ruled: his decision and the decision of the army are one and the same, because all are subordinate to his power.

He follows up these opening manoeuvres by launching on a self-righteous speech that interprets Ajax's action as insubordination. A string of moral platitudes on authority follow, by which means Menelaus emphasizes the importance of maintaining discipline in the face of such insurrection (1071–86). In their speech-dividing couplet, the chorus make an acute critique of this speech. They approve of the principles espoused (they are 'wise thoughts', *γνώμας σοφὰς*, 1091), but implore him not to be hubristic (*μή . . . ὑβριστὴς γένῃ*, 1091–2). The strong opposition of the chorus to this point reveals an important concern as yet unresolved: what *do* the gods think? We had seen Athena set up the stage, but without issuing any definitive interpretation on how we should judge Ajax's humiliation. Menelaus, in contrast, interprets Athena's help in deflecting Ajax's hand as unequivocal support for his authority. The chorus suggest something different here with their qualifying comment. They open the possibility that the Atreidae are the ones guilty of *hubris* by their insistence on denying burial to assert their authority. (If we think of the *Iliad* inter-text, clearly Athena there had not intervened to reinforce Agamemnon's authority.)

Their check on the applicability of Menelaus' speech helps to guide our assessment of it. It is picked up by Teucer in reply, and cast in significant terms (1099–1102):

οὐκ αὐτὸς ἐξέπλευσεν ὡς αὑτοῦ κρατῶν;
ποῦ σὺ στρατηγεῖς τοῦδε; ποῦ δὲ σοὶ λεὼν
ἔξεστ' ἀνάσσειν ὧν ὅδ' ἦγετ' οἴκοθεν;
Σπάρτης ἀνάσσων ἦλθες, οὐχ ἡμῶν κρατῶν·

Did he not sail out as master of himself? How are you his commander? How is it possible that you rule over the people whom he brought from home? You came as king of Sparta, not as master over us.

This barrage of questions immediately challenges Menelaus' authority. Menelaus does not possess authority over them (*οὐχ ἡμῶν κρατῶν*, 1102) because he is not their king; Ajax is the one who led them (1101). Again this recalls Achilles' resistance to Agamemnon's use and abuse of authority in the debate that opens the *Iliad*.[31] In fact, Teucer's next point, that Ajax 'did not go to war for the sake of your wife' (*οὐ γάρ τι τῆς σῆς οὕνεκ' ἐστρατεύσατο / γυναικός*, 1111–12), echoes Achilles directly. In rejecting the embassy, Achilles had raised the hypocrisy of fighting at Troy over Menelaus' wife, when his woman, Briseis, had been taken away by Agamemnon.[32] Teucer draws on this Iliadic context in denying the legitimacy of the Atreidae's assertion of authority over Ajax and himself.

That is not all however: on the tragic stage, the hero's dissent is recast with contemporary resonance. This excessively Agamemnon-like Menelaus rules over *Spartans*, not over Ajax and his people. Homeric precedent mixes with Athenian prejudice to produce, as Rose puts it, a 'model for thinking big in the face of Spartan attacks on free speech and independent action'.[33] It is not just the fact that Teucer taps into Athenian propaganda; he articulates *how* Athens is different (and superior). Put simply, the issue is about authority. In Sparta, to Athenian eyes at least, those in power demanded strict obedience. In Athens, as Teucer's very resistance to Menelaus in the agon suggests, authority can be contested; indeed, one might think it vital that it is so, in order that it may be legitimate. According to Teucer, in the stichomythia that succeeds the paired speeches, 'it is possible to think big with justice' (*ξὺν τῷ δικαίῳ γὰρ μέγ' ἔξεστιν φρονεῖν*, 1125).[34] Ajax's dissent, as

[31] See, for example, Homer, *Il.* 1.149–72.

[32] Homer, *Il.* 9.334–45. Teucer repeats this pointed vocabulary at the conclusion to his speech against Agamemnon: *τῆς σῆς ὑπὲρ / γυναικός* (1311–12).

[33] Rose (n. 8), 72. See Bowra (n. 2), 51–2; Rehm (n. 10), 135, and bibliography cited there. Cf. Thucydides' Pericles 2.37–9.

[34] 'Perhaps we realize now the force of Ajax's question "will I not learn to be moderate (*sophronein*)?" [677]. Such "moderation" in the language of the Atreidae's hierarchy means knowing one's place of obedience': Goldhill (n. 19), 196.

enacted by Teucer's defence, takes on an Athenian democratic resistance to the discipline and hierarchical authority associated with Spartan government.

The first agon takes place, not so much over the issue of burial as is demanded by the strict narrative context, but the general issue of authority and language. Menelaus' sententious moralizing is countered by Teucer's ideological distinction between a Spartan-like authority and a legitimate, *Athenian*, rejection of that. It begins the process of reassessing the value of dissent and recouping it in terms of Athenian, democratic, practice.

Agamemnon and Teucer

After Menelaus has played the role of an Iliadic Agamemnon, the genuine article arrives, all of a sudden, a visual symbol of the Atreidae's attempted domination of the arena of speech.[35] Yet this second agon is not simply a replaying of the first; it represents a further stage of contest, more expressly dealing with the unresolved issue of Ajax's dissent.[36]

Central to Agamemnon's claim to authority is the most extended discussion yet of the contest of arms (1239–50):

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

We are likely to regret having announced to the Argives a contest for the arms of Achilles, if we are to be denounced as evil in every way by Teucer, and even when you are defeated you will not consent to yield to what has been decided by the majority of the

[35] Although the chorus formally anticipate a further contest after Menelaus' departure (*ἔσται μεγάλης ἔριδος τις ἀγών*, 1163), Agamemnon's appearance is sudden; Teucer only just manages to announce his coming (1223–5) before he launches into a tirade of abuse (1226).

[36] Agamemnon attracts Heath's censure for not taking up the issue of burial. But Agamemnon's 'irrelevant maxims' (Heath, (n. 7), 201) are very relevant for how we should look on Ajax and, therefore, whether we can bury Ajax.

judges, but you will always hurl abuse or stab at us from ambush, you who are left. With this behaviour, there could never be the institution of any law, if we are to thrust aside those who have justly won and bring to the front those who were behind. But these things must be prevented!

Agamemnon ranks Teucer with Ajax as people who cannot abide by the rules of contest and accept the majority's decision. In doing so Agamemnon voices a fundamental fear of democracy. In order that contests, especially contests of words, benefit society, they must be predicated on the necessity and desirability of reaching a consensus. Once a decision has been made, dissent cannot be allowed to go on outside the institutional arena (such as the *ἀγών*) in secret (*σὺν δόλῳ*).

Here, then, Agamemnon introduces an important check to our analysis thus far. Dissent is not always a good thing, even, or especially, in democracy where decisions are taken on a majority basis.[37] The degree and kind of dissent makes a difference. It needs to be channelled, made use of, institutionalized; that is to say, it is of vital importance that dissent does not go on outside the institutional arena of the agon, as Agamemnon makes clear here. 'By speaking with a free tongue,' he claims, Teucer 'commits hubris' (*ὑβρίζεις κἀξελευθεροστομεῖς*, 1258). On the terms laid out by Agamemnon, the dissent of Teucer, and of Ajax before him, is hubristic.

This is the strongest condemnation yet of dissent. But the figure who articulates these (democratic) concerns is Agamemnon. His intervention has a history, he is the figure from the *Iliad* who had tried to stifle dissent only for it to be reproduced by his actions. Perhaps we see through Agamemnon's hypocrisy in the manner in which he equates free speech with hubris. More directly revealing is the way he tries to disqualify Teucer from speaking at all, claiming, outrageously, that he won't be able to understand his opponent's response since Teucer is a barbarian and doesn't speak Greek (1262–4)![38] We should note too that he

[37] How much dissent to allow, where to allow it, and to whom, is a constant source of anxiety in modern western democracies. In defence of dissent in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, G. Monbiot (*The Guardian*, 16th October, 2001) argued: 'Democracy is sustained not by public trust but by public scepticism. Unless we are prepared to question, to expose, to challenge and to dissent, we conspire in the demise of the system for which our governments are supposed to be fighting.' In contrast, J.-M. Colombani (*Le Monde*, 24th April, 2002) defended Jacques Chirac's refusal to debate with the leader of the far-right, Le Pen, by citing an article from 1993, in which J.-P. Vernant explained why he refused « le moindre dialogue » with Nazi sympathizers: « Être tolérant, c'est savoir fixer les limites de l'intolérable . . . [O]n ne discute pas de recettes de cuisine avec des anthropophages » ! Both positions seek to articulate the grounds of, and boundaries to, debate by which dissent may be legitimized in the democratic community.

[38] 'The pretence that Teucer does not speak intelligible Greek brings the speech to its offensive end': Garvie (n. 2), 239 n. 1262–3.

attempts to debar his opponent from speaking in an arena – the tragic agon – that expressly demands a response. Ironically, then, the strongest assertion of the problem of dissent turns out to be the clearest indication that dissent is needed. It is the clearest indication too that we must get involved and find our voice.

Teucer finds his voice by reciting the tradition of Ajax's glorious deeds: 'Don't you remember the time when the Achaeans were fighting by the ships, when Ajax alone fought them off, when Ajax duelled with Hektor . . .?' (1272ff.). Indeed we do. That 'time when' turns out to be the *Iliad*.[39] In defence of Ajax's dissent, tragedy invokes Homer or, more to the point, our recollection of Ajax in the *Iliad*. We remember Ajax's heroic stand before the enemy on behalf of the Greek army. Bringing this knowledge to bear on our assessment of Ajax, we are encouraged to reflect again on Agamemnon's formulation of dissent. Agamemnon's strictures against dissent are acutely pertinent to the democratic system of government and the desirability of accepting decisions when they are made; but, given our collusion in Teucer's retelling of the *Iliad*, we resist Agamemnon's desired application of this principle. In this way, we are invited to assess the individual case on its merit, even as we assent to the truth of the general statement. In other words, the agon makes us responsible for sanctioning and policing dissent. This is not something imposed from above in a democracy, but participated in, and enacted, by us the audience.[40]

In the conclusion to his discussion of the agon, Heath writes: 'Teucer's overwhelming victory in the verbal contest is entirely satisfying to our sense of antipathy.'[41] This is right; but more is at stake than emotional response alone. Teucer demonstrates the necessity and desirability of dissent as a democratic prerogative. He even rehabilitates Ajax, in terms that make the issue of his dissent (if not its manifestation) look seemly after all.[42]

Furthermore, we see how the agon exceeds its dramatic context and the effect this has on the spectator. Seeing the characters adopt polarized

[39] *Iliad*, 15.676–88, 727–46; 16.101–11; 7.181–305 respectively. Differences in detail are noted by Kamerbeek (n. 20), 241–2 (nn. 1276–9), but do not detract from an overall impression that evokes the *Iliad*.

[40] The view of dissent which I am arguing for here contrasts to that propounded by J. Ober, *Political Dissent in democratic Athens* (Princeton, 1998). Ober conceives of dissent as the work of an élite group who form a 'critical community' of democratic practice. I suggest that such an approach is to confuse dissent with criticism and misunderstand dissent as something external to democracy.

[41] Heath (n. 7), 208.

[42] Teucer's enactment of Ajax's dissent would be more apparent to an audience aware of the actor's role-doubling: Rehm (n. 10), 133–5.

positions and contest each other's opinions, the audience experience debate and the procedure of argument. But this is not just a reflection of the audience's experiences of debate in the law court or assembly; the tragic agon offers more, in this case at least, because it does not present an end to the crisis. Instead, the audience enact the process of argument and, more particularly, of dissenting from authority, precisely because resolution is resisted.

Far from being an artificial, frigid device, the agon involves us in a process of reassessment that fulfils our role as an active, responsible, citizen. Where the *Iliad* explored dissent through the figure of Achilles, the consequences of Ajax's dissent are enacted by the citizen audience of tragedy, where we are invited to enter into the agon.

Dialogue: the Negotiation of Difference

Yet, the agon marks only the beginning. In itself it has led only to an impasse. The Atreidae clearly have the power to deny burial. Equally, however, Teucer, supported by Ajax's wife and child, has created a ritual space around the body which it would be, as the chorus remark (1092), hubristic to break.[43] In addition, there still remains the question of Athena's role in staging the crisis.

Perhaps this is why, contrary to Heath's view, the chorus fail to endorse Teucer's dissent. Instead, they address Odysseus, who has suddenly, and silently, entered (1316–17):

> ἄναξ Ὀδυσσεῦ, καιρὸν ἴσθ' ἐληλυθώς,
> εἰ μὴ ξυνάψων, ἀλλὰ συλλύσων πάρει.

Lord Odysseus, know that you have come at the critical moment, if you are here not to join in with the quarrel, but to join in untying it!

The play's turn to Odysseus is remarkable for several reasons. First, his entry on to the stage comes as a complete surprise; it is highly irregular for a third party to enter stichomythia after the agon and for one of the speakers (in this case Teucer) to be sidelined.[44] Second, up until this point in the play, the chorus, along with Ajax and his supporters, have

[43] For the creation of a ritualized space around the body, see Burian (n. 10), especially 152–3; Easterling (n. 10), 93–5; Henrichs (n. 10), 170–3; Rehm (n. 10), 133–4, 137.

[44] « Mais la stichomythie attendue ne se présente pas telle quelle: à peine Teucros a-t-il achevé son discours, Ulysse arrive ». The scene then moves towards « un débat de ton amical »: Duchemin (n. 27), 57. There is one Sophoclean parallel: the sudden appearance, again of Odysseus, at *Philoctetes* 1293. In that play there is no doubt that his intervention is shocking and sinister.

uniformly and consistently condemned Odysseus as wily, deceptive, self-seeking.[45] As Stanford remarks, 'The change of mood has not been motivated in the play.'[46] Yet, here the chorus appeal wholeheartedly to ('Lord') Odysseus in the hope that he comes with the intention of solving the crisis (*συλλύσων*, 1317). Just why should their attitude change now?

Turning to the following stichomythia, we see that Odysseus adopts a strategy of non-dissent. He emphasizes his connection with the chorus (*συγγνώμην*, 1322; *συμβαλεῖν*, 1323). He calls Ajax noble (1355) and praises his excellence (*ἀρετή*, 1357). Most striking of all, he concedes Ajax's status as the greatest of the Greeks after Achilles (1339–41).

This last claim maybe jars a little.[47] The whole tragedy has been predicated on the contest between Odysseus and Ajax about this very issue, and on the enmity that resulted.[48] And here Odysseus recognizes that Ajax, after Achilles, was 'the best of the Argives'.

The way in which Odysseus makes this acknowledgement may cause us no less food for thought. The painfully careful phrasing – 'I could not dishonour him so as not to say that he seemed the best' (*οὔ τἂν ἀτιμάσαιμ' ἄν, ὥστε μὴ λέγειν / ἔν' ἄνδρ' ἰδεῖν ἄριστον*, 1339–40) – makes it difficult for Agamemnon to refuse. In fact, throughout this passage, Odysseus displays an expertise in negotiating his interlocutor's authority.[49] He exploits a personal connection with Agamemnon (1328) and upholds his authority with the paradoxical: 'Stop! You win by being won over by your friends' (*παῦσαι· κρατεῖς τοι τῶν φίλων νικώμενος*, 1353). Thus, Odysseus' successful manoeuvring of Agamemnon off stage is indebted to his traditional portrait as persuasive, collusive, manipulative.[50]

[45] This is their first mention of Odysseus, after having depicted him in his usual (tragic) guise 'making up such slanderous words' (*τοιούσδε λόγους ψιθύρους πλάσσων*, 148).

[46] Stanford (n. 2), 220 n. 1316. According to J. F. Davidson, 'The Parodos of Sophocles' *Ajax*', *BICS* 22 (1975), 167, the chorus are forced to revise their earlier judgement when Odysseus assumes the role that he had established in the prologue. But this neglects the fact that it is the chorus who initiate the move by inviting Odysseus to speak.

[47] March (n. 11), 7, observing that Odysseus concedes the title of being best to Ajax, wonders how Odysseus did manage to win. Cf. A. Machin, *Cohérence et continuité dans le théâtre de Sophocle* (Haute-Ville, 1981), 31–59. Blundell (n. 17), 100, suggests that Odysseus shows that he is indeed the 'best' of the Achaeans, by helping Ajax's dependants. For the importance of Odysseus in Ajax's tragedy: Kitto (n. 8), 184–5; Stanford (n. 2), liv–lvii.

[48] As Odysseus concedes to Athena in the prologue (78), and to Agamemnon in the stichomythia (1347, 1355).

[49] 'Odysseus' position as an enemy of Ajax (which he mentions at 1336, 1347, and 1355) is a powerful help in persuading Agamemnon': Holt (n. 9), 287 n. 29. Holt reads Odysseus' intervention as solving the crisis of, and to a certain extent correcting, the agon, which again betrays a concentration on character rather than on how the audience are positioned.

[50] 'Odysseus, the statesman *and* the trickster of epic, uses the uncertainties of moral evaluation to

Some – all? – of these (contradictory) thoughts are perhaps evoked within us. Moreover, though we move towards ritual and reconciliation, Teucer rejects Odysseus' offer to join in with the burial (*συνθάπτειν*, 1378) 'for fear of doing a thing displeasing to the dead' (*μὴ τῷ θανόντι τοῦτο δυσχερὲς ποιῶ*, 1395). Odysseus responds by expressing his desire to participate, but accepts Teucer's prerogative to exclude him (1400–1). Stichomythia, which usually leads to a breakdown in communication, in this case leads to an acceptable consensus. It allows us an escape from all that has gone before, it allows the play to come to a conclusion. Yet the issues are not settled definitively. On *this* occasion, Odysseus' non-dissent has a positive end in setting the stage for ritual. Even then, however, he is excluded from it. The text cannot, or will not, fully suppress the anger of dissent. But differences are allowed to remain.[51]

Given this ending, and Odysseus' ambiguous role in preparing it, perhaps we may reflect on how the play began, with Athena's ambiguous lesson. Can we make more sense of it now?

There are four points I want to stress. First, the chorus finally gain a role to play after the focus on the repercussions of dissent for those spectating. They express their insecurity, as Ajax is marginalized; their hope, as Teucer arrives to protect them. But it is only when they enter the agon that they open up a route to a more secure future. That security is in the ritual for which the last scene prepares.[52]

This brings me to my second point. Hand-in-hand with this focus on the spectating group comes the involvement of the audience. This is in part due to the mediating role the chorus play. But it goes deeper than that. We saw how the double agon invites the audience to reassess the value of Ajax's dissent, at the very moment the chorus themselves are finding their voice. It is their turn to Odysseus that initiates the final movement. Are we also prepared to put aside our doubts about

make possible Ajax's burial': Goldhill (n. 19), 160. Cf. N. Worman, 'Odysseus ⟨*Panourgos*⟩: the Liar's Style in Tragedy and Oratory', *Helios* 26 (1999), 35–68, who traces Odysseus' bad reputation on the tragic stage back to his ability in Homeric epic to adapt his persona to each addressee in order to gain a favourable reception and establish his authority. Contrast Kirkwood (n. 19), 64f., who sees Odysseus here as exclusively Iliadic, not the Odyssean trickster.

[51] Blundell (n. 17), 101–4, stresses how the play ends as a co-operative endeavour. Segal (n. 8), 138, notes that there is continuing tension. The truth is somewhere in-between.

[52] Rehm (n. 10), 137: 'After his death, the hero who divided the Greek camp is honoured in a public (polis) cult, a process that effectively converts kin-based funeral ritual (signalled in the play by Odysseus' exclusion) into a communal rite celebrating polis solidarity'. Rehm notes in passing Odysseus' exclusion, but finds it difficult thus to explain how the ritual is transformed from being kin-based to polis-inclusive: 'Perhaps the Athenian audience found some mitigation of Odysseus' exclusion in the hero cult in which it could participate' (350 n. 97).

Odysseus?[53] Can we overlook the judgement of arms that is at the play's genesis? Can we, in short, turn to Odysseus *and* keep him at arms' length? Can we accept the desirability of accepting difference?

Third, and following on from this, the new, all-inclusive 'democratic' perspective on dissent finds its instantiation at the end of the play. In myth, Ajax is enshrined as the figure of dissent. In this play too, his anger is allowed to continue to reverberate through the ages.[54] What the play does, I suggest, is institutionalize this in ritual, as we work through the process of finding a place for Ajax's dissent in the community. Crucial to this is the role of Athena. She sets up the action on stage and invites Odysseus, and us, to draw a particular (simplistic) lesson. Odysseus' response reveals, however, the potential to interpret the divine presence differently. In her absence from the rest of the play, the human characters on stage must work out and work through the crisis that she staged. If the characters end up with the establishment of ritual, that is because of, not in spite of, her role.[55]

Fourth, what is that achievement more particularly? The unresolved dialogue between Odysseus and Teucer shows new possibilities of dissent. Dissent is made useful, not by being silenced or else privileged to the extent of justifying violence, but by allowing difference to remain. Teucer excludes Odysseus from actively participating in the ritual in the sense of touching Ajax's body; but he does allow him to stand by and watch as a spectator. Where the *Odyssey* had left Ajax silent in the shadows, in democratic Athens differences are allowed to the extent that both Ajax *and* Odysseus can occupy the same stage in honour, though not necessarily together.

[53] Rose (n. 8), 64, complains that Odysseus is a relatively 'colourless' character. That may be the point: what hue he takes will depend on through what lense we choose to see him.

[54] See especially Teucer's reasoning to Odysseus for excluding him (1393–5). The hero's anger is an important feature of cult: by observing ritual, one hopes to redirect the hero's anger against one's enemies. Considering Athena's role in Ajax's tragedy, this 'may prove another instance of the pattern wherein a god is antagonistic to a hero in myth, yet associated with the hero in ritual': Bradshaw (n. 3), 114 n. 34. On ritual antagonism: G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore, 1979), 289–300.

[55] Contrast: Segal (n. 8), 150, who sees Odysseus' flexibility as denoting 'secular humanism'. Or S. M. Maslanka, 'Alcuni aspetti della sofferenza tragica nell' *Aiace* di Sofocle', *Arctos* 29 (1995), 115–35, who regards the play as setting out a new kind of relationship between man and an amoral divinity (Athena). This is fine as far as it goes, but I prefer to see the potential for man to construct a moral system under the gods' care, however distant that may be. See F. Budelmann, *The Language of Sophocles: Communality, Communication and Involvement* (Cambridge, 2000), who speaks of 'the simultaneous impact and inscrutability of the divine' (186), which engages the audience in a critical debate over divine responsibility.

Conclusion

We have seen how the play explores Ajax's Achilles-like dissent from the perspective of those looking on – Odysseus, the chorus, ultimately us. Unlike their epic counterparts, who remain largely silent, Ajax's group, the chorus, are given voice to initiate the play's striking turn to Odysseus and ritual. We too are implicated in this move, since we must also put aside prejudice and be prepared to respect Odysseus' role in mediating the crisis. In a dual movement, the chorus are finally located in a ritualized context even as we are invited to participate in and sanction its institutionalization.

Thus the play stages the bringing of the *Iliad* to Athens and democratizes dissent so that all are responsible for exercizing judgement. Sophocles suggests a place, an institutional place, for dissent after all. Ajax's act of suicide enshrines his dissent eternally in silence.[56] But on the democratic stage, there is always a response, another voice to listen to. By the end of the play, Ajax is honoured, aided by Odysseus, in the city of Athena – if we can consent to this.

Two further points, I believe, emerge for thinking about tragedy in general. First, the shift in focus that dissent undergoes can help counter criticism of the agon as being neither a generic part of the action nor resolvable. These readings focus on the characters, whereas I have shown how the agon in *Ajax* is directed towards the spectators: the first makes Teucer's dissent desirable *and* Athenian; the second explores that process by involving the audience, recalling to them Ajax's role in the *Iliad*. This initiates a process of re-viewing, re-evaluating, fundamental to our judgement of Odysseus and, consequently, of the play as a whole. To study the tragic agon from the perspective of the agents is, I conclude, to misunderstand its democratic nature. We, as spectators, are the agents.

Second, this suggests one way in which tragedy functions in democracy. We experience judgement as a process, rather than a single event; as a self-monitoring exercise, rather than as the assertion of an authoritative solution. In short, the tragic agon reinvents decision-making as a process of self-reflection that puts the onus on individual responses within a collective framework.[57]

[56] In fact, Ajax's last words echo the *Odyssey* (cited above): *τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐν Ἅιδου τοῖς κάτω μυθήσομαι*, Soph., *Aj.* 865. Thus he reproduces his epic gesture. But the play does not end with it, rather with how the community responds to it.

[57] For a view of the chorus along these lines: Budelmann (n. 55), especially 231–44. My idea of

It is tragedy's capacity for prompting self-reflexivity through dissent, for engaging individual responsibility within the collective process that, I suggest, makes it such an integral part of the Athenian democratic framework. As we watch tragedy, we are not merely invited to reflect on or even question democratic ideology; we also participate in that framework to reproduce it and to perform as a citizen.[58] Entering the tragic agon is a performance of democracy.[59]

agency in the performance of democratic institutions owes much to A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: an Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, 1984), who understands structure as being 'not "external" to individuals' (27), but something experienced – and reproduced – by individuals participating within that system.

[58] Democratic ideology as being able to recoup difference: Rose (n. 8), 81 n. 14; S. Goldhill, 'Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference: the Politics of Aeschylean Tragedy once again', *JHS* 120 (2000), 34–56.

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