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EPISTEMIC CERTAINTY & UNCERTAINTY IN SOPHOCLES' *AJAX*

Title Page

EPISTEMIC CERTAINTY & UNCERTAINTY IN SOPHOCLES' *AJAX*

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Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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Descriptive Note

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The topic of the thesis is epistemic certainty and uncertainty in Sophocles' *Ajax*.

Epistemic certainty refers to the quality of a character's knowledge. I chose the topic because I was curious about the assessment of Ajax among scholars as a character who makes decisions purely on the basis of self-assertion in the pursuit of glory. The topic thus challenges what has become a point of near-consensus among scholars. This effort differs from other studies of the *Ajax* in that it acknowledges the existence of both paradigms of action and personality: based either on the reason or the will. It pursues this investigation while preserving the expanded scope of recent works on the *Ajax* to include its implications for the play's marginal characters, particularly Tecmessa and the Chorus. To that end, the investigation encompasses the entirety of the play while still addressing a major aspect of criticism concerning Ajax himself.

The topic of the thesis is epistemic certainty and uncertainty in Sophocles' *Ajax*. Epistemic certainty refers to the quality of a character's knowledge. I coined the term to describe the aspects of the play which seemed to explain this gap between Ajax's actual and perceived character. Ajax is typically assessed by scholars as a character who makes decisions purely on the basis of self-assertion in the pursuit of glory. My thesis challenges this view, which has become a point of near-consensus among scholars. This effort differs from other studies of the *Ajax* in that it acknowledges the existence of both paradigms of action and personality: based either on the reason or the will. I conclude that Ajax acts on the basis of reason, but misleads other characters (and the audience) because of the dynamics of epistemic certainty and uncertainty. I view the *Ajax* as deliberately thematizing these dynamics of knowledge for the sake of provoking reflective thinking and discussion about this phenomenon in the play's audience. At the same time, it pursues this investigation while preserving the expanded scope of recent works on the *Ajax* to include its implications for the play's marginal characters, particularly Tecmessa and the Chorus. To that end, the investigation encompasses the entirety of the play while still addressing a major aspect of criticism concerning Ajax himself. Meanwhile, I describe how these two planes of engagement, that is, being epistemically certain or uncertain, mimic the condition of theatre-goers (or readers) as they move from being an audience member, an objective observer, to someone implicated in the action of their own lives once the play has ended.

This thesis is the culmination of years of effort. As such, there is a long list of friends and loved ones to thank, and I apologize for omitting by name a great number of people who ought not to have been overlooked. My parents, Colin and Diane, and my sister, Nicole, have been a never-ending source of encouragement and support. At My Dog Joe I had a second family in the friends, coworkers and customers that I met, but especially in the Repei family, as well as their successors, for allowing me to support myself through school. Furthermore, I cannot begin to express how grateful I am to my hard-working friends at the McMaster Catholic Student Association, who generously and richly nurtured the spirit (not to mention the stomach) through the many wonderful events they put on in my time at McMaster. And, like any student, I have had teachers who inspired me in my studies. I thank especially Dr. Eilers, whose love of Latin and Roman history is infectious. His example was quickly followed by Dr. Murgatroyd's, whose classes opened my eyes to the treasures of the ancients and the beauty of their words. Dr. Corner's feedback on elements of my thesis as well as ancient personality and agency were most valuable (and humbling). My supervisor, Dr. Mattison, was instrumental in keeping me on track. Without her patience and guidance, this work would never have been completed. Meanwhile, to be a true companion is to suffer with another as though they were oneself, and no one on this journey has suffered with me more than my Anne, who was there for every high and low, every victory and defeat these past two years, ever ready with hugs, food, good cheer and constancy in faith and hope. Most of all, I wish to dedicate this thesis *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, from Whom, more than from anyone else, has come to me all good things.

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Introduction

ἐγὼ δὲ πλέον' ἔλομαι
λόγον Ὀδυσσεός ἢ πάθαν διὰ τὸν ἀδυεπῆ γενέσθ' Ὅμηρον:
ἐπεὶ ψεύδεσιν οἱ ποτανᾶ τε μαχανᾶ
σεμνὸν ἔπεστί τι: σοφία δὲ κλέπτει παράγοισα μύθοις

Greater, I imagine, did Odysseus' story become than his suffering through honey-worded Homer: as there is a certain power in his lies and winged technique: and cleverness steals the day when it diverts with its words. (Pind. N. 7.20-23).

Glenn W. Most, writing on Pindar's *Seventh Nemean Ode*, says of ἔλομαι that it “denotes a strong private conviction for which the grounds are not or cannot be given...the basis in fact which alone could have legitimated genuine fame is lacking in the case of Odysseus... And because this fame is not securely grounded, it is fragile, for it can always be called into question by reference to the criterion of real accomplishment”.¹ Elsewhere, Pindar scathingly critiques the treachery which led the Danaans to favour Odysseus over Ajax in the Judgement of Arms:

ἐχθρὰ δ' ἄρα πάρφασις ἦν καὶ πάλαι,
αἰμύλων μύθων ὀμόφοιτος, δολοφραδῆς, κακοποιὸν ὄνειδος:
ἂ τὸ μὲν λαμπρὸν βιάται, τῶν δ' ἀφάντων κῦδος ἀντείνει σαθρόν.
35[60] εἴη μή ποτέ μοι τοιοῦτον ἦθος, Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἀλλὰ κελεύθοις
ἀπλόαις ζωᾶς ἐφαπτοίμαν...

Hostile persuasion existed even long ago, the companion of wily words, cunning, an evil-working reproach: it assaults the famous, and holds up the unsound fame of the meagre. May I not have such a character, father Zeus, but that be fixed in the straight paths of life... (Pind. N. 32-36).

¹ Glenn W. Most, *The Measure of Praise* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 148.

Pindar attacks the gap that exists between an action and its report: Odysseus is admired because of the stories told about him, and the stories he told about himself. His fame is mediated through the poetry of Homer, whose cleverness beguiles the audience. The power of persuasion and storytelling over ‘what really happened’, Pindar says, is the explanation behind the error of the Greeks in misjudging the contest for Achilles’ arms.

Pindar’s arguments presuppose a schema of facts and interpretations of those same facts. There is the thing itself, which stands as it is, and then there is the word pertaining to it: the story, rumour, report, reputation, history, myth. When the latter in some way eclipses the former, those who hear the description of the facts are at risk of receiving a distorted version of the truth. But Most’s comment on Pindar’s lyrics points to a paradox in the poet’s model. Pindar himself has only a strong conviction, but not the proof, that Odysseus’ fame is exaggerated, highlighting the indeterminate nature of the debate Pindar is stepping into. For the evidence of Odysseus’ exploits, and of Ajax’s unjust defeat, resides only in the words of poets. The truth to which Pindar makes his appeal does not exist outside of Homer’s story.

Something of this paradox has made its way into criticism of Sophocles’ *Ajax*. The son of Telamon figures greatly in the poetry of Homer, particularly the *Iliad*, where he is one of the Greek heroes at Troy. Although he is ancillary to the main interest, the portrait the poem paints of Ajax is mostly favourable. Helen speaks of him as being the ‘great bulwark of the Achaeans’, emphasizing his

propensity for defense and protection.² In *Iliad* 7 Ajax faces Hector alone in combat. After the fight proves inconclusive, Hector praises Ajax, ‘since the god has given you greatness in both force as well as wisdom, and since you are greatest of all the Achaeans with the spear.’³ Teucer resorts to this moment in his defense of Ajax’s worth to Agamemnon.⁴ The actions of Ajax are observed, read, interpreted, and re-presented to others. Nestor chose Ajax to be part of the embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* 9 along side Odysseus and Phoenix.⁵ And although Nestor appears to place special significance on the role of Odysseus in persuading Achilles, it is Ajax, rather, who comes closest to success, though the embassy ultimately fails.⁶ Stanford appraises Ajax’s epic representation thus: “His achievements in the battles described in the *Iliad* are supremely valiant...Nor is he simply a tremendous fighting machine. He does not fail in the heroic ideal of being ‘a speaker of words as well as a doer of deeds’.”⁷ Yet Homer shows a rather different Ajax in *Odyssey* 11, when Odysseus describes his encounter with the shades of the underworld to the court of King Alcinous. Odysseus relates how, among others, the shade of Ajax, ὃς ἄριστος ἔην εἰδός τε δέμας τε / τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ’ ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα (*Od.* 11.469-470: *who was best of all the*

² *Il.* 3.228-229.

³ *Il.* 7.288-289: Αἴαν ἐπεὶ τοι δῶκε θεὸς μέγεθός τε βίην τε / καὶ πινυτήν, περὶ δ’ ἔγχει Ἀχαιῶν φέρτατός ἐσσι...

⁴ *Aj.* 1283-1287.

⁵ *Il.* 9. 169.

⁶ For Odysseus’ importance to the success of the embassy in Nestor’s eyes: 9. 179-180: τοῖσι δὲ πόλλ’ ἐπέτελλε Γερῆνιος ἱππότης Νέστωρ / δειδίλλων ἐς ἕκαστον, Ὀδυσσεῆϊ δὲ μάλιστα...; for the moving of Achilles by Ajax: *Il.* 9 644-645: Αἴαν διογενὲς Τελαμώνιε κοίρανε λαῶν / πάντα τί μοι κατὰ θυμὸν εἰσαο μυθήσασθα:

⁷ W.B. Stanford, introduction to *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1963), xiii.

*Danaans in appearance and form, after the noble son of Peleus) approached him.*⁸

There is no indication of the tension which exists between Odysseus and Ajax until nearly seventy lines later:

αἱ δ' ἄλλαι ψυχὰι νεκρῶν κατατεθνηώτων
ἔστασαν ἀχνύμεναι, εἶροντο δὲ κήδε' ἐκάστη.
οἷη δ' Αἴαντος ψυχὴ Τελαμωνιάδαο
νόσφιν ἀφροσύνη, κεχολωμένη εἵνεκα νίκης,
τὴν μιν ἐγὼ νίκησα δικαζόμενος παρὰ νηυσὶ
τεύχεσιν ἀμφ' Ἀχιλλῆος· ἔθηκε δὲ πότνια μήτηρ.
παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.
ὥς δὴ μὴ ὄφελον νικᾶν τοιᾶδ' ἐπ' ἀέθλω:
τοίην γὰρ κεφαλὴν ἔνεκ' αὐτῶν γαῖα κατέσχευ,
Αἴανθ', ὅς περὶ μὲν εἶδος, πέρι δ' ἔργα τέτυκτο
τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ' ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα.

The other spirits of the dead corpses stood in place, grieving, and each asked after their concerns. Only did the soul of Ajax son of Telamon stand apart, angered on account of the victory which I won over him, when I was judged over the arms of Achilles by the ships; his regal mother had put them up, and the children of the Trojans as well as Pallas Athena sat in judgment. It ought not to have been me that prevailed over such a prize: for on account of them did the earth keep below it such a head, that of Ajax, who was best in appearance and action of all the Danaans, except for the noble son of Peleus (Od. 11.541-551).

The Homeric description of the Judgement aligns broadly with its representation in Sophocles: after the death of Achilles, Ajax and Odysseus competed for his arms in a contest. When the judges awarded the arms to Odysseus instead of Ajax, Ajax lost his life.⁹ But Odysseus does not revel in his victory:

⁸ Sophocles adapts the compliment for Odysseus at the end of Ajax: ὥστε μὴ λέγειν / ἔν' ἄνδρ' ἰδεῖν ἄριστον Ἀργείων, ὅσοι / Τροίαν ἀφικόμεσθα, πλὴν Ἀχιλλέως (Aj. 1339-1441: ...so as not to say that he was the best of us Argives who came to Troy, except Achilles).

⁹ On the nature of the contest in Homer: P.J. Finglass, introduction to *Sophocles: Ajax—Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011) 27. “The award evidently involved a judicial process, with Thetis setting out the prize (and presiding?); how the ‘children of the Trojans and Pallas Athena’ arrived at their verdict is

Αἴαν, παῖ Τελαμῶνος ἀμύμονος, οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλες
οὐδὲ θανὼν λήσεσθαι ἐμοὶ χόλου εἵνεκα τευχέων
οὐλομένων; τὰ δὲ πῆμα θεοὶ θέσαν Ἀργείοισι,
τοῖος γάρ σφιν πύργος ἀπώλεο: σεῖο δ' Ἀχαιοὶ
ἴσον Ἀχιλλῆος κεφαλῇ Πηληϊάδαο
ἀχνύμεθα φθιμένοιο διαμπερές: οὐδέ τις ἄλλος
αἴτιος, ἀλλὰ Ζεὺς Δαναῶν στρατὸν αἰχμητῶν
ἐκπάγλως ἤχθηρε, τεῖν δ' ἐπὶ μοῖραν ἔθηκεν.
ἀλλ' ἄγε δεῦρο, ἄναξ, ἴν' ἔπος καὶ μῦθον ἀκούσης
ἡμέτερον: δάμασον δὲ μένος καὶ ἀγήνορα θυμόν.
ὧς ἐφάμην, ὁ δὲ μ' οὐδὲν ἀμείβετο, βῆ δὲ μετ' ἄλλας
ψυχὰς εἰς Ἔρεβος νεκῶν κατατεθνηώτων.

“Ajax, son of noble Telamon, did you still not, even in death, leave off from your anger towards me on account of those ruinous arms? The gods set many pains upon the Argives, for you, such a tower for them, were lost: and we Achaeans grieve for you sorely, like to dearest Achilles, son of Peleus, when he was slain: no one else is responsible, but Zeus was terribly hostile to the army of Danaan spearmen, and he it was that set this fate upon you. But come here, that you may hear my word and explanation: tame your rage and your manly heart.” So I spoke, but he answered me nothing, and went off with the other shades of the dead corpses into Erebus. (Od. 11.553-564).

Ajax himself, in Sophocles’ tragedy, addresses Erebus as a desirable place shortly after returning to his senses and being reunited with the Chorus and Tecmessa.¹⁰ He also promises, in the moment before he kills himself, to say no more among the land of the living, but to speak instead to the dead below.¹¹ And although he does not mention Odysseus alongside the Atreidae and the Greek army in his

unspecified.” On Ajax’s death in Homer: Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Duckworth Press, 2003), 26: “Odysseus does not tell us how Ajax died but he clearly links his death to the Judgement and its outcome.”

¹⁰ 394-397: ἰὼ / σκότος, ἐμὸν φάος, / ἔρεβος ᾧ φαειννότατον, ὡς ἐμοί, / ἔλεσθ' ἔλεσθέ μ' οἰκήτορα (*O darkness, my light, o most brightest, at least to me, Erebus, take me to dwell in you*).

¹¹ 864-865: τοῦθ' ὑμῖν Αἴας τοῦπος ὕστατον θροεῖ, / τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐν Ἄιδου τοῖς κάτω μυθήσομαι. (*Ajax speaks this last word to you, the rest I shall tell to those below in Hades*’).

invocation of the Furies in his suicide speech (815-865), he does make his disdain apparent in other parts of the play.¹²

One other subtle connection unites Sophocles' tragedy and Homer's allusion in *Odysseus* 11: the story of Ajax's death is not told directly, but embedded in the poem within the internal narration of another storyteller. How enmity arose between Ajax and Odysseus is revealed by someone who was directly engaged in the events which precipitated that enmity. The audience, both internal and external to these stories, has no way of verifying the truth for themselves. The tale is made believable by the skill of the storyteller. As Pindar does in his own poetry, Odysseus, mediated by Homer, presents his perspective on the events. This perspective, by necessity, is limited, hampered by Odysseus' mortal limitations of memory and skill in telling, coloured by his own prerogatives and needs in the moment he stands in the court.

Sometimes, on the other hand, what is at stake is not the truth-content of a story, but the interpreter's comprehension of the storyteller's intended message. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates, after a long and creative discussion with the sophist about the correct interpretation of a poem of Simonides, suddenly comes alive to the apparent futility of their efforts:

οὕτω δὲ καὶ αἱ τοιαῖδε συνουσίαι, ἐὰν μὲν λάβωνται ἀνδρῶν
οἷοίπερ ἡμῶν οἱ πολλοὶ φασιν εἶναι, οὐδὲν δέονται ἀλλοτρίας φωνῆς οὐδὲ

¹² E.g. 103 ἧ τοῦπίτριπτον κίναδος ἐξήρου μ' ὄπου; (Do you ask me where that accursed fox is?); 379-382: ἰὼ πάνθ' ὀρῶν ἀπάντων τ' ἀεὶ / κακῶν ὄργανον, τέκνον Λαρτίου, / κακοπινέστατόν τ' ἄλημα στρατοῦ, / ἧ που πολὺν γέλωθ' ὑφ' ἡδονῆς ἄγεις (O, seeing all things, the instrument of all evil things, you, the son of Laertius, the most wily knave of the army, surely you are laughing richly because of your pleasure).

ποιητῶν, οὐς οὔτε ἀνερέσθαι οἶόν τ' ἐστὶν περὶ ὧν λέγουσιν...

So do these sorts of gatherings, whenever they compass many men such as we claim of ourselves to be, have no want for the voice of another, not even of the poets, whom it is not possible to question about what they say... (Pl. Prot. 347e.1-5).

As with Odysseus and Homer, to Socrates, the debate about the interpretation of Simonides' poetry is irresolvable, since the poet can no longer be asked how his words were meant to be taken. But Socrates only raises this objection after he has engaged in a lengthy and detailed argument about what the appropriate interpretation of Simonides' poetry is. He and Protagoras both engaged with the words of the poem, citing passages, matching them to arguments which attempt to demonstrate the validity of their readings. That the debate takes up so much of the dialogue shows its inherent interest to both the internal as well as the external audience: human beings are eager for an explanation of what remains unclear, and the final uncertainty of Socrates' and Protagoras' efforts to unravel Simonides' words did not dampen the pleasure felt by the listeners of the debate.

It is this kind of uncertainty that the *Ajax* dramatizes. The *Ajax* is not about the meaning of a poem, but it does encompass actions, interpretations of actions, and soundness of knowledge, something I call epistemic certainty and uncertainty. Epistemic certainty or uncertainty refers to a subject's relationship to the knowledge he or she possesses. Their knowledge may be secure or insecure based on their ability to verify not only the information they possess, but the soundness of their interpretation of that information. The *Ajax* explicitly exploits this dynamic in its dramatic action. Unlike Odysseus' report of his visit to the

underworld, in the *Ajax*, several people are present for the events described in the play, and there is no narrator, like Odysseus, to mediate the story being told definitively. Furthermore, the degree of epistemic certainty and uncertainty differs among the participants and witnesses of the play: some characters know everything and can be confident in their interpretation of the knowledge they possess; others know only a little, and of the little they know they remain uncertain. Some of the characters are implicated in the play's major actions, others are bystanders, and those whose knowledge is epistemically uncertain are forced to rely on their own deliberative powers in order to reach a correct interpretation. And there is yet another level of abstraction to be explored in the play's dynamic of epistemic certainty and uncertainty—that of the scholastic audience's response to the actions and characters of the play. Scholars of Sophocles' *Ajax* have come up with assessments of the play's titular character which are incommensurable. Two parties have emerged: 'hero-worshippers', "who play down Ajax's impiety and arrogance", as well as 'pietists', an approach "which affirms Ajax as a great but impious and excessively arrogant hero."¹³

In the first chapter, I explore conceptions of Ajax as they arise out of scholarship which seeks to view him as a 'Homeric hero', a figure imported from interpretations of the *Iliad* and applied to Ajax in his tragic form. The heroic

¹³ Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Duckworth Press, 2003), 59. For an expanded overview of these two positions, see *ibid.* 59-60. R.P. Winnington-Ingram (1980: see bibliography) presents the most emblematic of the pietist argument, while Garvie (2016: see bibliography) is representative of the hero-worshipper's perspective.

framework for understanding Iliadic figures has been well-debunked by recent studies of Homeric action and personality, but these insights have largely failed to make an impact on critical approaches to Sophocles' *Ajax*, where the Homeric model is clumsily super-imposed on the titular character. The first chapter will show the inadequacy of the heroizing-framework in explaining Ajax's actions and outline the distortions which arise from the play on account of this approach. It will also demonstrate how aspects of Ajax's character and actions, which critics attempt to explain within a heroic framework, are better explained as operating under the dynamics of epistemic certainty and uncertainty.

The second chapter focuses on Ajax's dependants: Tecmessa and the Chorus of Salaminian sailors. It will explore the substantial epistemic uncertainty these characters confront in the play in their isolation from characters possessed of epistemic certainty, bereft of a means of securing their knowledge. It will show how the quality of epistemic uncertainty leaves these figures prone to errors in deliberation and rationalization. It will also be shown that, because of their uncertainty, these figures, who seek to dissuade Ajax from killing himself and abandoning them, put themselves at risk of acting out the very behaviours and attitudes themselves which they seek to discourage in Ajax. In the end, they attain epistemic certainty, but only because their errors of interpretation are eventually brought to light by Ajax's suicide, which reveals his true intentions. In discovering Ajax's suicide, they are forced to confront their own errors of

interpretation in trying to read Ajax, and to acknowledge their epistemic uncertainty.

The third chapter focuses on Odysseus. Odysseus is one of the few figures in the play possessed of epistemic certainty, thanks to his relationship with Athena. It will be shown that, because of Athena, Odysseus is able to achieve perspectives and insights unavailable to other characters in the play. As a result, Odysseus finds himself in the paradoxical situation of being epistemically both privileged and isolated, since, despite his efforts to communicate his insight to Agamemnon, he fails to persuade the Greek commander on these grounds, even if he succeeds ultimately. I expect that by exploring the dynamics of epistemic certainty and uncertainty in Sophocles' *Ajax*, some long-standing problems of criticism and interpretation of this play will have new light cast on them.

Chapter 1: Homeric Heroism; Epistemic Certainty and Uncertainty

Is Ajax, then, really ‘the last of the heroes’? Clearing up misconceptions about heroism and personal action does not fully account for the brisk and lonely image of Ajax we receive in the play. Ajax may not be a radical individualist, but there may nevertheless be something in his ethical makeup that leads to a certain solipsism, as I hope to show by analyses of some of the key passages which have contributed to an understanding of Ajax as a megalomaniacal figure.

There is the boast Ajax makes in his *kommos*. Ajax express how the arms were given to Odysseus rather than to himself:

οὐκέτ’ ἄνδρα μὴ
τόνδ’ ἴδητ’, ἔπος
ἐξερῶ μέγ’, οἷον οὔτινα
Τροία στρατοῦ δέρχθη χθονὸς μολόντ’ ἀπὸ
Ἑλλανίδος: τανῦν δ’ ἄτιμος
ᾧδε πρόκειμαι.

*No longer you will see this man—I shall speak a big word—like unto no one Troy saw in the army coming from the land of Greece: but now I lie dishonoured.*¹⁴ (421-427).

Another declaration soon follows:

καίτοι τοσοῦτόν γ’ ἐξεπίστασθαι δοκῶ /
εἰ ζῶν Ἀχιλλεὺς τῶν ὀπλων τῶν ὦν πέρι
κρίνειν ἔμελλε κράτος ἀριστείας τινί,

¹⁴ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 179 n. 27 argues that “It will be boasted that those lines are appropriate to Achilles, who is the best: Ajax is second best, so this is evidence of megalomania...This is too literal-minded: the use of superlative expressions is not so jealously guarded in Homer...much attention has been devoted to this contrast between the greatness of Ajax and his ruin...and the same idea is being pursued here: an effect that is entirely spoilt if one is obsessed with Ajax’s ‘state of mind’ and constantly tutting over his exaggerations.” But Finglass (2011) 263 n. ad 421-6 writes: “...in all those [Homeric] passages the superlative is attributed by a warrior to an enemy with whom he has fought in a close-run duel, or to a fallen comrade; the exaggeration amplifies the speaker’s *kleos* by making his opponent seem more fearsome, or highlights the pathos of a death.”

οὐκ ἄν τις αὐτ' ἔμαρψεν ἄλλος ἀντ' ἐμοῦ.

*I also know this for certain:*¹⁵ *if Achilles were alive and going to judge the prize of excellence over his very own arms to anyone, no one else would have grasped them instead of me. (441-444).*

R.P. Winnington-Ingram memorably asks: “Is there not something vaguely unpleasant about Ajax, even in hypothesis, seizing greedily upon the arms of a living Achilles?”¹⁶ The question seems to miss the thrust of Ajax’s argument. Ajax sets as the condition for the treachery and mischief of the Atreidae and Odysseus the death of Achilles himself, calling into question the integrity of the latter by comparing them to the arms’ original owner. If the Atreidae understood what the arms represented, then they could not have failed to award them to Ajax. Their choice, to Ajax’s mind, divorces the Atreidae from the spirit of the arms, from any identification with the values they represent. Winnington-Ingram’s assessment goes too far: Ajax would not wish to deprive Achilles of his own arms, he insists rather that Achilles as judge in the contest would have awarded them to him. Still, there is an obliviousness in Ajax’ utter self-assuredness and lack of self-doubt.

Soon afterwards, Ajax observes that εἰ δέ τις θεῶν / βλάπτοι, φύγοι τᾶν χῶ κακὸς τὸν κρείσσονα (455-456: *If any of the gods should strike, then the base man may escape his better*). Ajax lays the blame for his failure to fulfill his revenge entirely at the feet of causes external to himself and his efforts. Not

¹⁵ Finglass (2006) 269 n. ad 441: “...the understated phrase expresses confidence in the following statement.”

¹⁶ R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 28.

anything about Ajax, but rather the inexplicable treachery of others has engineered Ajax's downfall. Instead, he comforts himself by looking to his heroic worth. The point is worth reiterating: Ajax does not raise the spectre of the blasphemous statements he made before Telamon whether to deny or affirm them. He ignores them entirely. Sophocles never makes a point of affirming whether Ajax has simply forgotten these statements, or thinks nothing of them. Ordinarily, such reversals of fortune as the one Ajax suffered would provoke the search for an explanation as to the causes of the turn of events. This search would extend to the role someone has played in engineering their own downfall. Even in this very play, the need for answers and explanation draws characters out from themselves towards one another. Odysseus comes looking for Ajax, but finds Athena along with his answers. Tecmessa and the sailors come together to combine their knowledge. These figures strengthen their relations with one another. Ignorance and curiosity, although risky, can be beneficial.

But Ajax is unquestioning and oblivious. His trust in the notion that he is not at all to blame for his downfall, that the responsibility lies in the treachery of others, precludes the need to effect a change in his character or to modify his relationships with others. Ajax does not doubt who Achilles would have chosen to receive the arms. He is also certain that *κεί μὴ τόδ' ὄμμα καὶ φρένες διάστροφοι / γνώμης ἀπῆξαν τῆς ἐμῆς, οὐκ ἄν ποτε / δίκην κατ' ἄλλου φωτὸς ὧδ' ἐψήφισαν* (447-449: *If my sight and my mind, diverted as they were, had not swerved from my intention, then they would not have voted this verdict against another man*).

Ajax's insistence in his martial greatness is the major cause of scholars' assessment of him. His confidence on this point may seem to be vindicated by Athena in the prologue, when she says that *κἄν ἐξεπράξατ', εἰ κατημέλησ' ἐγώ* (45: *He would have seen the act through, if I had not paid attention*), but Athena is unique in the play on account of her perfect knowledge.¹⁷ Ajax cannot be certain as Athena is. In fact, given what happened to him in the prologue, Ajax has no reason to be certain of anything. But despite this, he continues to exhibit an epistemic confidence about what has happened to him.

Ajax reasons about what to do: he cannot return home without proving his worth,¹⁸ and he cannot further the Greek cause.¹⁹ Rejecting both options, Ajax focuses on his goal: *πειρά τις ζητητέα / τοιάδ' ἀφ' ἧς γέροντι δηλώσω πατρὶ / μή τοι φύσιν γ' ἄσπλαγχνος ἐκ κείνου γεγώς* (470-472: *Some attempt must be sought from which I may show to my aged father those sorts of things, namely that I was not born without heart in respect of my nature from him*). Ajax had brought up his father once before in an unfavourable comparison to his present situation:

ὄτου πατήρ μὲν τῆσδ' ἀπ' Ἰδαίας χθονὸς
τὰ πρῶτα καλλιστεῖ' ἀριστεύσας στρατοῦ
πρὸς οἶκον ἦλθε πᾶσαν εὐκλειαν φέρων:
ἐγὼ δ' ὁ κείνου παῖς, τὸν αὐτὸν ἐς τόπον
Τροίας ἐπελθὼν οὐκ ἐλάσσοι σθένει
οὐδ' ἔργα μείω χειρὸς ἀρκέσας ἐμῆς,
ἄτιμος Ἀργείοισιν ὧδ' ἀπόλλυμαι.

Then my own father went from this land of Ida, having won the first of the finest things of the army, carrying all renown: but I, his son, coming to the

¹⁷ Chapter 2 explores Athena's perspective in greater detail.

¹⁸ *Aj.* 462-465

¹⁹ *Aj.* 466-469

same place in Troy, no less in might, but accomplishing with my hand deeds no less great, am destroyed in this way by the Argives. (434-440).

Ajax failed to achieve what his father did. There is an admission of responsibility in these words: it should have been possible for Ajax to attain honour similar to Telamon, although he does not. The earlier reference to Achilles casts blame on the Atreidae. But the invocation of his father calls Ajax into question.²⁰ How individualistic is Ajax if he is so concerned with his father's estimation of him? Without the prospect of his father's censure, Ajax may have been content with going home. In fact, in the *Philoctetes*, Neoptolemus uses a story like this one in his deception of Philoctetes. Neoptolemus reports that Odysseus justified the withholding of Achilles' arms from his son on the grounds that: οὐκ ἦσθ' ἴν' ἡμεῖς, ἀλλ' ἀπῆσθ' ἴν' οὐ σ' ἔδει (Ph. 379: *You were not where we are, but were where there was no need of you*).²¹ So spurned, Neoptolemus quits the field at Troy and returns home. Philoctetes does not react to Neoptolemus as though he has done something shameful in sailing home from

²⁰ E.g. Lillian Feder, *Madness in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 93: "Certainly the precipitating cause of Ajax's rage—the awarding of Achilles' arms to Odysseus—sets off a complex reaction to his allies, to his own fame, and to life itself, which must be explored in connection with his suicide. A definitive characteristic of Ajax, the pride that compelled him to scorn the aid of Athena, is the essential motivating force for this act of violence against himself. His pride manifests itself in more than an exalted view of his own powers as a warrior; it conveys his conception of himself as a personification of the immortal fame that is the implicit promise of the heroic code. Until he is forced to recognize his terrible vulnerability by madness itself, Ajax has regarded himself as omnipotent. The extremity of his anguish upon realizing that his vengeance was taken only on helpless animals results not merely from shame but from the exposure of his own impotence to contend with the forces that now control his destiny—the hostile Greek leaders and their attendant goddess."

²¹ Odysseus' (supposed) censure echoes Agamemnon's criticism of Ajax in this play: ποῖ βάντος ἢ ποῦ σάντος οὔπερ οὐκ ἐγώ; / οὐκ ἄρ' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄνδρες εἰσὶ πλὴν ὄδε; (*Aj.* 1237-1238: *Where did this man go, or in what place did he stand, that I did not? Do the Achaeans have no men but this one?*).

Troy.²² But although Ajax's situation is like the one Neoptolemus invented, his desire to please his father prevents him from taking this option.

This cannot be the result of "Ajax's ruthless indulgence of his own desires," which "matches his portrayal throughout the play as a man who pursues personal gratification to the exclusion of the claims of all *philoï*, whether friends, relatives, allies, dependants or gods."²³ For Homeric warriors who are denied glory, it is an option for them to express their displeasure and curtail further attacks by leaving. Ajax has this option—it is within his power to do it. But he does not, because he wants more to satisfy Telamon's desires than his own.²⁴ Ajax resorts to a general rule to complete his deliberation:

αἰσχρὸν γὰρ ἄνδρα τοῦ μακροῦ χρήζειν βίου,
κακοῖσιν ὅστις μηδὲν ἐξαλλάσσεται.
τί γὰρ παρ' ἡμᾶρ ἡμέρα τέρπειν ἔχει;

For it is shameful for a man to wish for a long life, who receives in

²² τοιαῦτ' ἀκούσας κάξονειδισθεὶς κακὰ / πλέω πρὸς οἴκους, (*Ph.* 382-383: *Having heard such base words, and being outrageously insulted, I sailed for home*). For my purposes, it does not matter if this is the real reason Neoptolemus is present on the island. The point is that the story was probable enough (*eikos*) to Philoctetes to be believed).

²³ Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping friends and harming enemies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 68.

²⁴ It may be argued, under the rubric which seeks to cast Ajax as an utter egotist, that his conception of his father is really a reflection of his own values and expectations. But Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 85: "...the other in him [Ajax's internal representation of his father] does represent a real world, in which he would have to live if he went on living." In other words, the expectations of his father represent a very real and binding judgment upon and to Ajax. He cannot dismiss them any more than he could dismiss his own expectations and identity as a Homeric warrior. If he did, he would cease to be Ajax, and the very thing that makes the play a tragedy would be dispelled.

*exchange for his evils nothing. For what joy can there be in day following day? (473-475).*²⁵

Then he says that:

οὐκ ἂν πριαίμην οὐδενὸς λόγου βροτὸν
ὅστις κεναῖσιν ἐλπίσιν θερμαίνεται:
ἀλλ' ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι
τὸν εὐγενῆ χρῆ. πάντ' ἀκήκοας λόγον.

*I would reckon that man of no account, who is warmed by empty hopes:
instead, it is necessary for the noble either to live well or so die. You have
heard the whole speech. (477-480)*

The term *eugenes* offers us another clue that Ajax is not the author of his own scheme of values, but ones which conform to a pattern external to him. Were this not the case, Tecmessa would have no grounds to offer up a redefinition of the term.

The speech's conclusion, however, does suggest wilfulness: "You have heard the whole speech." The phrase πάντ' ἀκήκοας is also used in the *Trachiniae* by the nurse before she reports the suicide of Deianira and the discovery of her body by Hyllus.²⁶ There the phrase is used after a description of things that have already happened. Nothing afterwards can upset the truth of her report. But Ajax's use of the phrase is different from its use in the *Trachiniae*: for one, Ajax is using an absolute phrase pre-emptively. I have translated *logos* here as speech, but it

²⁵ I have omitted *Aj. 476* (προσθεῖσα κἀναθεῖσα τοῦ γε κατθανεῖν;), although most editors include it, on account of Finglass (2011) 276 n. ad 475-6: "...it remains obscure," and that "[t]extual alteration does not help." He posits that "[a] lacuna...is perhaps the most likely solution, as the Greek seems too abbreviated to make the sense clear; but no supplement commends itself." On these grounds I have chosen not to offer an interpretation of the line myself.

²⁶ *Tr. 876*

may also refer to the process of deliberation Ajax undertook, as well as to the choices available to him. It can also refer to the rule he employs at the end, which offers a general account of how life ought to be lived. Unlike the nurse, Ajax does not know yet if his life will be warmed by only empty hopes, because he is trying to describe things that have not happened yet. In fact, it will later be revealed that Ajax could have been saved, if only he had waited.²⁷ Once again, Ajax exhibits an epistemic confidence which proves unfounded.

But there is another sense in which Ajax's usage of the phrase differs from the nurse's; as mentioned before, Ajax has not reviewed everything in his past which could have caused his misfortune: the boast Ajax made to his father,²⁸ the rebuke he offered to Athena on the field of battle, are both missing from the 'whole account.'²⁹ Does Sophocles intend the audience to suppose that Ajax has forgotten? Or is Ajax aware of what he did, but actively evading responsibility by suppressing the memories? Are these moments inconsequential for him? The audience may wonder why it is that Ajax does not connect his actions with the warning his father gave to him.

Yet these are questions that can arise for the audience only later in the play. Ajax, whether by deliberate omission or not, does not share these two episodes. Instead, the messenger reports them from Calchas much later. But without the messenger, Ajax's perspective on his situation reigns. Besides Athena,

²⁷ Aj. 756-757: ἐλᾶ γὰρ αὐτὸν τῆδε θῆμέρα μόνῃ / δίας Ἀθήνας μῆνις, ὡς ἔφη λέγων.

²⁸ Aj. 763-769

²⁹ Aj. 770-777

no one else knows more. Indeed, Tecmessa's petition to Ajax, which will be scrutinized in Chapter 2, responds to Ajax's formulation of events. Thus at this point audience (internal and external) may be tempted to sympathise with Ajax based on what he has shared. The Atreidae and Odysseus are the only orchestrators of Ajax's downfall in this account. Only afterward is it revealed that Ajax, too, played a role. This, to a limited extent, implicates the external audience in the action of the play. They cannot know more than Ajax does, reacting to him on incomplete premises. The spectator's own epistemic confidence will be brought into question along with Ajax's.

But first Tecmessa begins her petition to Ajax, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Ajax does not respond to it, but instead addresses Eurysaces.³⁰ After another attempt by Tecmessa to dissuade him as he hastens to close the tent, Ajax rebukes her: μῶρά μοι δοκεῖς φρονεῖν, / εἰ τοῦ μὸν ἦθος ἄρτι παιδεύειν νοεῖς: (594-595: *Your thoughts are foolish, if you expect to shape my character only now*). The line has been taken to be indicative of Ajax's implacable nature. But the adverb ἄρτι qualifies Ajax's statement: Ajax does not say that his mind cannot be changed, but that it is too late for Tecmessa to effect the change she seeks. Ajax has always lived as a warrior. He and Tecmessa have been the beneficiary of his success. Moreover, Ajax expected and valued the potential rewards of pursuing his identity. It would be inconsistent of Ajax to disregard all these things, now that he has suffered a defeat.

³⁰ Aj. 525-544.

One other scene suggests the idea of Ajax as absolutist tyrant: the Deception Speech. Because of the ubiquity, depth and extent of the discussion surrounding the speech, it is difficult to say much which has not already been said.³¹ Instead, I would like to focus on the fact that Ajax's speech is the most dramatic example in the play of something which has become an increasing focus in my analysis of Ajax: epistemic uncertainty. By 'epistemic uncertainty' I mean the inability for someone with knowledge to know if that knowledge, or their interpretation of it, is secure from error. Throughout the play, characters have differing levels of epistemic certainty: Odysseus, to anticipate the investigation I conduct in the third chapter, has epistemic certainty in the prologue thanks to Athena's perfect vision. The Chorus and Tecmessa, whom I take up in the second chapter, waver between epistemic certainty and uncertainty: sometimes they are shown not to know, and as being aware that they do not know. At other times, the

³¹ The three main arguments, as summarized in A.P.M.H Lardinois, "The Polysemy of Gnomonic Expressions and Ajax' Deception Speech," in *Sophocles and the Greek Language*, eds I.J.F. de Jong & A. Rijksbaron (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 213 are as follows: 1) Tecmessa and the Chorus understood Ajax correctly because he had, in fact, given up his intention to suicide for a time. 2) Ajax deliberately deceives Tecmessa and the Chorus. 3) Tecmessa and the Chorus misinterpret the words of Ajax, who does intend to deceive them. That said, I take Christopher Gill's, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 213-214 point that "Ajax's 'deception-speech'...expresses the conflict between a deliberated exemplary gesture, based on reflection about general principles of co-operative living, and the more standard claims of *philia*, the validity of which are also recognized by the person concerned. The peculiar formal character of the speech is to be explained by reference to its role as an expression of this conflict...the two voices are, paradoxically, combined in the same lines...Ajax both expresses the ethical claims on his *philia* made by Tecmessa and indicates, by his bitter and ironic tone (as well as by the contrast with his previous speeches his rejection of the compromises involved in meeting those claims. In this sense, his speech contains a kind of internal dialogue, as he both expresses and rejects those claims in favour of those of his exemplary gesture." Cf. also R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 47 n. 109: "the Deception Speech itself is to be the supreme—ironic—revelation of the mind of Ajax through the expression of its reverse, as the Suicide Speech reveals when it comes."

awareness of epistemic uncertainty is limited to the perspective of the audience, which alone knows what limits there are to the characters' knowledge. In his Deception Speech, Ajax's phrasing, at every turn, seems calculated to deflect secure interpretations of his intentions. So, Ajax, for example, says κρύψω τόδ' ἔγχοσ τοῦμόν, ἔχθιστον βελῶν, / γαίας ὀρύξας ἔνθα μή τις ὄψεται (658-659: *I shall bury this sword, the most hateful of weapons, once I have dug up the earth, where no one will see*). When the words are heard for the first time, their meaning may seem obvious. It is only in hindsight, when action is matched to stated intent, that the double-resonance becomes clear: "[t]he words he uses, as we have seen, are heavy with the sound of death".³² Similarly, the speech encourages us to read Ajax's descriptions of nature as signs that he will choose to live instead of dying in self-fulfillment: καὶ γὰρ τὰ δεινὰ καὶ τὰ καρτερώτατα / τιμαῖς ὑπέικει: τοῦτο μὲν νιφοστιβεῖς / χειμῶνες ἐκχωροῦσιν εὐκάρπῳ θέρει (669-671: *For things both dread and most powerful yield to offices: snow-tracked winters make way for fruitful summer...*). But, "in each case, the power that yields is extinguished: the simultaneous presence of winter and summer, night and day, storm and calm, sleep and waking, is impossible."³³ The effect, in sum, is that the Chorus and Tecmessa are deflected from Ajax's true intention. Epistemic uncertainty extends even to the motivation for characters' actions. Is the misinterpretation of the Chorus and Tecmessa the result of wilful dishonesty, as they think? But because

³² Bernard Knox, "The Ajax of Sophocles," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 65, no. 1 (1961):15.

³³ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 187.

Sophocles has refrained from elaborating upon Ajax's intentions in the Deception-Speech, answers to questions like these remain unavailable.

But perhaps the search for an answer is itself what is at stake in the play. The scene which is most responsible for the varying characterizations of Ajax prevents secure interpretation in the absence of a secure apparatus for measuring those interpretations. Whatever interpretation is formed of the Deception Speech both advances and undoes its own conclusions. We cannot know whether Ajax deceives or really means what he says and has an abrupt change of heart. Although I lean to the former view, it remains far from secure based on a reading of the text. The Chorus and Tecmessa take Ajax to have deceived them, and it is Tecmessa herself who describes Ajax as a figure obsessed with his own pleasure.³⁴ But Tecmessa, and other characters besides, rarely have access to the epistemic certainty necessary to make a secure assessment. Nor, often, is the audience given the information necessary to know which reading is the correct one.

So it is that Ajax himself, in the last speech he makes before he dies, suggests cryptically, over and over, the indeterminacy of resolving two opposing perspectives on the same action and event, beginning with his prayer to Zeus:

πέμψον τιν' ἡμῖν ἄγγελον, κακὴν φάτιν
Τεύκρω φέροντα, πρῶτος ὧς με βαστάση
πεπτῶτα τῶδε περὶ νεορράντων ξίφει,
καὶ μὴ πρὸς ἐχθρῶν του κατοπτευθεὶς πάρος
ρίφθῶ κυσὶν πρόβλητος οἰωνοῖς θ' ἔλωρ.

³⁴ Aj. 966-967: ἐμοὶ πικρὸς τέθνηκεν ἢ κείνοις γλυκύς, / αὐτῷ δὲ τερπνός... (*He died bitter rather to me than sweet to them, and a pleasure to himself*).

Send for us a messenger bringing the bad news to Teucer, that he may be the first to lift me, fallen low on this new-sprinkled sword, and that I, spotted first by one of my enemies, may not be cast out as a feast for the dogs and the birds. (826-830).

Ajax knows that the sight of his body communicates two different messages, depending on who the recipient of the news of his death is: to Teucer, the message of Ajax's death will be a misfortune; but to any of Ajax's enemies, it is a boon. Teucer will want to hasten to reach Ajax before his enemies, since his enemies, if they should arrive before Teucer does, will take the opportunity to do violence to Ajax and his legacy. The stakes of the race Ajax sets up to his corpse, and the possibility of more evil, depending on who the victor is, comes from the fact that the final significance of Ajax's body cannot encompass both of these possibilities: the meaning of his death will remain indeterminate until one of the parties arrives. It is the discoverer who fulfils the meaning of Ajax's death. If Teucer, then his death will be vindicated, since he will find a burial appropriate to a hero despite the treachery of his enemies. If Ajax's enemies, Ajax's death will become a story about his defeat.

Likewise, Ajax implores the Furies, μαθεῖν ἐμὲ / πρὸς τῶν Ἀτρειδῶν ὡς διόλλυμαι τάλας (837-838: *Learn about me, how I, wretch that I am, am destroyed at the hands of the Atreidae*). Ajax bids the avenging gods to learn about him, and he takes care to specify exactly what lesson the Furies should take from the situation. Athena had attempted to do this as well in the prologue when she warned Odysseus against becoming a *kakos*—but as we saw in the prologue,

the lesson may not always be clearly derived from the situation at hand, nor, even if it is, does the one hearing the lesson necessarily identify with it, as Odysseus pitied Ajax in his humanity rather than shunned him for his baseness. There is, on Ajax's part, a recognition in his injunction to the Furies that his story may not be taken the way he intends it, and that it is ultimately out of his hands whether or not it is: for those same Furies could instead dwell on the fact that Ajax attempted to destroy his allies in turn.

Recognizing the possibility of other perspectives, then, Ajax spends most of his last words clarifying the narrative he wishes to impose on recent events.

Ajax recognizes the vulnerability of his legacy to reinterpretation when he prays to Helios to

ἄγγελον ἄτας τὰς ἐμὰς μόρον τ' ἐμὸν
γέροντι πατρὶ τῆ τε δυστήνῳ τροφῷ.
ἧ που τάλαινα, τήνδ' ὅταν κλύη φάτιν,
ἧσει μέγαν κωκυτὸν ἐν πάσῃ πόλει.

*Announce my ruin and death to my aged father and miserable mother.
Very truly will she let out a great shriek in all the city, whenever she hears
this news of me. (848-851).*

There is little reason to doubt how Ajax's parents will receive the news of his death. Tecmessa herself had earlier admonished Ajax to

ἄλλ' αἰδεσσαι μὲν πατέρα τὸν σὸν ἐν λυγρῷ
γῆρα προλείπων, αἰδεσσαι δὲ μητέρα
πολλῶν ἐτῶν κληροῦχον, ἧ σε πολλακίς
θεοῖς ἀρᾶται ζῶντα πρὸς δόμους μολεῖν:

*But feel shame at the thought of leaving your father in his mournful old
age, and feel shame too at the thought of your mother, who has drawn the
lot of many years, and often prayed to the gods that you may come home
alive. (506-509).*

She had wanted Ajax to understand that the message he will ultimately send with his death is not one of atonement in the eyes of his father, before whom Ajax previously feared to show himself as γυμνὸν φανέντα τῶν ἀριστείων ἄτερ (464: *appearing as one naked, without the fruits of excellence*), but rather one of grief and even disrespect (so I take the force of αἶδεσαι to be). When Ajax expressed his shame at the thought of appearing before Telamon, it was shame at seeming to have abandoned the victorious legacy of his father. We see now, in his suicide-speech, that Ajax still maintains this conception of his relation to his father: he sees his death as restoring his former glory and honouring the legacy of Telamon in Troy—or else he would not wish the news to be given at all. This is meant to comfort Telamon, even though it grieves him. At the same time, Ajax realizes that the same message will be for Eriboea a cause for lamentation.

Crucially, although Ajax attempts to set the tone of his suicide, he does not at the same time attempt to deny the bifurcating possibilities of interpretation available to the recipient of the news of his death. He recognizes his mother's grief but does not discount it. He does not anymore suggest that the Atreidae are wrong to hate him. The double-message is left to stand even as the existence of the two choices threatens the interpretation Ajax wishes to be dominant. He recognizes the risk in leaving these things to chance, since in death he cannot affect the outcome, and so he prays to the gods to ensure that Ajax is seen the way that Ajax would like to see himself. It is in this way that Ajax himself recognizes and dramatize the dynamics of certainty and uncertainty within the play.

Chapter 2: Tecmessa and the Chorus

...the drama begins on an unprepared fortissimo: during the prologue the mad Ajax is summoned out of his tent; at this point there is a break; and what follows is virtually a new, contrasting beginning. Then comes, as the first part of the tragedy, the melancholia and death of a man fully conscious of what he is doing, and, as the second part, the dispute about his burial. We have here a kind of catastrophe-drama which follows from the very beginning how a human being has to come to terms with his fate, which has already been decided.³⁵

Karl Reinhardt brings out well the strange setup of Sophocles' *Ajax*. The action which sets the plot in motion does not occur within the play. Moreover, the dramatic interest of the play's first half comes from Ajax's consideration of the choices before him, not from direct action. It is for this reason that criticism of the *Ajax* tends to focus on Ajax himself.³⁶ But Ajax is not alone on the stage. The play is remarkable for its variety of figures: a former princess, a child, warrior-kings. Ajax is removed from the action (if not the stage) at line 865, with just under half the play remaining. What follows is a debate, involving multiple parties with differing interests about what quality of man Ajax was, which will determine the question of his burial. While the practical discussion begins after Ajax's suicide, Ajax's character is scrutinized throughout the play. From the beginning of the prologue, the audience is confronted by the search to find out what sort of man Ajax is. The answer involves Ajax's own perspective, but his is

³⁵ Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, trans. Hazel Harvey and David Harvey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 9.

³⁶ E.g. Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 178: "The dialogue after Tecmessa's entry was evenly distributed between her and the Chorus, and her lines were in a recitative metre: that is, not too far in pitch from the Chorus' more emotional lyrics. By contrast, Ajax on his entry dominates our attention entirely: it is he, the actor, who is given the emotionally charged lyrics...while the others are allowed only the briefest interjections, and these merely spoken."

not the only one. The views of enemies and friends come together, competing against each other, struggling to reconcile what has happened with their own view. The truth is sought since, with it, one can decide what to do next. When that deliberation is private, then one has only oneself to rely on. Deliberation in tandem with others presents its own risks and rewards: it guards against the error of a lone perspective, but puts one in danger of being misled by the malice or ignorance of another. As explored in the first chapter, the isolation and vulnerability of the Sophoclean hero is a common, if not uncontested schema, to adopt when studying the *Ajax*. Moving away from the perspective of the hero, I wish to explore the isolation and vulnerability of these other figures on the stage. But first, a note on genre in relation to epistemic certainty and uncertainty.

Greek tragedy, by its very nature, lends itself to a story comprised of many voices. In a narrated tale, everything is mediated through the narrator, who has a special authority in the text. So, in *Iliad* 11, when Achilles calls for Patroclus to go to the Greek camp to see if Machaon has been injured, the narrator tells us: ὁ δὲ κλισίηθεν ἀκούσας / ἔκμολεν ἴσος Ἄρηϊ, κακοῦ δ' ἄρα οἱ πέλεν ἀρχή (*Il.* 11. 603-604: *When that man, equal to Ares, heard him from his tent, he came forth, but that was the beginning of evil for him*). How this is so is not yet clear to the audience, but the authority of the narrator removes all doubt that it is true. The question of whether this moment really is the beginning of evils for Patroclus (as opposed, say, to his coming to the war at all) cannot be taken up, since there can be no meaningful argument with the narrator. To mount any such argument would

be to challenge the terms of the poem itself. Had the narrator made no comment, then discussion would be possible.³⁷ Only the lack of a secure answer leaves grounds for argument and debate about action and causality in literature.

This is precisely what Greek tragedy does in opposition to its epic counterpart. Charles Segal documented the generic gap that exists between the two genres in his study, *Sophocles' Tragic World*. For Segal, the *Ajax* is emblematic of this: “We are given sharply contrasting points of view: those of mortal and god, friend and enemy, individual and group, inside and outside, specific moment and entire Trojan war...Sophocles thereby involves us in the problem of understanding the character of his anomalous hero.”³⁸ As a result, “Sophocles’ play presents the full story of its hero not as the subject of a lucid, perspicuous present, as epic narrative tends to do, but as an object to be recovered and reconstituted with effort and difficulty.”³⁹ The adaption of epic material to tragedy allows the resulting play to explore new dimensions in mythic material. What was secure within its epic context because of objective narration becomes insecure in the dramatic form, as tragedy produces its action directly.⁴⁰ Tragic

³⁷ This raises the further question of whether or not the answer itself would change, even if we granted in this scenario that it were not discoverable from the direct comment of the voice of the poet (Homer, in this example). I acknowledge that it is an issue for the discussion, but since the answer does not bear directly on the current argument I am making, I pass over the issue.

³⁸ Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 16.

³⁹ Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22.

⁴⁰ Narration, of course, does happen within tragedy (e.g. speeches from messengers). But very few instances of narration in tragedy come from characters who unambiguously have the status of an objective perspective. In fact, Athena in the *Ajax* represents one of the closest examples we have of a character who has an objective perspective—in this instance, one that is unfettered by human limitations of sight and awareness (cf. *Aj.* 13, where Athena asks Odysseus to tell her

characters are implicated in the action they comment on, and this internal perspective is the only one available to the audience. When the terms of perception and information are the same among all parties on stage within a drama, there can be no secure interpretation of actions and events unless a character has been given special powers of knowledge (such as a prophet, or a goddess). Far from frustrating literary interest, tragedy can stage a drama of knowledge and awareness arising from the limited perceptions of the characters within it. In the epic example, the excitement of the audience comes from anticipating not if, but when and how Patroclus will find the evil promised him by the narrator. In Greek tragedy, both of these potential sources of interest are present.

Interest in this dimension of the *Ajax* has grown. In a recent article focusing on Sophocles' narratology and stylistics, de Jong points out that "[a] characteristic feature of Sophocles' dramatic technique is the repeated presentation of the same event by different characters," and that the *Ajax* is "an extreme example of repeated presentation," wherein "the story of Ajax's mad attack on the cattle...is recounted no less than seven times..."⁴¹ De Jong's

what it is that he is trying to accomplish, "ὡς παρ' εἰδύιας μάθῃς", that he may learn it from someone who knows. But even in this example, scholars have argued that Athena's reading of Ajax as being κακός (*Aj.* 133) speaks to a bias in Athena's point of view: cf. R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 55; Ruth Scodel, *Sophocles* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 19; Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Duckworth Press, 2003), 45.

⁴¹ I.J.F. De Jong, "Where Narratology Meets Stylistics," in *Sophocles and the Greek Language*, eds. I.J.F. de Jong & A. Rijksbaron (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 74

analysis describes Sophocles' use of focalization, which grounds an event within the perspective of a single character.⁴² For de Jong, the act of telling and retelling the story becomes itself a source of dramatic interest.

Barker also highlights the proclivity of Sophocles to use this aspect of tragedy to effect: "In a remarkable move, Sophocles *does not represent the judgement of arms itself*. Instead, he dramatizes its 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 perspectives of the characters."⁴³ Like Segal, Barker extends the drama of understanding, ignorance and judgement from the characters within the play to the audience watching it. Like de Jong, he understands that this participatory aspect of drama only exists in the absence of key features of epic narrative.

There is room yet to expand the discussion by exploring the thought processes and reasoning of each of the parties involved in the action of Sophocles' *Ajax* to better understand the structure of the dramatic presentation of a character when a narrator is absent, creating the conditions for epistemic uncertainty. It will be shown that major portions of the play are, in fact, a drama of ignorance, reasoning and learning. I explore what characters seek to do in the absence of secure information. The scope of the work does not permit an exhaustive analysis

⁴² See I.J.F. De Jong, "Where Narratology Meets Stylistics," in *Sophocles and the Greek Language*, eds. I.J.F de Jong & A. Rijksbaron (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 74-76 for a detailed explanation of focalization.

⁴³ Elton Barker, *Entering the Agon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 283.

of all figures within the play, so I restrict my analysis to Ajax's dependants. When I refer to dependants, I mean the Chorus, Tecmessa, Eurysaces. The Chorus are, in Tecmessa's words, ναὸς ἄρωγοὶ τῆς Αἴαντος, / γενεᾶς χθονίων ἀπ' Ἐρεχθιδῶν (201-202: *the helpers of the ship of Ajax*). Ajax addresses them as his φίλοι ναυβάται, μόνοι ἐμῶν φίλων (349: *Beloved seafarers, alone of my friends*). They are sailors, coming with Ajax from Salamis to Troy as part of his contingent.⁴⁴ Later on, they are addressed by Ajax as ἄνδρες ἀσπιστῆρες, ἐνάλιος λεώς (565: *shieldbearing men, race of the sea*) indicating that they perhaps played a martial role. They are partisans of Ajax: they grieve when he grieves, rejoice when he rejoices.⁴⁵ Some scholars have characterized them through their cowardice and self-interest.⁴⁶ At the same time, they are dejected from the toils of the war.⁴⁷ Their most admirable attribute is their loyalty to Ajax. At one point in the action they sing, addressing Salamis, that Ajax,

ὄν ἐξεπέμψω πρὶν δὴ ποτε θουρίῳ
κρατοῦντ' ἐν Ἄρει: νῦν δ' αὖ φρενὸς οἰοβώτας
φίλοις μέγα πένθος ἠΰρηται.
τὰ πρὶν δ' ἔργα χεροῖν
μεγίστας ἀρετᾶς
ἄφιλα παρ' ἀφίλοις

⁴⁴ Cynthia P. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 52: "As in the majority of Sophocles' plays, there has been no preparation during the prologue for the chorus' entrance, and we may therefore assume that their identity was readily apparent to the audience."

⁴⁵ *Aj.* 136-140

⁴⁶ Cynthia P. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 51: "Their role is usually seen as that of ordinary, lesser men, a standard against which the audience measures Ajax and finds him mightier, larger than life. They are relatively weak, timorous (perhaps cowardly), concerned chiefly for survival; in contrast to them Ajax appears strong, bold, unswervingly dedicated to maintaining his honor even at the expense of his life."

⁴⁷ E.g. *Aj.* 866: πόνος πόνω πόνον φέρει. (*Toil adds toil to toil*), which the Chorus sings as they search about for the now-dead Ajax.

ἔπεσ' ἔπεσε μελέοις Ἀτρείδαις.

Whom you sent was once before victorious in raging war: but now he, nourishing his mind alone, is found a great grief to his friends. The former deeds of valour of his hands have fallen friendless among the hateful, miserable Atreidae. (Aj. 613-621).⁴⁸

Tecmessa, the other member of Ajax's dependents, is his wife, a slave-concubine.⁴⁹ Despite her status, the Chorus acknowledge Ajax's affection for her.⁵⁰ Like them, Tecmessa is loyal to Ajax.⁵¹ Even after Tecmessa realizes that she has been tricked by Ajax's deception-speech, she remains true to his cause.⁵² Tecmessa is also the mother of Eurysaces, the son of Ajax. Eurysaces has no lines, but he is addressed in one speech at length by Ajax directly.⁵³ The boy is quite naturally of great importance to them both, and Tecmessa implores Ajax not

⁴⁸ R.W.B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 7: "The main function of the chorus in Ajax [sic] is to enhance the tragic pathos of the play by contrasting the past glory with the present ruin of their hero and expressing their loyalty and devotion to him in his alienation from his true self and from the fellowship of his equals."

⁴⁹ Aj. 211-212: παῖ τοῦ Φρυγίου Τελεύταντος, / λέγ', ἐπεὶ σὲ λέχος δουριάλωτον... (*Child of the Phrygian Teleutas, speak, since you, being a spear-won bride...*).

⁵⁰ Aj. 213: ...στέρξας ἀνέχει θούριος Αἴας (...*valiant Ajax loves and protects*). Finglass (2011) 206 n. ad 211-213 reads στέρξασαν ἔχει which he translates as "Ajax possesses you, as you acquiesce in a marriage won by the spear." His reasoning is that it provides "a more realistic, less romantic picture of the relationship between Tecmessa and Ajax," but admits "that the decision is finely balanced..." (ibid.) It remains to be seen in comparison to what does Finglass' choice seem 'more realistic, less romantic'. While such a decision would bring the phrase more in line with how Ajax treats Tecmessa in this play, the play itself gives several indications that Ajax's behaviour of late is unprecedented and unusual (cf. 233-34; 317-318; esp. 808, where Tecmessa describes herself as καὶ τῆς παλαιᾶς χάριτος ἐκβεβλημένη (cast out of my former favour). There is not much reason, on Finglass's grounds, to doubt the received reading.

⁵¹ Aj. 392-393: ὅταν κατεύχη ταῦθ', ὁμοῦ κάμοι θανεῖν / εὐχου: τί γὰρ δεῖ ζῆν με σοῦ τεθνηκότος; (*Whenever you pray these things, pray for me to die with you together: for why should I live when you are dead?*)

⁵² Aj. 961-963: οἱ δ' οὖν γελώντων κάπιχαιρόντων κακοῖς / τοῖς τοῦδ': ἴσως τοι, κεῖ βλέποντα μὴ 'πόθου, / θανόντ' ἂν οἰμώξαιαν ἐν χρεῖα δορός. (*Let them, then, laugh and take pleasure in the evils of this man: perhaps, indeed, even if they did not miss him alive, they will cry out in need of his spear now that he is dead*).

⁵³ Aj. 545-582.

to abandon them on their son's behalf.⁵⁴ Likewise, when Teucer arrives too late to save Ajax, his priority is to protect Eurysaces.⁵⁵

As noted by both Reinhardt and Barker, Sophocles' *Ajax* begins after the major event which sets the events of the play in motion. That is, the major action, the Judgement of Arms, does not itself take place during the narrative; neither does Ajax's resolution to take vengeance upon the Atreidae and Odysseus, whom he holds responsible for the Judgement. The play instead opens with Odysseus and Athena outside the tent of Ajax, a scene which will receive close attention in the next chapter. What is important about the prologue is the confirmation of Ajax's guilt by Odysseus, and that, while Athena remains hostile to Ajax, Odysseus has pity on him and does not mock his defeated foe. For Ajax's dependants, however, and the Chorus in particular, the action begins with the *parodos*. From this point up until the arrival of Teucer, the play is taken up with their as well as Tecmessa's journey to make out what has happened, to discover what Ajax's intentions are for the future, and their attempt to explain how they were so wrong in their interpretation of his words when they discover their hero's body. This chapter will follow that journey, drawing out its implications at each stage.

⁵⁴ *Aj.* 510-513.

⁵⁵ *Aj.* 985-989.

In the *parodos*, the Chorus quickly inform the audience about their state and the nature of the knowledge they possess, addressing the absent Ajax and expressing their distress:

ὥς καὶ τῆς νῦν φθιμένης νυκτὸς
μεγάλοι θόρυβοι κατέχουσ' ἡμᾶς
ἐπὶ δυσκλείᾳ, σὲ τὸν ἵππομανῆ
λειμῶν' ἐπιβάντ' ὀλέσαι Δαναῶν
βοτὰ καὶ λείαν...

As the night was wasting away, great disturbances gripped us to our disgrace, that you, bounding about in the horse-nurturing meadows, destroyed the beasts and plunder of the Danaans. (141-145).

The ‘great disturbances’ they allude to are a particular instance of what frightens them generally, a λόγος ἐκ Δαναῶν κακόθρους ἐπιβῆ (138: *an evil-speaking rumour from the Danaans*). They attribute the tale that is being spread about Ajax to Odysseus.⁵⁶ De Jong says “the chorus is not referring to any report of Odysseus at all, but is basing itself on the vague rumors which ever since daybreak and the finding of the slaughtered cattle (and the report of the eyewitness) must have started to spread. Knowing the enmity between Ajax and Odysseus it simply—but as the spectators know unjustifiedly—ascribes that rumor to him.”⁵⁷ The theme of uncertainty is parallel to Odysseus’ admission that he is searching for Ajax because ἴσμεν γὰρ οὐδὲν τρανές, ἀλλ’ ἀλώμεθα (23: *for we know nothing clearly, but wander about*).

⁵⁶ Aj. 148-149: τοιοῦσδε λόγους ψιθύρους πλάσσων / εἰς ὅτα φέρει πᾶσιν Ὀδυσσεύς (*Molding these sorts of slanderous words, Odysseus whispers them into the ears of everyone*).

⁵⁷ I.J.F. De Jong, “Where Narratology Meets Stylistics,” in *Sophocles and the Greek Language*, eds. I.J.F. de Jong & A. Rijksbaron (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 84.

The Chorus too admit that they base their alarm on disturbances and whispers. But unlike Odysseus, the Chorus are on-stage alone. There is no divinity who knows everything to inform them.⁵⁸ In other words, their ignorance is irresolvable for the moment, unlike Odysseus' in the prologue, where figures with differing levels of knowledge and authority stood side-by-side, creating the opportunity to teach and inform. The Chorus only have access to their own knowledge of the night's events, which is uncertain, and no way of knowing if their interpretation is correct. They are forced to attempt to come to an understanding of what has happened on their own. To that end, the Chorus attempt to reason out what happened, and the explanation must encompass not only how (a whisper from the Danaans) but also why.

The Chorus begin their inquiry with their suspicion that *περὶ γὰρ σοῦ νῦν / εὐπειστα λέγει, καὶ πᾶς ὁ κλύων / τοῦ λέξαντος χαίρει μᾶλλον / τοῖς σοῖς ἄχεσιν καθυβρίζων* (150-153: *about you does he [Odysseus] speak words that persuade, and everyone who listens to him is very happy to relish in your pains*). From this they reference a rule: *τῶν γὰρ μεγάλων ψυχῶν ἰεῖς / οὐκ ἂν ἀμάρτοις: κατὰ δ' ἄν τις ἐμοῦ / τοιαῦτα λέγων οὐκ ἂν πείθοι: / πρὸς γὰρ τὸν ἔχονθ' ὁ φθόνος ἔρπει.* (154-157: *For when you aim against great spirits, you would not miss: but saying such things against me, he would not succeed in persuading anyone: for envy creeps up on the powerful*). The Chorus' attribution of the malicious rumour to Odysseus is sensible, but the audience already knows from the prologue that they

⁵⁸ Aj. 13.

are wrong. The audience has seen Odysseus presented with an opportunity to gloat over Ajax, as well as his refusal to do so. They also saw that it was Ajax who was motivated by envy at Odysseus' success.⁵⁹

The partisanship of the Chorus towards Ajax, while understandable given their limited perspective, is demonstrative of their vulnerability to epistemic uncertainty. Their understanding of Odysseus and Ajax is the reverse of the audience's: Odysseus, who won the arms of Achilles and has power over Ajax (thanks to Athena), does not indulge in mockery; but the Chorus, who operate in ignorance of what has happened, conclude that Odysseus is the cause of the trouble afflicting Ajax and themselves. In the third chapter, I will discuss how greater access to information, as well as safety from physical harm, allow Odysseus to engage in a universalization of Ajax, collapsing the categories of friend and foe. But the Chorus, in their isolation, can only resort to the pre-defined categories of friend and foe, categories which do not accurately describe relations between Ajax and Odysseus. Although the audience may be moved to sympathise with the Chorus, they cannot identify with them, since their perspective on the events of the play brings to prominence the Chorus' error. This heightens the dramatic interest of the play: the audience will be anticipating the Chorus' discovery of its own error, and the fallout from that discovery.

⁵⁹ Aj. 41: χόλω βαρυνθείς τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὄπλων. (Ath: *Since he was weighed down by anger about the arms of Achilles*).

This anticipation is fulfilled when Tecmessa arrives from the tent. The

Chorus ask her:

τί δ' ἐνήλλακται τῆς ἡμερίας
νῦξ ἦδε (----) βάρος;
παῖ τοῦ Φρυγίου Τελεύαντος,
λέγ', ἐπεὶ σὲ λέχος δουριάλωτον
στέρξας ἀνέχει θούριος Αἴας:
ὥστ' οὐκ ἂν ἄϊδρις ὑπέιποις.

And what weight of the day has this night exchanged? Child of the Phrygian Teleutas, speak, since valiant Ajax loves and protects you, his spear-won bride; that way you may speak as one not ignorant. (209-214).

The Chorus' very first address to Tecmessa begins with a question, beginning with the interrogative τί. τί modifies βάρος, 'what weight...', but τί, coming in the emphatic first position in the first line, is separate from its noun in the extreme, reaching completion only at the very end of the next line. Suspended on its own as it is for a time, τί, which also signifies the interrogative adverb "why?" hints at the Chorus' desire for an explanation of what has happened, founded upon reason. They seek not only the news, but also the understanding necessary to grasp the event. They have good reason to hope for this, since Tecmessa is close to Ajax: she may be, unlike the Chorus, able to speak as 'one not unknowing.' Tecmessa's answer speaks to some of the concerns the Chorus expressed in the *parodos*. The Chorus worried about Ajax's long absence, which allowed his enemies to move freely. They wanted him to come out of his tent, confident that μέγαν αἰγυπιὸν δ' ὑποδείσαντες / τάχ' ἂν ἐξαίφνης, εἰ σὺ φανείης, / σιγῇ πτήξειαν ἄφωνοι (169-171: *If you were to appear suddenly, they, frightened of the great eagle, would take*

flight in hushed silence). Their solution was for him to come ... ἄνα ἐξ ἐδράνων, ὅπου μακραίωνι / στηρίζει ποτὲ τᾶδ' ἀγωνίῳ σχολᾷ / ἄταν οὐρανίαν φλέγων (193-195: *up from your dwelling, where for some time you have been fixed in this overlong respite from battle, stoking a divine ruin*). The error of the Chorus' perspective, however, from the *parodos*, that Odysseus is the malefactor of Ajax's crisis, hangs like a cloud over their hopes for Ajax's appearance, giving the audience good reason to suspect that he will not be a panacea for their troubles. The Chorus' eagerness for news from Tecmessa expresses their great need for epistemic certainty.

But Tecmessa's answer perpetuates the uncertainty with a question which speaks to the limits of her capacity to explain what happened: πῶς δῆτα λέγω λόγον ἄρρητον; (215: *How, really, do I say the unspeakable word?*). Tecmessa can only proceed by resorting to a periphrastic image of what her limited knowledge means for the Chorus:

θανάτῳ γὰρ ἴσον βάρος ἐκπεύσει.
 μανία γὰρ ἀλοὺς ἡμῖν ὁ κλεινὸς
 νύκτερος Αἴας ἀπελωβήθη.
 τοιαῦτ' ἂν ἴδοις σκηνῆς ἔνδον
 χειροδάϊκτα σφάγι' αἰμοβαφῆ,
 κείνου χρηστήρια τὰνδρός.

*For you will learn of a weight equal to death. For Ajax, famous to us, but overcome by madness, was this night outraged. You may see such things inside the tent, the slaughters dipped in blood by his own hand, the sacrifices of the man.*⁶⁰ (216-220).

⁶⁰ I.J.F. De Jong, "Where Narratology Meets Stylistics," in *Sophocles and the Greek Language*, eds. I.J.F. de Jong & A. Rijksbaron (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 88: "Tecmessa, not knowing the exact nature of Ajax' delusion, his taking cattle for men, tries to make sense of his behaviour, interpreting in terms of a sacrifice, albeit a corrupted sacrifice."

Knowledge will bring death to the Chorus. Both Ajax and Tecmessa will echo the sentiment.⁶¹ Beforehand, the appearance of Ajax was the condition set by the Chorus for their own safety. Now, the first mention of Ajax from someone who is supposed to know more than the Chorus promises death. Ajax, famous to Tecmessa and the Chorus, is now infamous for his deeds at night. As evidence, Tecmessa offers a sight like the one Athena offered Odysseus: Ajax exposed. Neither Tecmessa nor the Chorus, however, have the invulnerability which Athena gave to Odysseus.⁶² The Chorus articulate their fear of reprisal:

πεφόβημαι λιθόλευστον Ἄρη / ξυναλγεῖν μετὰ τοῦδε τυπεῖς, τὸν αἴσ' ἄπλατος ἴσχει. (254-255: *I am frightened of suffering the violence of a stoning, struck down in the company of this man, whom a confounding fate holds*). Tecmessa offers a qualification, but not to relieve the Chorus: οὐκέτι: λαμπρᾶς γὰρ ἄτερ στεροπῆς / ἄξας ὀξὺς νότος ὡς λήγει, / καὶ νῦν φρόνιμος νέον ἄλγος ἔχει: (257-259: *No longer [mad]: for just as a fierce south wind, after it has shot forth without lightning, grows calm, so too does he, now sensible, have new pain*). The arrangement of the words deceives: φρόνιμος comes first in Tecmessa's description of his present state, teasing the notion that Ajax might be free of his suffering—but being sensible has only extended his suffering, as the line's

⁶¹ Ajax: *Aj.* 554-555; Tecmessa: *Aj.* 942

⁶² *Aj.* 223-228: οἶαν ἐδήλωσας ἀνέρος αἴθονος / ἀγγελίαν ἄτλατον οὐδὲ φευκτάν, / τῶν μεγάλων Δαναῶν ὑπο κληζομέναν, / τὰν ὁ μέγας μῦθος ἀέξει. / οἴμοι φοβοῦμαι τὸ προσέρπον (What news of the fiery man have you revealed, neither sufferable nor able to be fled from, spread by the great ones among the Danaans, which the great story strokes!).

completion reveals. Once again, information which seemed to offer relief to the Chorus instead promises further suffering.

The shock of the Chorus leads to an argument about Ajax's grounds for continuing to despair, even as Tecmessa qualifies what she means by 'new pain':

τὸ γὰρ ἐσλεύσσειν οἰκεῖα πάθη, / μηδενὸς ἄλλου παραπράξαντος, / μεγάλας
ὀδύνας ὑποτείνει. (260-262: *for looking on his own sufferings, when no one else
has had a hand in them, propounds his great distress*). Unable to accept this, the
Chorus retorts: ἀλλ' εἰ πέπαυται, κάρτ' ἂν εὐτυχεῖν δοκῶ: / φρούδου γὰρ ἤδη τοῦ
κακοῦ μείων λόγος. (263-264: *But if he has stopped, I would certainly expect him
to prosper: for is the reckoning of an evil, now that it is departed, greater?*),

forcing Tecmessa to elaborate:

άνηρ ἐκεῖνος, ήνίκ' ήν ἐν τῆ νόσῳ,
αὐτὸς μὲν ἤδεθ' οἷσιν εἶχετ' ἐν κακοῖς,
ήμᾶς δὲ τοὺς φρονοῦντας ήνία ζυνών:
νῦν δ' ὡς ἔληξε κἀνέπνευσε τῆς νόσου,
κεῖνός τε λύπη πᾶς ἐλήλαται κακῆ
ήμεῖς θ' ὁμοίως οὐδὲν ἤσσον ἢ πάρος.
ἄρ' ἔστι ταῦτα δις τόσ' ἐξ ἀπλῶν κακά;

*That man, when he was in his sickness, himself took pleasure in those evils
which gripped him, and by his presence he caused pain to us who are
cognizant: but now, when he has ceased from and recovered from his
illness, that man is entirely wracked by evil grief, and we are no less alike
him than before. Is not this a doubling of evils from a single woe? (271-
277).*

But this explanation reveals a parallel between Ajax's discovery and processing of his own disaster and that of the Chorus'.⁶³ Both Ajax and the Chorus begin the

⁶³ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 177 defends the passage: "This dialogue...has been criticized for dullness and frigidity, perhaps rather unjustly: for the point about Ajax's reaction is one which, in preparation for the scenes which are to

play in ignorance of their respective situations. Each hopes that the culmination of their desires will give them the restitution they look for: Ajax, to slay the Atreidae and Odysseus; the Chorus, to see Ajax restored, or at least get good news of him. Both discover, in the process of learning from another, that the good they thought they were seeking instead endangers them. For Ajax, the end of his delusion has humiliated him and made him vulnerable to mockery and physical harm. The dispersal of the Chorus' ignorance has the same result for them. In learning that that Ajax remains overwhelmed after his delusion, the Chorus themselves flinch from this knowledge and try to rationalize what they have heard. In their behaviour, the Chorus enact and vindicate the very process which they despair of in Ajax. They look to the gods for an explanation: ξύμφημι δὴ σοι καὶ δέδοικα μὴ 'κ θεοῦ / πληγὴ τις ἦκη. πῶς γάρ, εἰ πεπαυμένος / μηδέν τι μᾶλλον ἢ νοσῶν εὐφραίνεται; (278-280: *I agree with you and I am frightened lest some stroke of a god has come. For how else can it be, if, having found respite, he is not at all more gladdened than in his sickness?*). The conclusion is naïve: for them, actions should have neither a history nor a consequence. Why Ajax was made to suffer does not seem important to them, nor do the consequences which his madness will have on his future.⁶⁴ Tecmessa forces them to confront the implacability of their

follow, merits emphasis; and if the exchange is stretched out more than is strictly necessary for this purpose, considerations of pace suggest that a relatively 'slack' interlude is desirable between the high-points of kommos and rhesis."

⁶⁴ Some may point to the *parodos*, where the Chorus ask if Ajax offended Artemis (172) or Ares (179). But the Chorus there are chiefly concerned with knowing why Ajax fell upon the *flocks* in particular; that he may have mounted an attack with a legitimate target is not out of the question for them (175; 183-185).

shared misfortune upon them: ὡς ᾗδ' ἐχόντων τῶνδ' ἐπίστασθαί σε χρή. (281: *Because this is how things are, you must understand*). It is only then that the Chorus ask Tecmessa to explain from the beginning.⁶⁵

The play's proclivity towards a variety of perspectives comes out in Tecmessa's narration of the events of the night, some of which overlaps with the events of the prologue and *parodos*:

κεῖνος γὰρ ἄκρας νυκτός, ἠνίχ' ἔσπεροι
λαμπτήρες οὐκέτ' ἦθον, ἄμφηκες λαβῶν
ἐμαίετ' ἔγχος ἐξόδους ἔρπειν κενάς.
κἀγὼ 'πιπλήσσω καὶ λέγω: τί χρῆμα δρᾶς,
Αἴας; τί τήνδ' ἄκλητος οὔθ' ὑπ' ἀγγέλων
κληθεὶς ἀφορμᾶς πείραν οὔτε τοῦ κλύων
σάλπιγγος; ἀλλὰ νῦν γε πᾶς εὔδει στρατός.

For that man, in the middle of the night, when the evening torches no longer burned, looked about for a two-edged sword to take as he went on a purposeless journey. And I questioned his purpose and said: "What are you doing, Ajax? Why are you rushing out, neither called for by the messengers nor hearkening to the trumpet, to this attempt? Really, at this moment, the whole army is asleep. (285-291).

Tecmessa reveals her familiarity with Ajax's customary behaviour in pointing out that it was not that Ajax was up late, stepping out at night, or arming himself which surprised her. We know from the *Iliad* that counsels, summons, and expeditions can be undertaken at night.⁶⁶ But Ajax was not acting in response to the army. The structure of Tecmessa's narration shows she underwent a process of deliberation similar to the Chorus's in the *parodos*. Reasoning from her prior

⁶⁵ Aj. 282-283: τίς γάρ ποτ' ἀρχή τοῦ κακοῦ προσέπτατο;

⁶⁶ Cf. The night raid and its preliminaries in *Iliad* 10.

experience of Ajax, Tecmessa surmises that Ajax leaves if he is summoned. On this night, Ajax is leaving the tent without summons, moving Tecmessa to question him. Ajax deflects her.⁶⁷ Tecmessa does not press the issue further, but *καὶ τὰς ἐκεῖ μὲν οὐκ ἔχω λέγειν πάθας*: (295: *I am not able to say what transpired out there*). She next describes the procession of animals into the tent, the evidence of Ajax's distorted perception, and the violence he commits.⁶⁸ The novelty of this repeated story arises from its grounding in a new perspective: Tecmessa knows more than the Chorus, less than Ajax, Athena, Odysseus. She is an ally and dependant of Ajax. Tecmessa sees the slaughter of the cattle, but not to whom Ajax speaks outside: *τέλος δ' ὑπάξας διὰ θυρῶν σκιᾷ τινι / λόγους ἀνέσπα...* (301-302: *At last, darting out through the doors, he dragged up words before some shadow...*). The audience knows that it is Athena, but Tecmessa does not, bringing the drama of limited information and epistemic uncertainty to the fore. What looked ridiculous to Athena, pitiful to Odysseus, and gratifying to Ajax, to Tecmessa looks uncertain and horrifying, inhuman in its extremity.⁶⁹ All these perspectives are voiced without the sanctioning comment of an objective authority. The pity of Odysseus, heartening in the prologue, looks now like the luxury of his invulnerable perspective.⁷⁰ Tecmessa's reaction is limited by what

⁶⁷ Aj. 292-293: ὁ δ' εἶπε πρὸς με βαί', ἀεὶ δ' ὑμνούμενα: / γύναϊ, γυναιξὶ κόσμον ἢ σιγὴ φέρει. (But he said to me something curt, and always recited: 'Woman, silence lends beauty to women.'

⁶⁸ Aj. 296-300

⁶⁹ Cf. earlier lines of Tecmessa, when she says that Ajax was *κακὰ δεινάζων ῥήμαθ'*, ἃ δαίμων / κούδεις ἀνδρῶν ἐδίδαξεν. (...cursing with awful phrases, which a *daimon*, and no man, taught him).

⁷⁰ Aj. 121-126

she knows. She and the Chorus, despite their unified knowledge, cannot react as Odysseus does, nor would such a reaction, however desirable to an audience, be appropriate to people in their position.

As Tecmessa reveals more of what she knows, the prospect of imminent danger to herself and the Chorus grows more likely: ἔπειτ' ἔμοι τὰ δειν' ἐπηπείλησ' ἔπη, / εἰ μὴ φανοίην πᾶν τὸ συντυχὸν πάθος, / κἀνήρετ' ἐν τῷ πράγματος κυροῖ ποτέ. (312-314: *And after a time, he threatened me terribly, if I would not reveal everything he had just suffered, and he asked me what his situation had been*). Ajax has no information for Tecmessa, but instead questions her, and does so violently. He seems to have changed: ὁ δ' εὐθύς ἐξώμωξεν οἰμωγὰς λυγράς, / ἅς οὔ ποτ' αὐτοῦ πρόσθεν εἰσήκουσ' ἐγώ: (317-318: *He immediately groaned out mournful groans which I had never heard of him before*). Tecmessa emphasises how radical is the transformation Ajax has undergone, since πρὸς γὰρ κακοῦ τε καὶ βαρυψύχου γόους / τοιούσδ' ἀεί ποτ' ἀνδρὸς ἐξηγεῖτ' ἔχειν: (319-320: *For he always thought that such groans were more fit for a weak and heavy-hearted man*). Far from helping them to understand what is happening, new information has only brought further peril. Tecmessa is certain of only one thing: καὶ δῆλός ἐστιν ὧς τι δρασείων κακόν. (326: *And it is plain that he is going to do something bad*).

When the tent is opened to the sight of Ajax, the Chorus lament that Tecmessa was so accurate in her reporting: οἴμ' ὧς ἔοικας ὀρθὰ μαρτυρεῖν ἄγαν. (354: *Alas, it seems you have borne witness to the truth too well!*). Ajax's arrival

from the tent was supposed to bring safety for his dependants. They had earlier described their belief in the conventional wisdom that:

καίτοι σμικροὶ μεγάλων χωρὶς
σφαλερὸν πύργου ῥῦμα πέλονται:
μετὰ γὰρ μεγάλων βαιὸς ἄριστ' ἄν
καὶ μέγας ὀρθοῖθ' ὑπὸ μικροτέρων.

The small without the great are a tottering defense of the tower: for the small with the great is best, and the great are kept straight by the lesser. (158-161).

But now they say: δηλοῖ δὲ τοῦργον ὡς ἀφροντίστως ἔχει. (355: *the fact is clear that he is out of his mind*). This possibility had not entered into their earlier deliberations. Tecmessa had indicated before that Ajax was φρόνιμος. But the Chorus cannot accept an Ajax that is φρόνιμος but still overwhelmed by what he has suffered. Their invocation of the great eagle does not match the bloody spectacle they see. This incongruity is compounded when they finally discover what it is Ajax desires: death.⁷¹

In their first meeting with Ajax on-stage, his epistemic uncertainty is, in fact, something to be desired and secured by the Chorus and Tecmessa, since Ajax reveals that he, too, is in the ironic position of having an opportunity to learn more—what happened to him and how he himself acted:

ὄρᾳς τὸν θρασύν, τὸν εὐκάρδιον,
τὸν ἐν δαΐοις ἄτρεστον μάχαις,
ἐν ἀφόβοις με θηρσὶ δεινὸν χέρας;
ὦμοι γέλωτος, οἶον ὑβρίσθην ἄρα.

⁷¹ *Aj.* 361: ἀλλά με συνδάϊξον (Kill me)

You see the bold, the brave, the dauntless in battles with the enemy, me, that is, dreadful with my hands, among beasts without fear! Alas for the laughter, how I have been outraged! (364-367).

Tecmessa, in strong language, urges him not to utter such words, trying to stifle any talk along these lines.⁷² For the Chorus and Tecmessa, Ajax's comprehension of his own woes is to be avoided. But Ajax drives on: ὦ δύσμορος, ὃς χερὶ μὲν / μεθῆκα τοὺς ἀλάστορας... (373-374: *Miserable me, who let slip from my hand those worthy of punishment...*). They learn Ajax's chief regret: not his plot, not its manner, but the failure. The Chorus attempt to calm Ajax by offering their own perspective on action and consequence: τί δῆτ' ἄν ἀλγοίης ἐπ' ἐξειργασμένοις; / οὐ γὰρ γένοιτ' ἄν ταῦθ' ὅπως οὐχ ὧδ' ἔχειν. (377-378: *Why, after all, are you in pain at what has happened: for these things cannot be but as they stand*). But they speak their belief even as they are forced to listen to Ajax reflect on the cause and consequence of his failed revenge, and the events of the play will once again vindicate Ajax, not the Chorus.

We have seen how Sophocles has woven an irony into the reaction of the Chorus to Ajax's state, since they mimic the very thing in him which they wish him to avoid. Now Tecmessa will fall prey to the same irony. Ajax prays to Zeus to grant his vengeance before finally dying himself.⁷³ But Tecmessa asks him:

⁷² Aj. 368: μή, δέσποτ' Αἴας, λίσσομαί σ', αὐδα τάδε.

⁷³ Aj. 389-391: πῶς ἄν τὸν αἰμυλώτατον, ἐχθρὸν ἄλημα, / τοὺς τε δισσάρχας ὀλέσσας βασιλῆς / τέλος θάνομι καὶ τός; (Is there some way I may destroy that arch-deceiver, that hostile scoundrel, as well as the two kings, and then die, at last, myself?)

ὅταν κατεύχη ταῦθ', ὁμοῦ κάμοι θανεῖν / εὖχου: τί γὰρ δεῖ ζῆν με σοῦ
 τεθνηκότος; (392-393: *Whenever you pray for those things, pray also that I may
 die together with you: for why is it necessary for me to live, once you are dead?*).
 On the surface, Tecmessa is offering sympathy to Ajax. It is a sympathy which
 reminds Ajax that Tecmessa depends on him. But the couplet also communicates
 Tecmessa's valuation of Ajax. Without him, Tecmessa may as well die. The
 question is not, 'how can I live, once you are dead?'—a question of means—but
 rather, 'why should I live, once you are dead?'—a question of ends. Within her
 scheme of values, Ajax is for Tecmessa the *sine qua non*. Like the Chorus,
 Tecmessa shares more in common with Ajax than she realizes: both stake their
 lives on the preservation of a single value which is vulnerable to harm.

Soon Tecmessa begins her petition to Ajax. Malcolm Heath describes it as
 “subtle and carefully organised,” with “an interweaving of themes, with sliding
 transitions and indirect connections of thought.”⁷⁴ The speech has also drawn
 comparisons to the exchange between Hector and Andromache in Book 6 of the
Iliad.⁷⁵ With it, Tecmessa tries to give Ajax a framework which will allow him to
 ‘live well’ without having to ‘die well.’ She starts by attributing Ajax’s situation
 to ‘bad luck’: ὦ δέσποτ' Αἴας, τῆς ἀναγκαίας τύχης / οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν μείζον

⁷⁴ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 181.

⁷⁵ So Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Duckworth Press, 2003), 69: “So Tecmessa’s tone and desperation are amplified by the recasting of an Iliadic scene. Where Hector seems understanding towards Andromache, Tecmessa points to the harshness of Ajax. Where Hector must die on the plain to avoid shame, Tecmessa styles Ajax’s threatened suicide as a shameful failure of reciprocity and an abrogation of his duties of care towards his son, consort and parents.”

ἀνθρώποις κακόν. (485-486: *My lord Ajax, there is not any greater evil for men than compelling fortune*). Tecmessa's first move is not to remove the pain of Ajax's misfortune, like the Chorus, but instead his culpability in it. Compelling fortune is something one suffers. But its consolation is that the sufferer can distance themselves from any responsibility for it.⁷⁶ Tecmessa employs her own life as an example.⁷⁷ Once a princess, Tecmessa is now enslaved.⁷⁸ She cites as causes of this reversal both Ajax and the gods.⁷⁹ From the disaster there is some good: their marriage.⁸⁰ The double-attribution of the gods and Ajax is peculiar, but can be made intelligible: when he annihilated Tecmessa's country, Ajax did not know the marriage he was going to draw. He was doing the work a warrior is expected to do. But the intention of that action operates underneath and in tandem with the gods', who brought Ajax and Tecmessa together, although neither foresaw it happening as a result of Ajax's conquest. Had Tecmessa reacted as Ajax intends to, their marriage and son would not exist. Now she can provide Ajax with a model of patiently suffering one's fate. It is a powerful argument on

⁷⁶ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 70 well explains the responsibility Ajax feels: "This is not just a regret about what happened, such as a spectator might have. It is an agent's regret, and it is in the nature of action that such regrets cannot be eliminated, that one's life could not be partitioned into some things that one does intentionally and other things that merely happen to one."

⁷⁷ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 181-182: "...the theme, 'others too...' is a common consolatory *topos*; 'I, too...' goes further, suggesting in addition a bond of shared suffering and mutual sympathy."

⁷⁸ Aj. 487-488: ἐγὼ δ' ἔλευθέρου μὲν ἐξέφυν πατρός, / εἵπερ τινὸς σθένοντος ἐν πλούτῳ Φρυγῶν.

⁷⁹ Aj. 489-490: θεοῖς γὰρ ᾧδ' ἔδοξέ που / καὶ σῆ μάλιστα χειρὶ. (*For it seemed right for things to be like this both to the gods, and especially your hand*).

⁸⁰ Aj. 490-491: τοιγαροῦν, ἐπεὶ / τὸ σὸν λέχος ξυνηῆλθον, εὔφρονῶ τὰ σά... (*Therefore, since I have joined you in your bed, I am well-disposed to your interests...*).

its own terms, but it fails, I argue, partially because it treats a future which is epistemically uncertain (unknown) as though it were certain. There is a cruel irony in the play's sequence of events, in that Tecmessa and the Chorus find out from the messenger that patience, in Ajax's case, could have delivered a rescue. But that is not Tecmessa's argument, and there are no clues to indicate that Calchas will divine a means for Ajax's salvation to be derived from it. An appraisal of Ajax's present situation will reveal the desperate degree of his circumstances: Ajax has lost the arms, as well as his vengeance. There is, realistically, little he can do to redress these things, for he has displayed his hostility to the army, becoming a traitor.⁸¹ Ajax has also been humiliated by Athena before Odysseus. He has not changed his position on any of these things. From their limited perspective, what time is left? Ajax does not and cannot know that he has only one day to suffer Athena's wrath. Even the audience does not know that it may be otherwise. On the other hand, it is natural for Ajax to expect reprisal. Where can he go from here?

Tecmessa then asks Ajax to consider what impact his actions will have on herself and Ajax's other dependants. Ajax should not allow his enemies to lay an evil whisper upon her by his actions.⁸² Like Ajax, Tecmessa wishes to avoid

⁸¹ Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 211: "Tecmessa's speech had failed to explore what it would mean, in practical or in ethical terms, for Ajax to be allowed to continue to act as the protector of his *philoí*, after his failed attack on the Greek leaders."

⁸² *Aj.* 494: μή μ' ἀξιώσης βάζειν ἀλγεινήν λαβεῖν...

mockery. She vividly describes how she and Eurysaces will be snatched up by force in his absence, how they will mock her because of Ajax's death:⁸³

καί τις πικρὸν πρόσφθεγμα δεσποτῶν ἐρεῖ
λόγοις ἰάπτων: ἴδετε τὴν ὀμευνέτιν
Αἴαντος, ὃς μέγιστον ἴσχυσεν στρατοῦ,
οἷας λατρείας ἀνθ' ὅσου ζήλου τρέφει

And someone of the nobles will speak a bitter phrase by abusing me with their words: 'Behold the companion of Ajax, who was mightiest of the army, what servitude she nourishes in place of what envy. (500-503).

Just as Ajax felt that the absence of Achilles created the conditions for mischief on the part of the Atreidae and Odysseus, so Tecmessa argues that the absence of Ajax will be what allows their family to be reviled by the enemy: *κάμῃ μὲν δαίμων ἐλάῃ, / σοὶ δ' αἰσχρὰ τᾶπη ταῦτα καὶ τῷ σῷ γένει.* (504-505: *And my fate will pursue me, but these words will be shameful to you and your family*).

Again, it must be asked, to what does this speak? The need for Ajax not to incur further abuse. But Tecmessa's appeal to the threat of future disgrace is misguided with respect to Ajax. Ajax has already incurred abuse and disgrace, such that he considers his identity to have been utterly nullified. His enemies have already prevailed over him. Ajax's chief concern is now dying well. Furthermore, Ajax has said little about Tecmessa and their child. He has called for Eurysaces once. To his sailors he called out also—to kill him. What Tecmessa hopes Ajax values is not what he truly values. As Winnington-Ingram puts it: "that the sexual relationship lacked its ideal symmetry is Tecmessa's tragedy as it was

⁸³ Aj. 496-499.

Deianira's."⁸⁴ Their marriage lost its value for Ajax once he was thwarted from achieving his highest aim. Along similar lines, Tecmessa tells Ajax to feel shame at the thought of his father and mother in their old age.⁸⁵ Tecmessa then urges Ajax to think of his parents, but it is Telamon's judgment which impels Ajax to abandon her and Eurysaces. The climax of Tecmessa's speech comes when she declares to her husband:

ἐμοὶ γὰρ οὐκέτ' ἔστιν εἰς ὃ τι βλέπω
 πλὴν σοῦ. σὺ γάρ μοι πατρίδ' ἤστωσας δόρει,
 καὶ μητέρ' ἄλλη μοῖρα τὸν φύσαντά τε
 καθεῖλεν Ἄιδου θανασίμους οἰκήτορας.
 τίς δῆτ' ἐμοὶ γένοιτ' ἂν ἀντὶ σοῦ πατρίς;
 τίς πλοῦτος; ἐν σοὶ πᾶσ' ἔγωγε σῶζομαι.

For there is nothing which I look on but you. For you razed my country with the spear, and another fate took the mother and the man who bore me to be the dead denizens of Hades. What country is there going to be for me in place of you? What wealth? But in you I am entirely saved. (514-519).

Here Tecmessa echoes her earlier statement that her death would accompany his. But Tecmessa's reasoning in both instances actually supports Ajax's decision to die. Tecmessa is the wife of Ajax—without Ajax, she is and has nothing. The same can be said for Ajax's reliance on the recognition of his valour in the contest for the arms and in the subsequent revenge. Without either of these, Ajax, the warrior, has nothing and is nothing. When Tecmessa tells Ajax, "In you is my whole salvation," she is not saying anything different from Ajax when he says, "One must either live well or die well." Everything depends on the doing of the

⁸⁴ R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 30.

⁸⁵ *Aj.* 506-510.

thing well—unqualified living is by no means sufficient for the “good life” as Ajax has framed it.

Finally, Tecmessa ends her speech on a note of reciprocity:

ἀλλ' ἴσχε κάμοῦ μνήστιν: ἀνδρί τοι χρεῶν
μνήμην προσεῖναι, τερπνὸν εἶ τί που πάθοι.
χάρις χάριν γάρ ἐστιν ἢ τίκτους' ἀεὶ:
ὅτου δ' ἀπορρεῖ μνήστις εὖ πεπονθότος,
οὐκ ἂν γένοιτ' ἔθ' οὗτος εὐγενὴς ἀνὴρ.

But keep you a remembrance of me: it is necessary for a man to hold onto his memory, if he has ever experienced some delight. For a kindness always begets kindness: but whenever the memory of someone who has experienced some good perishes, that man may no longer be noble. (520-524).

Hesk argues that these lines constitute “...a very real problem for ‘hero-worshipping’ critical approaches which seek to minimise Ajax’s negative qualities. The play as a whole seems to equate Ajax’s failure fully to answer Tecmessa’s powerful demand for charis and the Atreids’ failure to show charis to Ajax by awarding him the armour.”⁸⁶ Under Hesk’s reading, Ajax acts hypocritically for wanting to kill himself, thereby abandoning his dependants, in part because he will be inflicting upon them the same consequences which the Atreidae inflicted upon him when they awarded the arms to Odysseus. This point is worth considering in connection with the earlier comparisons made between Tecmessa’s argument and the discussion that takes place between Hector and Andromache. As Hesk points out:

Tecmessa’s recasting of Hector’s words generates the irony that it is she who has to describe her future of enslavement to Ajax rather than the other way round. And he is planning suicide, not a glorious death in

⁸⁶ Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Duckworth Press, 2003), 67.

*battle... When she goes on to demand that Ajax feel shame at abandoning his parents and dependants, she is appealing to a concept which stops Hector from staying on the ramparts with Andromache... But it is clear that Ajax will feel more shame about his humiliation before the army than he will about deserting his familial philoi.*⁸⁷

Hesk is correct about Ajax's motivations, but fails to draw out the full implications for Tecmessa's speech and her role in the wider play. Hesk states that, "[w]here Hector seems understanding towards Andromache, Tecmessa points to the harshness of Ajax. Where Hector must die on the plain to avoid shame, Tecmessa styles Ajax's threatened suicide as a shameful failure of reciprocity and an abrogation of his duties of care towards his son, consort and parents." But Hesk fails to see that Tecmessa's speech contains its own refutation. For Tecmessa is trying to tell Ajax that she and Eurysaces will suffer if Ajax dies. Moreover, Ajax's death will violate the *charis* which is owed to Tecmessa in repayment for her *charis* to him. At the same time, Ajax is everything to Tecmessa, such that his death will cause her and their son the greatest grief: her purpose for living will be removed if Ajax leaves them. Tecmessa's reasoning follows, but fails to recognize that it validates Ajax's suicide.

These are the same arguments Ajax could make about the Judgement of Arms, the value of the weapons, and the significance of his defeat. If Agamemnon and Menelaus were going to give the arms to Odysseus, Ajax would be open to insult and disgrace. Doing so would mean despising the *charis* which Ajax provided them through his service. Moreover, Ajax singularly values the

⁸⁷ Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Duckworth Press, 2003), 68.

recognition that accompanies his fighting services to the Greeks. His dependency on this recognition makes him vulnerable, and its removal causes him the greatest harm.⁸⁸ Tecmessa's argument legitimizes Ajax's suicide. As Christopher Gill points out, "unlike Achilles in Iliad 9, Ajax is not in the position of being able to set terms to his *philoï* for what should count as 'paying back all his spirit-grieving insult'. His position is rather that of having tried, and failed, to make the Greek leaders 'pay back' his insult, and of experiencing the more intense humiliation, as well as the greater enmity, that is the result of this."⁸⁹ As seen above, critics compare Ajax unfavourably to Hector. But they are not as careful in differentiating their situation as Heath is: "...in Homer, Hector faces a glorious death in battle; in the play, Ajax is in a disastrously ruinous situation, and faces suicide as a desperate, but necessary remedy..."⁹⁰ Gill says, "Ajax's indignation at his loss of honour (*time*) is based not simply on his failure to acquire a valuable status-symbol. It is also grounded, as it is for Achilles, in his conviction of the wrongness of the Greek leaders' decision, its inconsistency with his merits, and, thus, the breach involved in proper modes of chieftainly reciprocity. In other words, it is not just Ajax's humiliation, but the unjustified nature of this humiliation that rankles, as well as what this indicates about the Atreidae's

⁸⁸ So Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 205-206: "Ajax regards the refusal of the Greek leaders to award him the arms of Achilles as being a massive act of humiliation (as Achilles regards the seizure of Briseis), and one which, in the light of his exceptional services to the Greeks, represents a gross breach in reciprocal friendship and the exchange of acts of favour (*charis*)."

⁸⁹ Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206.

⁹⁰ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 183.

general way of treating their *philoí*...”⁹¹ Ajax has suffered a loss as indicative of a broken reciprocal relationship as Tecmessa will. Her anger ultimately supports Ajax’s action.

Meanwhile, the Chorus, whose expectations are on the verge of being dashed, attempt to articulate the chaos brought on by their epistemic uncertainty. The tent is then closed, the stage cleared but for them. They sing out their lament at what has happened. They address famous Salamis, their happy memory of a place *πᾶσιν περίφαντος ἀεί* (599: *always famous to all*). The phrase speaks to the lack of stability they experience on the shores of Troy, never knowing what will happen next, seeing things most reliant turn faithless and depart. The word they use to describe Salamis is *κλεινὰ*—well-known.⁹² It signifies that many have seen for themselves and heard of Salamis, that they can count on its prosperity and blessedness to endure, as it always has. Troy, in turn, will not be *κλεινὰ* for the same reasons.

I have discussed how Sophocles may be leveraging epistemic uncertainty in the Deception-Speech for its dramatic interest in the first chapter. Ajax’s words have the effect of deceiving his dependants that he has changed his mind, whether he means them to or not. Now we will see how Sophocles leverages the appearance of epistemic certainty for dramatic interest. The first words of the Chorus, after Ajax departs, are: *ἔφριξ’ ἔρωτι, περιχαρῆς δ’ ἀνεπτόμαν* (693: *I*

⁹¹ Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206-207

⁹² *Aj.* 597.

shudder with passion, and take flight in joy). They call to Pan to come and dance and Apollo too—the εὔγνωστος.⁹³ The adjective highlights the irony of their joy: ‘easy to discern.’ But the Chorus are soon to find out that they have not discerned well what Ajax intends to do. They repeat the elements of Ajax’s speech, but define for themselves what Ajax left ambiguous:

νῦν, ὦ Ζεῦ, πάρα λευκὸν εὐάμερον πελάσαι φάος
 θοᾶν ὠκυάλων νεῶν, ὅτ’ Αἴας
 λαθίπονος πάλιν, θεῶν δ’ αὖ
 πάνθ’ οὐ θέσμι’ ἐξήνυσ’ εὐνομία σέβων μεγίστα.
 πάνθ’ ὁ μέγας χρόνος μαραίνει,
 κούδ’ ἀναύδατον φατίσασιν ἄν, εὐτέ γ’ ἐξ ἀέλπτων
 Αἴας μετανεγνώσθη
 θυμοῦ τ’ Ἀτρείδαις μεγάλων τε νεικέων.

Now, O Zeus, it is possible for the white light of a fair day to shine upon the swift, sea-striking ships, since Ajax, forgetting his labours once more, has fulfilled all appropriate sacrifices, respecting the great righteous law. Time extinguishes all things. I would not say that anything is unspeakable, or that there is anything unexpected, but Ajax has changed his mind about his anger against the Atreidae and his great quarrels. (709-717).

So it is that Ajax said he would learn to ‘revere the Atreidae.’⁹⁴ The Chorus also connect Ajax’s idea that ‘time reveals all things’ with his choosing to forget his present pains.⁹⁵ The referent of the adjective ἀέλπτον is changed.⁹⁶ Ajax originally associated the word with the pity he feels for Tecmessa on account of her words.⁹⁷ But the Chorus attach it to the repentance of Ajax’s anger against the Atreidae.

⁹³ Aj. 694-706.

⁹⁴ Aj. 667: ...μαθησόμεσθα δ’ Ἀτρείδας σέβειν

⁹⁵ Aj. 646-647: ἅπανθ’ ὁ μακρὸς κἀναριθμητὸς χρόνος / φύει τ’ ἄδηλα καὶ φανέντα κρύπτεται:

⁹⁶ Aj. 648

⁹⁷ Aj 651-653: ...ἐθελύνην στόμα / πρὸς τῆσδε τῆς γυναικός: οἰκτίρω δέ νιν / χήραν παρ’ ἐχθροῖς παῖδά τ’ ὄρφανὸν λιπεῖν (I have become a woman with respect to my mouth on account of this woman: and I feel pity at leaving her a widow among my enemies and my child an orphan.

Significantly, the Chorus are on stage alone; just as in the *parodos*, they have erred in their understanding of the world around them. Now, in their zeal to grasp the sentiments of Ajax in celebration, the Chorus try to interpret for themselves the meaning of his speech. They forget that for Ajax, whom they describe as ‘reverencing the great righteous law,’ they themselves were men he could depend on, because they μόνοι ἔτ’ ἐμμένοντες ὀρθῷ νόμῳ (350: *alone still abided in the correct law*). But Ajax used that phrase when ordering them to kill him. The Chorus are projecting what they desire onto his words, finding what they wish to. Sophocles points to the fundamental vulnerability of communication between groups.

After their ode, the appearance of epistemic certainty gives way to genuine epistemic certainty when, as in the *parodos*, they meet someone better informed than they are. A messenger arrives with the news of Teucer facing the hostility of the army because of Ajax.⁹⁸ This messenger is a unique proxy for the epistemic certainty bequeathed to Odysseus and the audience by Athena in the prologue: he himself is not immortal or all-knowing, but delivers a message from someone who has some share in such knowledge: Calchas. This is the only point in the play in which the dependants of Ajax have access to secure knowledge, and it is tethered to a divine source, mediated twice along the way. Epistemic certainty is fragile, even when it exists.

⁹⁸ *Aj.* 720-730.

The intervention of the Greek elders and Calchas prevents Teucer's death by the sword.⁹⁹ The Chorus tell the messenger that Ajax οὐκ ἔνδον, ἀλλὰ φροῦδος ἀρτίως, νέας / βουλάς νέοισιν ἐγκαταζεύξας τρόποις (735-736: *is not inside, but has just departed, having yoked tightly new intentions to new methods*). The Chorus takes their description to be positive, but the language they use is, in fact, ambiguous. Being yoked to 'new ways' could mean a change from bad to good, or good to bad. Their reading, on account of their epistemic uncertainty, applies the positive interpretation. The true meaning of the phrase reveals itself when the messenger reacts poorly. He knows that Ajax's absence really signifies the opposite of what the Chorus intends.¹⁰⁰ Teucer has ordered Ajax not to be outside alone.¹⁰¹ The Chorus repeat this process of attributing positive meanings to ambiguous phrases when they say that Ajax has gone θεοῖσιν ὡς καταλλαχθῆι χόλου (744: *to lay down his anger towards the gods*). The Chorus possess the superficial reason for Ajax's departure, but not the inner significance of his words.¹⁰² They need to learn what significance it has for the messenger, whose knowledge comes from higher up in the epistemic chain.¹⁰³

He informs them that Ajax may live, since Athena's wrath against him was co-extensive only with the present day.¹⁰⁴ In so doing, he reveals how

⁹⁹ Aj. 731-732.

¹⁰⁰ Aj. 738-739.

¹⁰¹ Aj. 741-742.

¹⁰² Aj. 745-746.

¹⁰³ Aj. 747: τί δ' εἰδὼς τοῦδε πράγματος πάρει;

¹⁰⁴ Aj. 749-755; 756-757: ἐλῆ γὰρ αὐτὸν τῆδε θῆμέρα μόνη / δίας Ἀθάνας μῆνις (*for the wrath of the goddess Athena will drive him only for the span of this day*).

Calchas explained the ultimate reasons for this wrath, and that the responsibility falls ultimately to Ajax. First, Ajax rejected the advice which his father gave him on the day he set out for Troy:

κεῖνος δ' ἀπ' οἴκων εὐθὺς ἐξορμώμενος
ἄνους καλῶς λέγοντος ἠὺρέθη πατρός.
ὁ μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἐννέπει: τέκνον, δόρει
βούλου κρατεῖν μὲν, σὺν θεῶ δ' ἀεὶ κρατεῖν.

That man was found to be foolish as he was leaving from home while his father spoke soundly. For Telamon said to him: 'child, desire to conquer with the spear, but to conquer always with divine power.' (762-765).

Telamon's advice to Ajax is not "to conquer," but rather "to desire to conquer" in a qualified way. What this means is that Telamon's expectations of Ajax are aimed as much as Ajax's conduct as his performance. Ajax replies:

ὁ δ' ὑψικόμπως κἀφρόνως ἠμείψατο:
πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἄν ὁ μηδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ
κράτος κατακτήσασαί: ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα
κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ' ἐπισπάσειν κλέος.

But Ajax made his reply arrogantly and foolishly: 'Father, even a man, being no one, may acquire victory with the gods: but I, apart from them, trust to take away that glory.' (766-769).

Ajax responds to Telamon by expressing his desire to conquer alone. Indications of this attitude have been accruing throughout the play: Ajax bitterly reflects on the power of the gods to confound mortal efforts ...εἰ δέ τις θεῶν / βλάπτοι, φύγοι τᾶν χῶ κακὸς τὸν κρείσσονα. (455-456: *If one of the gods should strike, even the base man may escape his better*); Odysseus ponders the gods' strength when

Athena says that she can prevent Ajax from seeing him;¹⁰⁵ the Chorus had tried to comfort Ajax by reminding him that ζύν τοι θεῶ πᾶς καὶ γελᾷ κώδύρεται. (383: It is *with the god that everyone both laughs and grieves*). The theme running through these statements is the power of the gods to effect their will over the efforts of humans. But Ajax calls into question the worth of the man assisted by the gods. Telamon views excellence as joined to cooperation with the gods. Ajax separates these elements. He uses the verb ἐπισπάω, having the original meaning of ‘to draw, to drag.’ It signifies effort and labour, even against the gods.

This first anecdote prepares the way for the second one the messenger relates: that Ajax rebuked Athena herself on the field of battle:

...εἶτα δεύτερον
 δίας Ἀθάνας, ἠνίκ' ὀτρύνουσά νιν
 ἠὺδ' ἔπ' ἐχθροῖς χεῖρα φοινίαν τρέπειν,
 τότ' ἀντιφωνεῖ δεινὸν ἄρρητόν τ' ἔπος:
 ἄνασσα, τοῖς ἄλλοισιν Ἀργείων πέλας
 ἴστω, καθ' ἡμᾶς δ' οὐποτ' ἐκρήξει μάχη.
 τοιοῖσδέ τοι λόγοισιν ἀστεργῆ θεᾶς
 ἐκτήσατ' ὀργήν, οὐ κατ' ἄνθρωπον φρονῶν.

Later, the second time, in the case of Athena, when she, while urging him on, bid him to turn his murderous hand against the enemies, then he answered her with an unspeakable word: “My lady, stand you near the other Argives, through us the battle will never break.” With such words did he acquire the unappeasable anger of the goddess, by not thinking as a mortal. (770-777).

Again, the Chorus receive a reason for Ajax’s imminent danger. Finglass says, “Ajax’s refusal of divine assistance...is an arrogant act likely to end in disaster...No human fighter, even an Ajax, can hold a line of battle

¹⁰⁵ Aj. 86: γένοιτο μέντ' ἅν θεοῦ τεχνωμένου. (Everything is possible when a god contrives).

indefinitely...without supernatural aid. In the *Iliad*, Ajax is more than once worn down and forced to conduct a fighting retreat...or withdraw altogether...There is nothing impious in gaining success without the direct intervention of the gods, as Ajax does in the *Iliad*. What is impious is refusing their help when it is offered...”¹⁰⁶ Ajax is clearly partially responsible for what has happened to him, then. The risk he is in is compounded by the fact that he does not acknowledge his share in the events which caused his ruin, and his conviction does not change, even once he is humiliated and ruined. Ajax rejected his father’s advice to behave in accordance with the cooperation of the gods. He spurns the reminders of the Chorus and Tecmessa that the gods have the final authority over all these things. Without these, Ajax is helpless, except for one act.

The Chorus bring Tecmessa out of the tent to hear the story.¹⁰⁷ From her reaction, it becomes clear that it is beginning to dawn on Tecmessa that the sympathy she offered Ajax may have spurred him on to his death. She says to the Chorus: οἱ 'γώ, φίλοι, πρόστητ' ἀναγκαίᾳς τύχης (803: *Ah me, friends, stand up to compelling fortune!*), followed by instructions to try and intercept Ajax before he can carry out his ruinous suicide.¹⁰⁸ The phrase ἀναγκαία τύχη was used in Tecmessa’s petition to convince Ajax to see what good may come. Now Tecmessa recognizes Ajax’s departure as another act of ἀναγκαίᾳς τύχης, but instead of treating it as she told Ajax to, she acts as Ajax did when crushed by

¹⁰⁶ Finglass (2011) 364 n. ad 774-775.

¹⁰⁷ *Aj.* 784-786.

¹⁰⁸ *Aj.* 804-806.

ἀναγκαία τύχη by attempting to resist it. Like Ajax, Tecmessa laments what she is about to suffer: ἔγνωκα γὰρ δὴ φωτὸς ἠπατημένη / καὶ τῆς παλαιᾶς χάριτος ἐκβεβλημένη. (807-808: *For I recognize that I was deceived of that man and cast out of my former grace*). She reacts to new information with decisive action, learning that her relationship with Ajax is not as settled as she once thought it was. But this is the pattern of Ajax's relationship with the Greeks. The play stages Tecmessa's identification with Ajax's grief. The audience sees that sometimes no attempt to rationalize suffering, however powerful, can succeed.

The scene closes with Tecmessa and the Chorus clearing the stage to look for Ajax.¹⁰⁹ When they return again, Ajax will have bid farewell to Troy, the site of his disaster, cursed the Greek army, and fallen upon his sword. The Chorus re-enters to look for him. They are repeating their search for information which will speak to their safety. Once more, they are alone in their search for answers, turning to the rustic realm for clues.¹¹⁰ Tecmessa is the one to answer them. She does not tell a tale, but cries out bitterly: ἰὼ μοί μοι.¹¹¹ ἰὼ τλήμων.¹¹² The scene is similar to Ajax's first appearance to the Chorus. There, once Ajax realizes what he has gone through, he begins to let out uncharacteristic groans, and the first of these is ἰὼ μοί μοι.¹¹³ He repeats that cry once more.¹¹⁴ In between his cries,

¹⁰⁹ *Aj.* 809-814.

¹¹⁰ *Aj.* 880-886: the list includes sleepless fishermen, the goddesses of Olympus, and the rushing rivers of the Bosphorus.

¹¹¹ *Aj.* 891

¹¹² *Aj.* 893

¹¹³ *Aj.* 333

¹¹⁴ *Aj.* 336

Tecmessa asks the Chorus τάχ', ὡς ἔοικε, μᾶλλον: ἢ οὐκ ἠκούσατε / Αἴαντος οἶαν τήνδε θωῦσσει βοήν; (334-335: *Soon, apparently, it [our sorrow] will be greater: or did you not hear the cry of Ajax, how greatly he keens?*). Now, in between Tecmessa's two cries, the Chorus also ask a question: τίνος βοή πάραυλος ἐξέβη νάπους; (892: *Whose cry comes from the neighbouring grove?*). Like Ajax,¹¹⁵ Tecmessa expresses her grief by emphasizing the destruction which will fall on her: ὄψωκ', ὄλωλα, διαπεπόρθημαι, φίλοι. (896: *I am dead, destroyed, uprooted, my friends*). The calamity she refers to is the recognition of the truth when one was led to believe otherwise, just as it was for Ajax becoming sensible again. Tecmessa thought that Ajax had gone off to live, but sees him now dead. The Chorus, once more, searching for assurance of their safety, have found only renewed peril. Even the instrument of death is presented as knowledge to be discovered: Αἴας ὄδ' ἡμῖν ἀρτίως νεοσφαγῆς / κεῖται, κρυφαίῳ φασγάνῳ περιπτυχῆς (898-899: *This our Ajax lies recently slain, wrapped around a hidden sword*). The sword needs to be found to tell its terrible news. The Chorus despair of returning home.¹¹⁶

The parallels between Tecmessa's and Ajax's reaction to misfortune continue. In the midst of his lament, Ajax had commented on the aptness of his name for his ruin:

¹¹⁵ Aj. 342-343: Τεῦκρον καλῶ. ποῦ Τεῦκρος; ἢ τὸν εἰσαεῖ / λεηλατήσσει χρόνον, ἐγὼ δ' ἀπόλλυμαι; (*I call Teucer. Where is Teucer? Or will he drive on this hunt forever, and I am ruined?*). Cf. also Aj. 921-923, where Tecmessa also calls upon Teucer to aid her in her need.

¹¹⁶ Aj. 900: ὦμοι ἐμῶν νόστων (*Alas for our return!*)

αἰαῖ: τίς ἄν ποτ' ὤεθ' ὦδ' ἐπώνυμον
τοῦμὸν ξυνοίσειν ὄνομα τοῖς ἐμοῖς κακοῖς;
νῦν γὰρ πάρεστι καὶ δις αἰάζειν ἐμοὶ

Aiai! Who would ever have supposed that my given name would so fit these my evils: for now it is possible for me to lament even twice. (430-432).

Tecmessa's echoes this now: ὡς ὦδε τοῦδ' ἔχοντος αἰάζειν πάρα. (905: *As this man lies thus, it is possible to cry out Aiai!*). There is again the terrible realization that the sufferings were caused by the very hand which tried to prevent them, but in this case, the realization, which was once Ajax's, is now Tecmessa's and the Chorus:

Χο: τίνας ποτ' ἄρ' ἔπραξε χειρὶ δύσμορος;
Τέ: αὐτὸς πρὸς αὐτοῦ, δῆλον: ἐν γὰρ οἱ χθονὶ
πηκτὸν τόδ' ἔγχος περιπετεῖς κατηγορεῖ.

Ch. By whose hand did he die?

Te. It is plain to see that he was slain by his own hand: for the sword, planted in the earth, declares that he fell upon it. (908-910).¹¹⁷

The sword again speaks out its grim news. Moreover, Tecmessa, like Ajax, puts special emphasis on the pain of having to experience one's misfortune, rather than looking on another's: σοὶ μὲν δοκεῖν ταῦτ' ἔστ', ἐμοὶ δ' ἄγαν φρονεῖν (942: *These things are for you to ponder, for me, rather, to feel overwhelmingly*).¹¹⁸ Tecmessa, once an onlooker to Ajax's grief, now herself experiences the pain of losing what he most valued. Though Tecmessa will find safety by the end of the play, she will

¹¹⁷ Aj. 259-261: καὶ νῦν φρόνιμος νέον ἄλγος ἔχει: / τὸ γὰρ ἐσλεύσσειν οἰκεῖα πάθη, / μηδενὸς ἄλλου παραπράξαντος. (*And now, returning to his senses, he has a new pain: having to look on his own sufferings, which no one else caused*).

¹¹⁸ Aj. 552-554: καίτοι σε καὶ νῦν τοῦτό γε ζηλοῦν ἔχω, / ὀθοῦνεκ' οὐδὲν τῶνδ' ἐπαισθάνει κακῶν: / ἐν τῷ φρονεῖν γὰρ μηδὲν ἡδιστος βίος, (*Furthermore, I am able to envy you even now of this thing at least, the fact that you perceive none of these evils: for in perceiving nothing is life sweetest*).

not be able to replace what she and her son have lost. Tecmessa's advice had been to suffer this loss and wait for the good that will come it. Will she kill herself as she said?¹¹⁹ The arrival of Teucer, and hope for security, postpones the issue. But Ajax's grief is no longer unique. Ajax has had his critics, but at least one other character, though very different from, reacts like Ajax to a similar grief.

This identification of sorrow comes about as a result of the errors produced by epistemic uncertainty: when one is uncertain, one can learn from another, if possible, what they need to become certain. Otherwise, time and experience become the teacher, and the lesson is often painful. But Tecmessa's pain humanizes Ajax's. Her fate will not be his, but Tecmessa's last lines exhibit many attitudes we saw in Ajax:

οἱ δ' οὖν γελώντων κάπιχαιρόντων κακοῖς
τοῖς τοῦδ' ἴσως τοι, κεί βλέποντα μὴ πόθουν,
θανόντ' ἄν οἰμώξειαν ἐν χρεῖα δορός.
οἱ γὰρ κακοὶ γνώμασι τάγαθὸν χεροῖν
ἔχοντες οὐκ ἴσασι, πρὶν τις ἐκβάλῃ.
ἐμοὶ πικρὸς τέθνηκεν ἢ κείνοις γλυκύς,
αὐτῷ δὲ τερπνός: ὧν γὰρ ἠράσθη τυχεῖν
ἐκτίσαθ' αὐτῷ, θάνατον ὄνπερ ἤθελεν.
τί δῆτα τοῦδ' ἐπεγγελάωεν ἄν κάτα;
θεοῖς τέθνηκεν οὗτος, οὐ κείνοισιν, οὐ.
πρὸς ταῦτ' Ὀδυσσεὺς ἐν κενοῖς ὑβρίζετω.
Αἴας γὰρ αὐτοῖς οὐκέτ' ἐστίν, ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ
λιπὼν ἀνίας καὶ γόους διοίχεται.

Let those men, therefore, laugh and take joy in the misfortunes of this one: perhaps, if they did not miss him when he was alive, they will cry out in need of his spear now that he is dead. For base men do not know in their reckoning the good they hold in their hands, before they cast it off. He died bitter to me rather than sweet to the Greeks, and a pleasure to himself: for

¹¹⁹ Though we should remember the high value she set on Ajax as being a principle of her own life earlier in the play, and her express wishes to die should he die.

what he longed to obtain he got for himself, the death he wished for. Why should they laugh at him? He died because of the gods, not them, no! On that note, let Odysseus exult among these things. For, for them, Ajax is no longer alive, but he dies, leaving me griefs and laments. (961-973).

Tecmessa has moved entirely away from the universalizing framework she employed in her petition speech to Ajax into the world of partisanship and friend/enemy distinctions. Here her (misplaced) revulsion of Odysseus is most fully expressed. Like Ajax, Tecmessa places a special emphasis on the laughter of Ajax's enemies. Like Ajax, Tecmessa hopes that his death, and the loss of his services in war, will be the proof of the mistake the Greek commanders made in the Judgement of Arms. This Tecmessa is very different from the one who urged Ajax to suffer compelling fortune patiently. But even after Ajax's death and the discovery of the true meaning of his words in the Deception Speech, it may be argued that Tecmessa has still not found total epistemic certainty. She still has, after all, Odysseus' role in the affair wrong, and she cannot predict that it is his intervention which will secure Ajax's burial. But she has still made a movement towards epistemic certainty: she has come to identify with Ajax's partisan view, to feel what he felt on his own terms. Previously, Tecmessa had attempted to mollify his anguish because of her own needs. Unlike Odysseus, whose perspective I will explore in the next chapter, Tecmessa has not had the benefit of learning from a goddess, who knows everything. She has had to piece together what has happened from her mortal perspective. It is a perspective vulnerable to error and deceit. Only the discovery and attendant suffering of the reality of one's

situation can correct these errors. In suffering, Tecmessa has discovered what it was like to be Ajax when he felt he had lost something precious.

Chapter 3: Odysseus

In the previous chapter, we explored scenes in which Tecmessa and the Chorus were forced to work through situations without access to secure knowledge. This chapter will focus on Odysseus, one of the few characters to be the beneficiary of epistemic certainty, and how this affects and isolates Odysseus as he negotiates conflicts with other characters who are not privileged with the same knowledge.

It is apparent by now that Sophocles' *Ajax* dramatizes the act of learning and interpretation. This is evident in the play even from the prologue. It is Athena's voice which is first heard, when she spies on Odysseus and asks him to explain his purpose.¹²⁰ The request is puzzling, since, as Athena herself declares, her omniscience has granted her complete knowledge of Odysseus' mission. In this way, Athena is another of the few exceptions in the play from the restraint of a limited perspective. Odysseus, unlike Athena, who "always sees" (1) him, is deprived of the sight of the goddess. Instead, he identifies Athena only by the sound of her voice, a stark difference from the language of vision and seeing Athena employs.¹²¹ This gulf is, in turn, mimicked by the pageantry of the theatre, as Sophocles attempts to give the audience a perspective it cannot truly have: a view of a man listening to an invisible goddess, who herself remains visible to an audience which, paradoxically, relates more in nature to Odysseus than to the goddess. A sensorial drama is playing out on-stage.

¹²⁰ *Aj.* 1-13.

¹²¹ *Aj.* 14-46.

Odysseus' explanation of his mission highlights over and over the need for reading and interpretation of signs and clues, and his own limited ability to carry out this task. Odysseus is tracking the footprints of Ajax: κατ' ἵχνος ἄσσω, καὶ τὰ μὲν σημαίνομαι, / τὰ δ' ἐκπέπληγμαι κοῦκ ἔχω μαθεῖν ὅτου. (32-33: *I move quickly along his track, and some of it I can interpret, but I am struck in confusion by others, and I cannot find out where he is*). But the prints confuse Odysseus. Contrast Odysseus' characterization of his hunt with his earlier description of Athena's voice, ὡς εὐμαθές (15: *how well-perceived*). The goddess' voice reveals itself perfectly to its intended audience. This is deliberate on the part of the goddess: she is trying to begin a dialogue with her favourite. Ajax's footprints, on the other hand, were not left for this purpose. They are the impressions someone made as they went about their work. Still, they have the power to communicate some details about the one who left them, albeit a limited one. But the communicative intention is missing. Odysseus' effort is one-sided: he must glean whatever meaning they possess alone.

The perspective of Odysseus outside the tent, like those of Ajax's dependants, is limited in the absence of external help. There we saw that Tecmessa and the Chorus, from vague clues, cryptic words and their own presumptions, to read the signs before them, in the hopes that they might find a way of saving Ajax. In those scenes we saw how vulnerable their efforts were to error, whether from the limitations of their human perspective or from the hostile intent of someone who does not want them to grasp the truth. Both Tecmessa and

the Chorus sought a perspective that was secure from error. It is this which Odysseus obtains from Athena. Odysseus welcomes the goddess: *καίρῶν δ' ἐφήκεις: πάντα γὰρ τὰ τ' οὐκ ἄραρος / τὰ τ' εἰσέπειτα σῆ κυβερνώμαι χερί.* (34-35: *You have come just in time: for in all things, both past and future, I am guided by your hand*). He has reached the limits of his ability to discern the signs before him. There is some information, but not enough, and with not enough time to discern it. In acknowledging his trust in Athena's guidance, Odysseus yields his efforts of reading and interpretation over to the goddess, who herself takes on the role of an omniscient narrator telling a story. The play achieves something resembling the framework of epic narration on-stage. And as with an epic narrator, Odysseus hopes that he will learn the indisputable facts about what happened that night.

That said, Athena's presence in the play is brief, and access to her is restricted only to Odysseus, who is himself only on-stage for the first and final scenes. Unlike an epic narrator, Athena is still involved in the action in a certain sense. Her words, however accurate a description of the night's events, are still subject to the interpretive efforts of both Odysseus and the audience watching the play. And although Odysseus can trust as reliable what she reveals, he does not know if she is telling the whole story. No one knew, for example, until it was too late, that Athena's wrath would pursue Ajax for only a day. Omissions such as these have given scholars cause to suspect her impartiality—something the epic narrator is rarely accused of—and so the extent to which the Odysseus and the audience may

trust her as ‘someone who knows.’ Consider the meaning of Athena’s last words, for instance, which are intended to point out a lesson for Odysseus:

τοιαῦτα τοίνυν εἰσορῶν ὑπέρκοπον
μηδέν ποτ’ εἴπησ’ αὐτὸς εἰς θεοὺς ἔπος,
μηδ’ ὄγκον ἄρη μηδέν’, εἴ τινος πλέον
ἢ χειρὶ βρίθεις ἢ μακροῦ πλούτου βάθει.
ὥς ἡμέρα κλίνει τε κἀνάγει πάλιν
ἅπαντα τάνθρώπεια: τοὺς δὲ σώφρονας
θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακοὺς.

Therefore, seeing such things, speak you no overbold word to the gods, nor if you become big, nor if you are heavier than anyone in strength of hand or depth of great wealth. So a day sinks and raises up again all human things: but the gods love the wise and hate the wicked. (127-133).

There is nothing controversial about the warning Odysseus receives from Athena in itself. But the natural reading is to connect the behaviour to be avoided with the actions of Ajax, and it is with this that Ruth Scodel takes issue: “[r]ather, the moral is inspired by Ajax, but not confined to his case or even put in a form that closely fits him...Odysseus is the prudent man, whom the gods love, and the sons of Atreus may well be base men, whom they hate. Ajax is neither one nor the other; the gods have punished him, but the prologue leaves his final relation to them in doubt.”¹²² For Scodel, the language of *kakos* seems ill-suited to Ajax, since it signifies baseness. Ajax certainly earns little by way of uncontested moral approbation for his actions in the play, but he is more often characterized as a *hybristes* than a *kakos*.¹²³ Either Ajax has been misinterpreted by other scholars,

¹²² Ruth Scodel, *Sophocles* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 19

¹²³ See N.R.E. Fisher, *Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992), 312-329 for Ajax as *hybristes*.

and he really is base, or the moral does not speak to Ajax's situation. Michael Lloyd goes further than Scodel by contesting the completeness of Athena's position: "Some accounts of dramatic irony align the vision of the audience with that of the gods, but in *Ajax* these two levels of understanding soon begin to diverge. Athena's vision is incomplete, because she sees only a great man brought low by his lack of *sophrosyne* (the 'pietist' aspect of the play), and never shows any awareness of Ajax's undoubted greatness (the 'hero worshipper' aspect of the play)."¹²⁴ For Lloyd, Athena's omniscience is limited to her forensic understanding of events but still vulnerable to error in the interpretation of the significance of those events. She knows what actions Ajax undertook and where it is he went, but cannot assess his character properly on account of her implication in the action. Lloyd's argument operates on the basis that the play's presentation of the character Ajax is meant to leave us with the conviction that he is 'great,' however great his fall.

It remains to be seen, then, what Athena's exact relation to the play is and its circumstances. Later in the play, it is discovered that Athena does have a personal cause for anger towards Ajax. There is some foreshadowing of this in the prologue. Athena tells Odysseus, for example, that δείξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανῆ νόσον, / ὡς πᾶσιν Ἀργείοισιν εἰσιδῶν θροῆς (66-67: *I shall show you this manifest sickness, that you, once you have seen it, may tell it to all the*

¹²⁴ Michael Lloyd, "Sophocles the Ironist," in *Brill's Companion to Sophocles*, ed. Andreas Markantonatos (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 572.

Argives). Athena’s interest in stopping Ajax is not limited to a desire to save the Atreidae and Odysseus from murder at his hands, but extends, rather, to seeing him punished and humiliated by the Greeks. She says that ἐγὼ δὲ φοιτῶντ’ ἄνδρα μανιάσιν νόσοις / ὄτρυνον, εἰσέβαλλον εἰς ἔρηκη κακά. (59-60: *I urged the ranging man on with a maddening illness, I threw him into evil enclosures*). So Athena does not merely deflect Ajax, but drives him into a worse state of affairs. She also attempts to give Odysseus the opportunity to gloat over his rival: οὐκουν γέλως ἥδιστος εἰς ἐχθροὺς γελαῖν; (79: *Isn’t it sweetest to laugh at your enemies?*). I agree, then, that despite my earlier claim about Athena’s similarity to an omniscient narrator, that “[n]either here nor anywhere else in the play is there any hint that Athene was moved in any degree by a concern to oversee impartial justice *inter homines*; it is with her own rights and her own honour that she is concerned”—that she is, even more so than a god customarily is, implicated in the action.¹²⁵ But, “[t]his should not be thought discreditable to her. In the heroic world, honour is the most precious commodity, among gods as well as among men; one not only may, one must react to insults and to action which detract from one’s status.”¹²⁶ Lloyd’s interpretation of Athena’s attitude is too reliant on the heroizing-tendencies of other scholars; it should not be thought that her personal interest in the matter limits her perspective in any way. She is, *contra* Lloyd, aware of Ajax’s greatness—indeed, she describes him as prudent and ready to act

¹²⁵ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 171.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

when necessary.¹²⁷ The point of these compliments is to leverage Ajax's greatness in emphasizing that he is still mortal and subject to the limitations of a human. Athena's willingness to recognize Ajax's excellences increases her credibility as an omniscient figure, one who can see the matter on all sides, though she speaks in the prologue from within the action and acts for her own, partial purposes.

The audience, like Odysseus, then, can rely on Athena to give them secure knowledge of what is happening. The power of Athena's capacity to read and confirm the signs Odysseus tries to parse is vividly demonstrated by her confirmation that Ajax is within the tent, which leads her to summon the deluded warrior onto the stage. Ajax's presence and epistemic condition creates a spectrum of vision and knowledge for the audience. Athena knows and sees all; Odysseus sees some, knows some, and knows that he only comprehends some; Ajax, in turn, knows nothing, but thinks he knows everything. Ajax greets Athena: ὦ χαῖρ' Ἀθήνα, χαῖρε Διογενὲς τέκνον, / ὡς εὖ παρέστης: καί σε παγχρύσοις ἐγὼ / στέψω λαφύροις τῆσδε τῆς ἄγρας χάριν. (91-93: *Hail, Athena, hail, child of Zeus, how well you assisted me; I shall wreath you even with all-golden spoils in thanks for this hunt*). Ajax's words would be an appropriate greeting for a Homeric warrior saluting a goddess.¹²⁸ He recognizes Athena's contributions to him and offers verbal as well as material thanks for them. But the

¹²⁷ *Aj.* 118-120.

¹²⁸ Sarah Nooter, *When Heroes Sing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 32: "In the beginning of the play, Ajax acts as an epic hero, addressing gods and promising offerings, yet his words do not have the effects he intends...He speaks with great confidence in a role he no longer occupies". For Homeric intertext of *chaire* and the irony generated by this scene's resonance with Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, cf. *ibid* 32-33.

irony of the phrase, which would be positive if interpreted in a vacuum, comes out in light of Athena's intentions. These words, with which Ajax attempts to signify his gratitude and devotion to Athena, take on a novel and unintended meaning, only accessible thanks to the unusual circumstances Athena has provided for the occasion. Not only that, Ajax exhibits a certainty in his interpretation of the situation which belies the radical uncertainty the audience and Odysseus knows he ought to feel.

Ajax's utter vulnerability before Athena on its own provokes pity and horror, but before the goddess's hostility appears too one-sided, evidence of Ajax's problematic relationship with her comes out, even as he continues to offer his gratitude: *χωρῶ πρὸς ἔργον: σοὶ δὲ τοῦτ' ἐφίεμαι, / τοιάνδ' ἀεὶ μοι σύμμαχον παρεστάναι.* (116-117: *I go to my work: but I enjoin this to you, always stand as such an ally with me*).¹²⁹ Ajax, although he recognizes Athena's help in attaining his goals, gives Athena an order. The order he does give is the opposite of the one he gave earlier in the war, when he bid Athena to stand by the other Greeks.¹³⁰ But this is not revealed about Ajax until much later. For an audience watching the scene in real-time, they have only this small evidence of Ajax's outrageous behaviour towards Athena. This double-detail, distributed across the time-progression of the play, mimics the capacity for facts to take on greater

¹²⁹ Ajax uses the same verb a few lines earlier, in a more outrageous command to Athena: *χαίρειν, Ἀθάννα, τᾶλλ' ἐγὼ σ' ἐφίεμαι: / κεῖνος δὲ τίσει τήνδε κοῦκ ἄλλην δίκην.* (*Aj.* 112-113: In all other things I bid you, Athena, to have your way: but he [Odysseus] will pay this price and no other).

¹³⁰ *Aj.* 770-775.

significance as with time one's perspective widens. Athena's perspective, although omniscient, does not remove the obligation of a human perspective, like that of Odysseus (as well as that of the tragic audience in the theatre, as opposed to an epic one, which yields its efforts of comprehension and reading over to the narrator) to engage in the process of discovery and interpretation.

Yet Athena's mere presence and divine power are not enough to give Odysseus the clarity he desires. Before that can be done, Odysseus must be prepared to see things, not as he would see them on his own, but through the vision of one who knows more than he. As I said earlier, even when the knowledgeable try to communicate their understanding to others, the attempt is vulnerable to a failure. As Barker notes, "[w]ith a deity giving instructions, and with her mortal interlocutor clearly seeing himself in a position of ignorance... a model of learning is quickly established."¹³¹ Athena must reconcile the differences between her position and Odysseus', which she does by lending him her view of the affair: *θαρσῶν δὲ μίμνε μηδὲ συμφορὰν δέχου / τὸν ἄνδρ': ἐγὼ γὰρ ὀμμάτων ἀποστρόφους / ἀνγὰς ἀπείρξω σὴν πρόσωπον εἰσιδεῖν.* (68-70: *Stand there bravely, and do not receive this man as a disaster: for I shall divert the lights of his eyes from seeing your face*).

Athena recognizes the differences between Odysseus and herself and attempts to account for them. Odysseus is a mortal and vulnerable to harm. The goddess' first instruction to him is to fight his mortal instinct to run for the sake of

¹³¹ Elton Barker, *Entering the Agon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 284.

his own safety. These are, of course, not concerns Athena shares, but she must account for them in her mortal counterpart; if Odysseus is going to see like Athena, then he must resemble Athena, at least somewhat. Like Athena, then, Odysseus will be safe from Ajax because he will be invisible to Ajax. The purpose of all this is summed up in Athena's striking order to Odysseus that he stay and 'not receive this man as a disaster.' In effect, Odysseus is told how it is he should read the scene of Ajax emerging from the tent. In the absence of Athena's protection, such an interpretation would not be possible. Naturally, Odysseus does not fully understand what Athena means, and tells her not to summon Ajax.¹³² In a line which suggests Athena's difficulty in comprehending mortal fear, she asks Odysseus if he will not hold his ground and not be called a coward.¹³³ Athena attempts to bridge the gap between herself and Odysseus by redefining the situation in terms of bravery and cowardice, concepts which the gods need not employ in their own cases since they pertain to one's attitude to the prospect of harm, but which are deployed now to help motivate Odysseus. When Odysseus starts at the thought of Ajax's appearance a second time, Athena asks him, τί μὴ γένηται; πρόσθεν οὐκ ἀνὴρ ὄδ' ἦν; (77: *Why shouldn't this be? Was this one not a man before?*). The implication of the question is clear: what is there about a mortal for anyone to fear next to a god? Odysseus' reply is telling: ἐχθρὸς γε τῶδε τάνδρῳ καὶ τανῶν ἔτι. (78: *he was an enemy, at least, to this man and still*

¹³² *Aj.* 74.

¹³³ *Aj.* 75: οὐ σῖγ' ἀνέξει μηδὲ δειλίαν ἀρεῖ;

is now). He repeats Athena's term, ἀνήρ, emphasizing the fact that he is a mortal too, and that while Ajax presents little threat to Athena, the same cannot be said of Ajax's threat to Odysseus himself. Athena and Odysseus do not share perspectives yet. It is only after Athena reiterates her promise to blind Ajax's eyes that Odysseus acknowledges the marvelous power of the gods.¹³⁴ Even then, Odysseus still flinches from seeing the deluded warrior.¹³⁵

Their perspectives united, Ajax is brought onto the stage, observed, and dismissed. The goddess then asks Odysseus a leading question to guide him in his reading of what he has just seen: ὀρᾶς, Ὀδυσσεῦ, τὴν θεῶν ἰσχὺν ὅση; (118: *Do you see, Odysseus, how great the strength of the gods is?*). The strength of the gods has two potential referents: the first is Athena's ability to control Ajax's perception with ease. Athena may also be referring, however, to the divine perspective on mortal affairs. Neither Odysseus nor Athena had to worry for their safety because Athena had removed Ajax from effective action. Athena's divine perspective allows her to exact her vengeance on Ajax with impunity, emphasizing her strength relative to his weakness. She had extended her perspective to Odysseus so that he would be able also to harm Ajax with his laughter and his report to the Greeks. Athena had sought an identification with Odysseus both in outlook and interest.

¹³⁴ Aj. 86: γένοιτο μέντ' ἄν πᾶν θεοῦ τεχνωμένου. (*Anything is possible when a god contrives*).

¹³⁵ Aj. 88: μένοιμ' ἄν: ἤθελον δ' ἄν ἐκτὸς ὦν τυχεῖν. (*I can remain: but I wish I were far away*).

But although Odysseus saw the same thing as Athena, he does not feel the same way as her about him:

ἐγὼ μὲν οὐδέν' οἶδ': ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν
δύστηνον ἔμπας, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ,
ὀθούνεκ' ἄτη συγκατέζευκται κακῆ,
οὐδέν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦμόν σκοπῶν:
ὀρῶ γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδέν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν
εἶδωλ' ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν ἢ κούφην σκιάν.

I know nothing: but I pity the wretch nevertheless, although he is hostile, because he is yoked to an evil ruin, seeing his lot as no more than my own: for I see that all we who live are nothing other than phantoms or an insubstantial shadow. (121-126).

I agree with Barker that, “Odysseus’ response reveals the potential to interpret the events differently and to come to a human understanding of the events as, in her absence from the rest of the play, the human agents both on—and off—stage must work out and work through the crisis she has set up.”¹³⁶ But I disagree that, on the grounds mentioned above, Odysseus’ oblique interpretation comes about “because of, not in spite of, Athena’s role.”¹³⁷ Athena has come to punish Ajax for his arrogance towards her. Her interest in Odysseus stems from her knowledge that the greatest humiliation for Ajax is to be seen and mocked by Odysseus in his defeat, even as Ajax imagines tormenting him. Athena has coaxed, at every stage, Odysseus into joining her in this effort, so as to maximize Ajax’s pain, to the effect of delighting both of them. But we have also seen that this effort at a shared perspective has remained imperfect, despite Athena’s efforts to make her own and

¹³⁶ Elton Barker, *Entering the Agon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 322.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Odysseus' attitudes towards Ajax congruent. We have also seen that this difficulty arises from the differences between mortals and immortals, even if mortals are promised the security available to a god. Malcolm Heath says, "[b]ecause he recognises Ajax's outstanding prowess, Odysseus can see the fall of Ajax as a paradigm of the frailty and vulnerability of mankind: and that means also, of his own frailty and vulnerability. It is to this vision that he responds..."¹³⁸ Of course, the vision which Athena shows Odysseus of the strength of the gods before mortals has implications for Odysseus, a mortal. That does not mean it is Athena's primary concern to demonstrate an ethical lesson to Odysseus, even as she helps him see and interpret the significance of Ajax's actions.

Other scholars have instead pressed interpretations of the scene too far in the opposite direction, lauding Odysseus' reaction in the face of the goddess. Take Hesk, for example: "I would argue that Odysseus' ability to be reflective enough to sympathise with Ajax and the manner in which he does is an example of Odysseus' 'intellectual virtue'. In other words, he is intellectually rigorous, impartial and courageous enough to put himself in his former enemy's shoes."¹³⁹ For Hesk, Odysseus' pitying of Ajax is not triggered by the vision before his eyes but rather by something in Odysseus' character, which he calls his 'intellectual virtue'. So, according to Hesk, "...it is clear that Odysseus is clinging rather admirably to a moderate (we might say *sophron*) position despite Athena's

¹³⁸ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 169.

¹³⁹ Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London: Duckworth Press, 2003), 45-46.

encouragement to abandon it.”¹⁴⁰ Hesk is attempting to interpret the scene as showing a divorce between the value of *to sophronein* and Athena’s conduct. Athena may laugh at Ajax because she is a goddess, but to do so, even at the invitation of Athena, would be, in Hesk’s view, not *sophron*. According to this argument, Odysseus preserves his moderation by withstanding Athena’s temptation to mock his enemy.

I would like to offer an alternative interpretation. What Sophocles has done with this scene is juxtapose human and divine attitudes towards the same event. They differ in accordance with their respective limitations, arising from their natures. Athena, in her divinity, has no reason to be afraid in this moment. Someone of a human nature does, because they are intrinsically vulnerable. Without Athena’s divine protection, to laugh at Ajax would be to show a lack of awareness of one’s limitations and vulnerability to harm. Odysseus shows that he has this awareness when he balks at the idea of facing Ajax. But his reluctance to mock Ajax is virtuous in light of the limitations that circumscribe a human being, ones which he incorrectly believes he will still have when Ajax appears. Yet Athena invites Odysseus to laugh under her protection. She blinded Ajax such that Odysseus was invisible to him. Odysseus is being granted a limited opportunity to act with the circumscriptions of a god. The invitation to laughter, then, cannot be considered an invitation to immoderate behaviour, since the very principle upon which virtuous and vicious behaviour (as Hesk has defined it) does not hold true

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

in the moment that Odysseus reacts with pity. For Athena, it would have been *to sophronein* for Odysseus to laugh, provided he did so under her protection and permission.

That Odysseus is unable to laugh says more about his inability to conceive of himself as anything but thoroughly human, even in this extraordinary situation. I suggest instead that Odysseus' reactions speaks more to the impossibility of perfect congruence between a mortal and a god, even if a god is doing the work, than it does to Odysseus' ability to remain *sophron* in light of the temptation of a goddess to act otherwise.¹⁴¹ That is, Odysseus' reaction to the sight of Ajax is not to be taken as arising from his own character, but rather the unique nature of the situation he finds himself in. After all, no other character has access to the perspective a goddess, whose vision we can take to be perfect in its clarity and discernment of a situation, thanks to her divine power. Pursuing an enemy to confirm a rumour, Odysseus finds himself sharing the vision of that goddess with respect to a man he was afraid to look on by himself. The union of sight allows him to see like a god, but does not make him a god. Retaining his humanity as he watches Ajax, Odysseus is given the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a human before the power of a god. It could as easily be him at another time. It is

¹⁴¹ Blundell (1989) *Helping friends and harming enemies* 63f: "Here enmity is significantly, and emphatically, distinguished from the total indulgence of hatred. Pity, based on shared humanity, is proposed as an alternative response to an unfortunate enemy—at least in some circumstances. Odysseus belies Athena's remark in the first line of the play that he 'always' hunts down his enemies. He does not say one should never hate an enemy, only that in this instance his enmity is tempered by pity for Ajax's terrible fate. Nor does he explicitly condemn the attitude which Athena shares with other human characters, or argue for his own."

the removal of a human being from the action, while remaining fully human, which allows Odysseus to have his insight. It is also the condition of an audience watching Sophocles' *Ajax*.

The second chapter explored how characters without this perspective respond. But to see how Odysseus' Athena-derived insight ripples outward within the context of the play requires us to move to its final scenes. Ajax has committed suicide, and Teucer arrived to arrange his affairs and defend his corpse, but first Menelaus and then Agamemnon have hindered the body's burial. When a resolution is not forthcoming, the two parties look to be on the verge of descending into violence, when Odysseus returns to the stage to intervene. The audience, even if they had grown in admiration of Odysseus in the play's prologue, could hardly have anticipated that such an ending would follow.¹⁴² In tracing Odysseus' efforts to bring about a peaceful resolution, we will see that Odysseus' view, however admirable we may find it, remains personal to him.

Odysseus, after tactfully engaging Agamemnon on the grounds of their friendship, says:

ἄκουέ νυν. τὸν ἄνδρα τόνδε πρὸς θεῶν
μὴ τλῆς ἄθαπτον ὧδ' ἀναλήτως βαλεῖν:
μηδ' ἢ βία σε μηδαμῶς νικησάτω
τοσόνδε μισεῖν ὥστε τὴν δίκην πατεῖν.

¹⁴² Some idea of the shock is brought out in remarks on Ajax by Feder (1980) *Madness in Literature* 96 "Ajax could not have imagined the breadth of vision that prompts Odysseus to defend his right to burial as a hero. Ironically, the rigidity of Menelaus and Agamemnon, in their demand for vengeance, would have been more comprehensible to his unyielding...mind." Besides Tecmessa, there has been no figure in the play since Odysseus' departure to advocate at length for a less extreme reaction.

Listen, now. Do not allow—by the gods!—this man to be cast out without burial so painlessly: and let not by any means violence overcome you to so hate the man that you end up trampling on justice. (1332-1335).

Odysseus begins his intervention by attempting to point out to Agamemnon that he is acting in a psychologically-passive manner: that is, by attributing Agamemnon's impulse to cast out Ajax to βία (force, violence) rather than the deliberated decision of a mind at ease. Odysseus also objects to Agamemnon's eagerness to expose the corpse.¹⁴³ This constitutes, in effect, a reply both to Agamemnon as well as Menelaus, who had insisted that Ajax be punished so that fear and shame would curb immoderate behaviour in the army, as it does in a city.¹⁴⁴ Odysseus does not sanction Ajax's treacherous behaviour. But another enemy of Ajax, Athena, at least had been willing to acknowledge Ajax's positive qualities. Unlike Agamemnon, she is not compelled to feel any remorse in punishing Ajax because she was not engaged in a cooperative, mutually-beneficial endeavour with him. Moreover, Athena, being a goddess, has no need for such a relationship with Ajax. Yet Agamemnon, despite being much more reliant on Ajax than Athena, attempts to flatten out his contributions to the Greek army. This happens both in Agamemnon's discussion with Odysseus, as well as earlier in his dispute with Teucer. In that scene, Agamemnon, in a misguided attempt to deflect Teucer's anger by deflating Ajax's heroism, asks Teucer ποῖ βάντος ἢ ποῦ στάντος οὔπερ οὐκ ἐγώ; / οὐκ ἄρ' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄνδρες εἰσὶ πλὴν ὄδε; (1237-1238:

¹⁴³ Cf. Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping friends and harming enemies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95 "...Odysseus does not object to retaliation per se and reserves the right to reprove whoever started the quarrel."

¹⁴⁴ *Aj.* 1073-1086.

Where did he go, or where did he stand, that I myself did not? Do the Achaeans have no men but this one?). But Teucer, like Odysseus after him, must remind Agamemnon of Ajax's worth, by recalling how Ajax's achievements surpassed that of other men:

ὦ πολλὰ λέξας ἄρτι κἀνόητ' ἔπη,
οὐ μνημονεύεις οὐκέτ' οὐδέν, ἦνίκα
έρκέων ποθ' ὑμᾶς οὔτος ἐγκεκλημένους,
ἤδη τὸ μηδὲν ὄντας, ἐν τροπῇ δορὸς
ἐρρύσατ' ἐλθὼν μοῦνος, ἀμφὶ μὲν νεῶν
ἄκροισιν ἤδη ναυτικοῖς ἐδωλίοις
πυρὸς φλέγοντος, εἰς δὲ ναυτικὰ σκάφη
πηδῶντος ἄρδην Ἑκτορος τάφρων ὕπερ;
τίς ταῦτ' ἀπεῖρξεν; οὐχ ὄδ' ἦν ὁ δρῶν τάδε,
ὄν οὐδαμοῦ φῆς, οὔ σὺ μή, βῆναι ποδί;

You speaker of thoughtless words, do you not remember at all, when that man, once upon a time, coming alone, saved you from the nets, although you were on the verge of death, in the turn of the spear, as the fire blazed around the uppermost benches of the ships, and Hector leapt on high over the ditches towards the hulls of the ships? Who prevented those things? Did not this man do those things, who, you say, did not march anywhere you did not? (1272-1281).

Ajax and Agamemnon may both be mortals, but there are still relevant differences between men which ought to inform their relationship with one another. Ajax did, in fact, do things which Agamemnon, in turn, was capable of doing, but did not. This difference in initiative and bravery marks a quantitative as well as qualitative difference between the two men. Per Teucer's testimony, both men had an interest in seeing Hector routed, but only one man drove him and the fires from the ships. Teucer's argument concedes to Agamemnon the point that all Greeks in the army do fall under the category of 'men,' but that this particular man distinguished

himself from the broader category by his actions. As a result, the other Greeks, including Agamemnon, ought to have a different relationship to this man than they would to a man who had not performed those deeds, and that this difference in relation ought to inform their treatment of the special hero from then on. In other words, Agamemnon's perspective on Ajax is warped and distorted by his forgetfulness of Ajax's services to himself and the army. This is Teucer's point when he says to Agamemnon:

φεῦ: τοῦ θανόντος ὡς ταχεῖά τις βροτοῖς
χάρις διαρρεῖ καὶ προδοῦσ' ἀλίσκεται,
εἰ σοῦ γ' ὄδ' ἀνὴρ οὐδ' ἐπὶ σμικρῶν λόγων,
Αἴας, ἔτ' ἴσχει μνηστίν, οὐδ' σὺ πολλάκις
τὴν σὴν προτείνων προύκαμες ψυχὴν δόρει.
ἀλλ' οἴχεται δὴ πάντα ταῦτ' ἐρριμμένα.

Alas, how quickly, when one dies, does gratitude among men pass away and is found a traitor, if this man, Ajax, does not bear even a little remembrance of you, when often you laboured to risk your life in war. But all these things run to waste. (1266-1271).

Ajax's exceptional actions are supposed to provoke a specific reaction from Agamemnon: the remembrance of *charis*, gratitude. Teucer reverses the significance of Agamemnon's description of Ajax as ὄδ' ἀνὴρ by pointing out that Agamemnon was also only ὄδ' ἀνὴρ among many men, but like many men, did not do what Ajax did when the opportunity arose. Ajax was not only an exceptional warrior, but one who shared in and worked on behalf of Agamemnon's interests when he preserved the ships. This also happens to be the substance of Odysseus' rebuke about Agamemnon's lack of feeling. Odysseus does not ignore Ajax's attempted crime upon the Atreidae and himself, but he

does imply that to punish a man without flinching at the prospect of harming one who helped so much is wrong.

Like Tecmessa in her petition to Ajax, Odysseus proceeds to use himself as an example to illustrate the viability of this course of action to Agamemnon:

κάμοι γὰρ ἦν ποθ' οὗτος ἔχθιστος στρατοῦ,
ἐξ οὗ 'κράτησα τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὄπλων,
ἀλλ' αὐτὸν ἔμπας ὄντ' ἐγὼ τοιόνδ' ἐμοὶ
οὐκ ἀντατιμάσαιμ' ἄν, ὥστε μὴ λέγειν
ἐν ἄνδρ' ἰδεῖν ἄριστον Ἀργείων, ὅσοι
Τροίαν ἀφικόμεσθα, πλὴν Ἀχιλλέως.

That man was once the most hateful to me of the army, from the time when I won the arms of Achilles, but I would not dishonour such a man, however he was, so as not to say that I knew him to be the best of us Argives who came to Troy, except for Achilles. (1336-1341).

I agree with R.P. Winnington-Ingram that the compliment paid Ajax by Odysseus before Agamemnon suggests that Ajax's anger at the Atreidae may have been just, or at the very least, understandable.¹⁴⁵ Whatever Odysseus' thoughts about the results of the Judgement or his true intentions in conceding this honour to Ajax, he can afford to acknowledge Ajax's superior worth as a warrior, since he is dead, and the arms are no longer the principal issue. That Ajax's death has changed what is at stake in the conflict is brought out by Odysseus' remark that

¹⁴⁵ R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 58-59: "In this respect Odysseus places him next to Achilles, that is above himself... Is this not an admission that the Judgement has been unjust... Odysseus says not only that it would dishonour Ajax, unjustly, to refuse him burial...but also that he would not dishonour him by denying that, after Achilles, he was best of the Argives...And it was precisely the *atimia* that drove Ajax to attempt murder and to commit suicide. Yet Odysseus had accepted the Arms, though we need not believe with the Ajax-party... that he had intrigued for them. Nor perhaps was he called upon, within the play, to say whether the Greeks were right or wrong, nor, if he had said they were wrong, would he have advanced his immediate cause."

...ἐμίσουν δ', ἠνίκ' ἦν μισεῖν καλόν. (1347: *I hated him, when it was good to hate him*). Hatred is good, but must be circumscribed.¹⁴⁶ What are these limits? In the prologue, Athena describes Odysseus as πεῖραν τιν' ἐχθρῶν ἀρπάσαι θηρώμενον (2: [*always*] *hunting to grasp some means of attack against his enemies*). His efforts to track down Ajax are part of his ongoing hostile interaction with Ajax from the time when he won the arms.¹⁴⁷ Soon afterwards, Athena grants Odysseus the vision of Ajax which provokes a powerful sympathetic response towards his enemy. In so doing, Odysseus foregoes the opportunity to mock Ajax.

At that moment, Odysseus left the stage and did not return until now. Now Ajax is dead, but the Atreidae are still attempting to dispose of Ajax like a living enemy, only one who is powerless to resist them.¹⁴⁸ Odysseus' response is to attempt to circumscribe the hatred of Agamemnon. Odysseus' own hatred was limited when he was made, by Athena, safe from the threat of Ajax. From his invulnerable perspective, Odysseus could afford to feel pity for Ajax, even though Ajax hated him in turn. Now, this perspective was a by-product of the powers of Athena. Odysseus, of course, cannot create the same perspective for Agamemnon

¹⁴⁶ Cf. also *Aj.* 1343-1345: οὐ γάρ τι τοῦτον, ἀλλὰ τοὺς θεῶν νόμους / φθειροῖς ἄν. ἄνδρα δ' οὐ δίκαιον, εἰ θάνοι, / βλάπτειν τὸν ἐσθλόν, οὐδ' ἐὰν μισῶν κυρῆς. (*For you would not all harm that man, but the laws of the gods. It is not just to harm a good man, not even if you hate him*).

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth Press, 1987), 167: "So the first thing we learn about Odysseus in this play is that he is always to be found watching for a chance to assail his enemies, and that his present actions are part of just such a campaign against Ajax. That, at any rate, is Athene's reading of his motives, and Odysseus does not deny it..."

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Menelaus to Teucer: εἰ γὰρ βλέποντος μὴ 'δυνήθημεν κρατεῖν, / πάντως θανόντος γ' ἄρξομεν, κἂν μὴ θέλῃς, / χερσὶν παρευθύνοντες (*Aj.* 1067-1069: *for if we were not able to rule prevail upon him when he was alive, we shall rule him completely when he is dead, even if you are not willing, controlling him with our hands*).

on Ajax in the same way as Athena did for himself, but he can attempt to unite their views on Ajax by the power of verbal persuasion. Odysseus does so by pointing out that it was right to hate Ajax when he was alive. What is inappropriate about Agamemnon's hatred of Ajax in death? Odysseus' argument points out that Agamemnon has similarly been removed from all action pertaining to Ajax now that Ajax has committed suicide. There was a time when it was good to hate Ajax, but with his death, that time has passed. Before his shared vision with Athena, Odysseus was in Agamemnon's position. But now Ajax is dead: he cannot cause them any more harm. Both Odysseus and Agamemnon are, practically speaking, invulnerable to Ajax. The danger implicit in direct action has been removed, not because the mortality of the agents has been set aside, but because one disputant has been removed. Hatred comes about as a response to the possibility of harm. This possibility has been nullified by Ajax's suicide.

Agamemnon's threat, then, to cast out Ajax's body becomes gratuitous and anachronistic. The facts have changed in their significance: Ajax attacked them, but the punishment is no longer necessary. Meanwhile, Agamemnon still has reason to be grateful to Ajax, because he and his ships are still preserved thanks to Ajax's efforts against Hector. One set of actions becomes irrelevant upon Ajax's death: the other set is relevant still. In other words, Odysseus is attempting to point out that Agamemnon is responding to the wrong actions at the

wrong moment.¹⁴⁹ By adducing himself as an example, Odysseus tries to unite the visions of himself and Agamemnon. As Agamemnon begins to waver, he says to Odysseus: μέμνησ' ὅποιφ φωτὶ τὴν χάριν δίδωσ. (1354: *Remember to what sort of man you give this kindness*). But Odysseus' reply does exactly that: ὄδ' ἐχθρὸς ἀνὴρ, ἀλλὰ γενναῖός ποτ' ἦν. (1355: *this man was an enemy, but once noble*).¹⁵⁰ Agamemnon's focus on the former category does not account for what remains in the latter. The point remains lost on him, τί ποτε ποήσεις; ἐχθρὸν ὦδ' αἰδεῖ νέκυν; (1356: *Why ever are you going to do this? Do you so respect an enemy corpse?*), and Odysseus is forced to elaborate: νικᾷ γὰρ ἀρετὴ με τῆς ἐχθρας πολὺ. (1357: *For his excellence prevails upon me much more than his hostility*). Agamemnon has difficulty accepting that such men should be treated as though friends, since τοιοῖδε μέντοι φῶτες ἔμπληκτοι βροτῶν (1358: *These sorts of men are unstable among mortals*). The implication is that it would be better to have friends one could honour without fear of future reprisal. But Odysseus' retort, ἦ κάρτα πολλοὶ νῦν φίλοι καὶ ὅθις πικροὶ (1359: *Truly very many are now friends but soon turn bitter*), echoes Ajax's earlier claim that τοῖς πολλοῖσι γὰρ / βροτῶν ἄπιστός ἐσθ' ἑταιρείας λιμὴν (682-683: *For to many men is the harbour of friendship faithless*).

¹⁴⁹ 97. Blundell (1989) *Helping friends and harming enemies* 97: "For the Atreidae, Ajax's suicide merely makes it easier to triumph over him... but for Odysseus his death brings about an even more radical change than his madness. Previously weighty arguments no longer apply. Ajax's life must now be evaluated as a whole. His former exploits, despite the crimes of the last few hours, now entitle him to the honour normally due to friends... Odysseus is proposing that Ajax receive belatedly the recognition whose absence drove him to attempted murder and aroused the enmity of the chiefs. He thus raises the possibility not just of respecting Ajax as an enemy, but of transforming enmity back into friendship."

¹⁵⁰ See Finglass (2011) *Sophocles: Ajax* 510 n. ad 1355.

All three men, Agamemnon, Ajax and Odysseus, have grounds for believing this: Agamemnon has been betrayed by Ajax, Ajax by Agamemnon, and Odysseus now finds himself advocating on behalf of an enemy to a friend thanks to a vision of pity provided by a goddess. Odysseus' appeals to Agamemnon throughout his intervention have largely been impersonal: it is Ajax's excellence Agamemnon is to honour, not his (lack of) friendship with Ajax. It is the law of the gods Agamemnon should be afraid of, rather than shrinking from the thought of leaving an enemy's corpse unpunished. Odysseus' attempts to persuade Agamemnon on these grounds jeopardize Agamemnon's acquiescence to Odysseus himself as a friend in this matter, but I argue that Odysseus is attempting to show that Agamemnon's reliance on friend/enemy distinctions is what has led him into his risk of trampling upon the laws of the gods.¹⁵¹

But Agamemnon expresses his incredulity at Odysseus' efforts by asking Odysseus if he really wants him to let the corpse be buried.¹⁵² Odysseus tells him that he really does desire this, since he himself will come to that need some day.¹⁵³ Agamemnon interprets this to be an example of the naked self-interest of every man: ἢ πάνθ' ὅμοια πᾶς ἀνὴρ αὐτῷ πονεῖ. (1366: *Truly does every man*

¹⁵¹ Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 87 on the play's resolution of the conflict: "Agamemnon will not accept any shifting in the way he terms Ajax but none the less changes his attitude to him. He no longer must do harm to even this most *ekhthros* man. The interchange between Agamemnon and Odysseus, then, not only marks Odysseus' undercutting of the rigid determination of the opposition of *philos* and *ekhthros*, but also introduces an uncertainty into the rigid application of the moral position of 'Do harm to your *ekhthros* and good to your *philos*.'"

¹⁵² ἄνωγας οὔν με τὸν νεκρὸν θάπτειν ἔαν; (1364?)

¹⁵³ ἔγωγε: καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸς ἐνθάδ' ἴξομαι. (1365)

work for himself in all things alike). Odysseus asks in reply: τῷ γάρ με μᾶλλον εἰκόσ ἢ 'μαυτῷ πονεῖν; (1367: *For whom is it more fitting for me to work than for myself?*). This answer may read like a vindication of Agamemnon's cynicism in his motivation, but this confusion arises out of an equivocation Sophocles is playing on in the phrase 'αὐτῷ πονεῖ.' To work for oneself can mean to work for one's own interests in a narrow sense, which is the sense Agamemnon takes. But it can also have a broader meaning, as I suggest it does here. Earlier, Odysseus, watching Ajax through the eyes of Athena, saw and pitied him. The sight spurred a realization in Odysseus that all mortals were mere phantoms. In one sense, the distinction between Odysseus and Ajax collapsed for a moment—friend and enemy were irrelevant, since these distinctions arise out of particulars and not generalities: what mattered most was their shared humanity.

I agree with Gill that "Odysseus' response is rather a sense of fellow-feeling with anyone (even an enemy) who finds himself 'yoked to disaster'...it is thus a response to Ajax's situation rather than to the person himself."¹⁵⁴ In other words, Agamemnon accuses Odysseus of labouring after a personal agenda in which it benefits Odysseus directly and personally to see Ajax buried, and this is the content of the phrase 'αὐτῷ πονεῖ.' But Odysseus invokes the phrase 'αὐτῷ πονεῖ' to describe the mutual need that he and every other human being has for the graciousness of others in securing burial after one's death, a state in which the

¹⁵⁴ Christopher Gill, "The Character—Personality Distinction," in *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*, ed. Christopher Pelling (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 21.

person is most vulnerable and dependant on others for the goods it requires.¹⁵⁵

That the same phrase is used by Agamemnon and Odysseus with entirely different meanings shows the fundamental divorce in their views on this matter. Odysseus identifies with Ajax's situation precisely and only because of the perspective Athena allowed him to have of his enemy. But Agamemnon does not share that perspective, in part, at least, because he has no access to it. The threat to his own personal honour by Ajax's attempt on his life leaves Agamemnon implicated in the action. This is the only perspective Agamemnon has, and he not only uses it to assess Ajax and determine how it is he should treat him, but he also uses it in the case of Odysseus, assessing him within the rubric of help friend/harm enemy. The phrase 'αὐτῷ πονεῖ', and the gulf in perspective Agamemnon and Odysseus have on it, becomes a microcosm of the discussion on interpretation and perspective which has been happening throughout the play.

But while Odysseus attempts to secure the burial of Ajax by inviting Agamemnon into his universalizing framework, one which sees the need to give what one would ask for oneself, Agamemnon proceeds to grant the burial, but precisely on opposite grounds to those Odysseus intended:

ἀλλ' εὔ γε μέντοι τοῦτ' ἐπίστας' ὡς ἐγὼ
σοὶ μὲν νέμοιμ' ἄν τῆσδε καὶ μείζω χάριν,

¹⁵⁵ Christian Meier, *The Political art of Greek Tragedy*, trans. Andrew Webber (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 174 "Anthropologists call this generalized mutuality: in the end the generality will give what the generality has received. Thus it comes about that certain conventions, like the laws of the gods, are always valid. What Agamemnon dismisses as Odysseus' egotism is at the same time a service to everybody. He is indeed serving his own interests, but they are the interests of anybody in the face of death. In this way his behaviour makes his position superior, because of its generality, to that of Agamemnon."

οὗτος δὲ κάκεϊ κἀνθάδ' ὄν ἔμοιγ' ὁμῶς
ἔχθιστος ἔσται: σοὶ δὲ δρᾶν ἔξεσθ' ἅ χρῆς.

*But know this, at least, well, that I would grant to you a favour even greater than this, but even so, that man lying there will be most hateful to me: but you may do what you please. (1370-1373).*¹⁵⁶

Moreover, Agamemnon disavows any credit for the gesture, wishing it to be attributed to Odysseus alone.¹⁵⁷ The commander of the Greeks steadfastly refuses to take up the broader category Odysseus invokes to encompass Ajax as well as the Atreidae and himself. The credit Agamemnon does wish to take is that of supporting Odysseus, a man of status since his victory in the Judgement of Arms.¹⁵⁸ In the end, Odysseus achieves his aim of seeing Ajax buried, and of preventing Agamemnon from trampling upon the laws of the gods. What he does not succeed in is sharing his vision of Ajax, and it is my argument that such a vision must remain idiosyncratic to Odysseus, since he is the only character in the play to have been granted the opportunity to experience a perspective of Ajax which reveals their common humanity. Sophocles' *Ajax* highlights the fragility of such an understanding. It lives in Odysseus alone, who acquired it in extraordinary circumstances. His attempts to communicate it to others fail,

¹⁵⁶ Kevin Hawthorne, "The rhetorical resolution of Sophocles' *Aias*," *Mnemosyne* 65, no. 3 (2012): 397 "In divorcing political agreement from actual persuasion, Sophocles' resolution elevates character and relationship over ideas and principles." While I agree that this is an accurate description of the play's resolution, I hesitate in attributing whole-heartedly an endorsement of this dichotomy to Sophocles himself. As apparent from this scene and Teucer's refusal to allow Odysseus to assist in Ajax's burial, the play remains conflicted about the superiority of the one over the other.

¹⁵⁷ σὸν ἄρα τοῦργον, οὐκ ἐμὸν κεκλήσεται. (*Aj.* 1368).

¹⁵⁸ εἴπ': ἧ γὰρ εἶην οὐκ ἂν εὖ φρονῶν, ἐπεὶ / φίλον σ' ἐγὼ μέγιστον Ἀργείων νέμω. (*Aj.* 1330-1331: *Speak: for I would very much not be in my right mind, since I consider you to be my greatest friend among the Argives*).

because these characters cannot detach themselves from the immediate action around them.

Like Agamemnon, Menelaus adheres rigidly to distinctions between himself and others which prevent any kind of identification with an enemy, as he does with Teucer.¹⁵⁹ And although Teucer's efforts are generally interpreted in a sympathetic light, they work more to dispute the arguments of the Atreidae within the friend/enemy framework than they do to advance beyond it.¹⁶⁰ Teucer is, after all, like Ajax's dependants, directly implicated in the actions of the hero and his enemies. He does not have the luxury of Odysseus' detached perspective. And the final rebuke of Odysseus' approach, despite his persuasion of Agamemnon, is Teucer's rejection of his assistance. In the play's closing lines, Odysseus approaches Teucer to say: καὶ τὸν θανόντα τόνδε συνθάπτειν θέλω / καὶ ξυμπονεῖν καὶ μηδὲν ἐλλείπειν ὅσων / χρῆ τοῖς ἀρίστοις ἀνδράσιν πονεῖν βροτούς. (1378-1380: *And I wish to bury this dead man and to assist in the labour and to leave out nothing which mortals must do for the best men*). Odysseus tries to adhere to the Golden Rule, but even here his attitude finds no welcome; for

¹⁵⁹ So Menelaus emphasizes that Teucer is a bowman as opposed to a frontline fighter at *Aj.* 1120, 1122. Agamemnon reinforces the distinction between himself and Teucer as a bastard (*Aj.* 1228-1229) and a barbarian (*Aj.* 1262-1263).

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Ruth Scodel, *Sophocles* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 25: "But in debating Agamemnon and Menelaus on their own terms, crudely but effectively, he [Teucer] causes them to damn themselves ethically..." Also, Herbert Golder, "Sophocles' 'Ajax': Beyond the Shadow of Time," *Arion* 3.1, no. 1 (1990): 28 on Teucer's arguments: "They may be Spartan oligarchs or the amoral expansionists of imperial Athens. In any case, they are despots who possess political, not moral, authority and whose power rests upon fear and exploitation of others."

Teucer, although he praises Odysseus, says: σὲ δ', ὦ γεραίου σπέρμα Λαέρτου πατρός, / τάφου μὲν ὀκνῶ τοῦδ' ἐπιψάειν ἔαν, / μὴ τῷ θανόντι τοῦτο δυσχερὲς ποιῶ: (1394-1396: *I shrink, seed of your aged father Laertes, from allowing you to lay a hand on this burial, lest I do something displeasing to the dead*). And we know from Homer that Teucer's worry will be vindicated when Odysseus visits Hades. For Ajax, even death offers no deliverance from the mortal perspective, no advance in wisdom. Ajax is dead as a consequence of what happened to him in life. He is removed from living, but not from the action.

The mystery of the play is that it allows one of its characters to attain a perspective of secure knowledge and interpretation, only to demonstrate the frustration of all attempts of that perspective to communicate itself to others. The perspective, although it comes from Athena, must remain uniquely Odysseus'. It should not be forgotten what Athena's original intention had been: the goddess had not given Odysseus an explicit directive that Ajax not be punished—on the contrary, the context for Odysseus' vision is the beginning of Athena's revenge for Ajax's impiety. But Odysseus' vision instead leads him to an interpretation of Ajax and his actions very different from that of the goddess, despite looking on the same sight as Athena. As a result, Odysseus cannot rely on a simple directive from the goddess to secure the hero's burial. After all, Athena's goal is much more like the Atreidae's, although her motivation is less problematic. Odysseus remains isolated, then, at the play's end, in that he possesses a view that is not

explicitly sanctioned (or condemned) by the gods, one arrived at entirely on his own, and one that, despite his best efforts, remains incommunicable.

Conclusion

The question of the audience's response to the dynamics of epistemic certainty and uncertainty is a discussion I have alluded to but generally avoided. To be clear, the elements of the *Ajax* which I have covered have been discussed described by other scholars under the framework of metatheatre. This is especially true of the prologue, where Athena is understood to be playing the role of a playwright-director, Odysseus an audience, Ajax the actor playing out a fantasy on-stage. Such an interpretation of the opening scene readily assimilates itself to Aristotle's understanding of tragedy as impacting the audience through the arousal of pity and fear.¹⁶¹ But I have generally avoided entering this discussion, since it is not my intention to detail the dynamic of parallel certainty and uncertainty in a way which limits its relevance to the metatheatricality of the *Ajax*, most especially because the issue of epistemic certainty and uncertainty is not particular to fifth-century Athens, but one that attends question of communication and interpretation at all times. My understanding of this dynamic as being universal within all human efforts of communication situates the question of

¹⁶¹ Dana Lacourse Munteanu, *Tragic Pathos: Pity and Fear in Greek Philosophy and Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 202: "This play constantly reinforces the idea that viewers ought to respond to tragic suffering with a type of pity that transcends friendship and enmity and is based on the abstract realization that everyone is prone to misfortune. This realization also appears to have been at the core of the Aristotelian link between tragic fear and pity. But Sophocles' *Ajax* goes beyond Aristotle, who refrained from specifically developing the topic of the morality of the tragic emotions, to suggest a clear ethical benefit, 'wisdom' (*sophrosyne*) derived from pity: contemplating another's misfortune helps us to estimate our correct place in the universe, our limited powers, and to avoid arrogance." In general, Munteanu's chapter (*ibid.*, 181-207) offers the fullest recent discussion of the metatheatrical elements of the *Ajax*'s prologue.

audience-response to Greek theatre within the cluster of questions pertaining to human communication and interpretation broadly. Complicating this background context to the work is the fact that in scholarship on Greek tragedy, the question of the nature of audience-response has its own history, and it continues to be debated to what extent Greek tragedy was meant to be ‘mere entertainment,’ an extension of the ideological apparatus of fifth-century Athens, or a form of critical self-reflection undertaken by the city.¹⁶²

Above all else, I have been interested in what the *Ajax* has to say about the dynamics of epistemic certainty and uncertainty to us. To engage in a full justification of this interest would take too much time and space. I hope it will suffice to say that I am not alone in this interest: following Gill, I take it that “[o]ne of the available models for the audience’s relationship to the work of art is that of engagement with a form of ‘argument’ or ‘dialectic’ provoked by the work,” and that when it comes to Greek tragedy, “this model is especially appropriate, in that the works concerned seemed designed to activate debate or ‘dialectic’ on central issues of human life.”¹⁶³ I take it that Gill’s lack of qualification as to which audience specifies that he does not think it a meaningful distinction to make: Greek tragedy is as capable of provoking a ‘dialectic’ in an

¹⁶² The argument for Greek tragedy as ‘mere entertainment’ is most iconically stated by Jasper Griffin, “The Social Function of Attic Tragedy,” *The Classical Quarterly* 48, no.1: (1998), 39-61; Simon Goldhill, “Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference: the Politics of Aeschylean tragedy, Once Again,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 120 (2000): 34-56 offers the rebuttal in favour of recognizing a political dimension which extends beyond the theatre.

¹⁶³ Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 121.

Athenian audience as it is in an audience of the present day. Following Williams,

I think that, when it comes to the authors of Greek tragedy:

...the fact that it takes some knowledge and imagination to see their point does not mean that when we see their point, the experience is just the product of imaginative time-travel—that they mean something to us only to the extent that we pretend to be fifth-century Greeks. If we get to the position of their meaning something to us, then they mean something to us... The fact that we can honestly and not just as tourists respond to the tragedies is almost enough in itself to show that ethically we have more in common with the audience of the tragedies than the progressivist story allows.¹⁶⁴

The fact of Odysseus' identification with Ajax along the lines of a human being, seems, to me, to be an oblique invitation by Sophocles to us to enter into such an engagement with his play and the issues it presents. I do not mean to suggest that Sophocles wrote the play with non-fifth-century Athenian audiences in mind. Yet epistemic certainty and uncertainty remains an issue we contend with in our own time, nor is it limited to dramatic or mythic contexts. Whether language points to a meaning which exists apart from the written or spoken word is one of the central issues at stake in the debate between realism and nominalism.

As explored in the last chapter, only one human character is epistemically secure: Odysseus. As of the play's conclusion, however, he remains unsuccessful in his attempts to share his perspective with others, whatever his practical success may be in securing Ajax's burial. One must wonder what an audience makes of such an ending. De Jong reaches the conclusion that "it is apparently the humanistic perspective of Odysseus, expressed early and adhered to consistently

¹⁶⁴ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 18.

until the end of the play, which Sophocles wanted his spectators to adopt.”¹⁶⁵ But the very existence of a split-camp phenomenon over the ethical assessment of Ajax among scholars suggests that there are other meaningful options for audience members to identify with.¹⁶⁶ At the same time, although the play nearly ends on a triumphant note for Odysseus, his final departure is marked by Teucer’s rejection of his help in burying Ajax. Moreover, the audience is likely to know that Teucer’s worries about unabating hostility between Odysseus and Ajax will be vindicated later in the mythological-chronology, when Odysseus meets Ajax again in the underworld. I do not think, then, that de Jong’s assessment can be accepted uncritically. It must be remembered that Odysseus’ ‘conversion’ happens at the play’s outset, when he is effectively isolated from other characters except for Athena. Ajax is deluded and cannot see him. And even Athena does not expressly endorse or join in with Odysseus’ piteous attitude towards his enemy. More importantly, Odysseus’ failure to convince Agamemnon to abandon his hatred and to respect Ajax as a friend and great hero tells against expecting success in persuading others to adopt humanistic behaviour. Agamemnon acquiesces to Odysseus along the lines which affirm, rather than weaken, friend/enemy distinctions.

Meanwhile, the rest of the play shows figures who are entirely engaged in the dramatic action. There is no moment of epiphany for Tecmessa and the

¹⁶⁵ I.J.F. De Jong, “Where Narratology Meets Stylistics,” in *Sophocles and the Greek Language*, eds. I.J.F de Jong & A. Rijksbaron (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 93.

¹⁶⁶ ‘Pietists’ will be more likely to prefer Odysseus, ‘hero-worshippers’ Ajax.

Chorus, except when they realize that they have been deceived by Ajax. This brings an end to their confusion and ignorance, but also resolves their dilemma in exactly the way they were trying to prevent from happening. Throughout the play, they joined together in attempting to arrive at epistemic security on their own. Because of their implication in the action, Tecmessa and the Chorus entered into this effort with pre-conceived desires and agendas which ultimately hindered them from recognizing the ambiguous nature of Ajax's words. Were they able to have recognized this ambiguity, Tecmessa and the Chorus may have been able to act prudently in not allowing Ajax to go to the beach alone. This is tragedy, however, and they do not, of course, realise what Ajax means to do. As a result, they come to identify with Ajax's pain and grief, but too late, and much more violently than they wanted to. In the absence of a teacher, an external guide to appropriate interpretation, such as Athena was to Odysseus, one has recourse only to experience and suffering as a corrective to error.

The result is that the play seems to stage the dynamics of certainty and uncertainty as happening on two different levels: on the one hand, there are situations in which one can be certain of the information they are receiving. This is Odysseus' situation in the prologue. On the other hand, there is the situation of Tecmessa and the Chorus, who are forced to discern from a perspective entirely within the action, vulnerable to harm and at risk of committing errors which may have disastrous consequences for themselves and others. There is, I suggest, a parallel to be drawn between these two levels and the audience of a Greek

tragedy. Watching the tragedy, the audience, like Odysseus in the prologue, is external to the action. They are emotionally engaged with what is happening on-stage, but are not implicated in the action. Because of this, they are able to enter into modes of interpretation which would not otherwise be possible for (or appropriate to) people implicated within the action. As discussed in the third chapter, Odysseus' pity required his safety under the protection of Athena. It was only then that Odysseus was able to take on a different mode of engagement with his enemy, Ajax. The theatre itself creates this condition for the audience. The tragic spectacle on-stage, were it really happening in the lives of the audience, would provoke a fear and pity of a very different kind. But because the audience members are able to watch the desperate and violent spectacle of Greek tragedy without any risk of personal harm, they are free to engage in a more detached manner—to learn without suffering. But this same audience, once the play is over, leaves the theatre, and, like Tecmessa and the Chorus, the moment it does, are faced with the very real prospect of having tragic situations arise in their own lives. They must confront these situations without the invincibility of an Odysseus before an Ajax, without the detachment of an audience member at the performance of a tragic play. They must also make decisions based on the information they possess from a position within the action, with a possibility for error which could be fatal. This interpretation of the metatheatrical element of the *Ajax* has the advantage of preserving the possibility of a meta-dramatic dimension in the prologue, while extending this dimension to encompassing the subsequent

portions of the play (the scenes including the Chorus and Tecmessa). At the same, such an understanding has relevance to our understanding of an audience's engagement with Sophocles' *Ajax*, whether that audience is celebrating the City Dionysia or coolly reading the words of Sophocles from an Oxford Classical Text.

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