

AJAX, THE UNEXPECTED, AND THE DECEPTION SPEECH

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IN Sophocles' *Ajax*, the hero delivers his famous "Deception Speech" (646–92), perhaps the single most controversial speech in this controversial author. At the conclusion of the previous scene, Ajax, disgraced and despondent, leaves behind a despairing Tecmessa and withdraws to his tent. The stage is set for his suicide, and Tecmessa's pleas at 585–94 show that she fears the worst. The chorus sings a melancholy ode describing Ajax' madness and the shame that this has brought upon his family (596–645).

Suddenly, however, Ajax reappears from his tent and tells us that his feelings have begun to change: he now pities Tecmessa and Eurysaces (652–53). He will, he says, go purify himself and cleanse away the heavy wrath of the goddess (654–56). The chorus interprets the speech unambiguously—Ajax has decided not to kill himself—and, almost hysterical with relief, they plunge into song (693–718). Ajax, however, describes his change of heart and his future reconciliation with the Atreids in bitter terms, and his speech is ambiguous. Later in the play, he kills himself.

The controversy surrounding this speech is endless. Did Ajax really decide to seek a reconciliation with the Atreids, then change his mind yet again and kill himself? Was he intentionally trying to deceive the chorus? Did he even realize that the chorus was there, or was he speaking primarily to himself? Why did he deliver this speech? And why did he then kill himself?¹

1. Perhaps no passage in Greek literature has generated more controversy; see, e.g., H. Friis Johansen, "Sophocles 1939–1959," *Lustrum* 7 (1962): 177–78. For a very brief survey of differing views, see R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 46, n. 107. See also K. von Fritz, "Zur Interpretation des Aias," *RhM* 83 (1934): 113–28; G. Perrotta, "L' Aiace di Sofocle," *Dioniso* 7 (1939): 135–49; R. Ebeling, "Missverständnisse um den Aias des Sophokles," *Hermes* 76 (1941): 283–314; K. Reinhardt, *Sophokles*³ (Frankfurt, 1947), pp. 18–41; I. Errandonea, "Les quatre monologues d' *Ajax*," *LEC* 26 (1958): 21–40; B. M. W. Knox, "The *Ajax* of Sophocles," *HSCP* 65 (1961): 1–37 (repr. in *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* [Baltimore, 1979], pp. 125–64); G. Kirkwood, "Homer and Sophocles' *Ajax*," in *Classical Drama and Its Influence: Essays Presented to H. D. F. Kitto*, ed. M. J. Anderson (London, 1965), pp. 51–70; P. Biggs, "The Disease Theme in Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, and *Trachiniae*," *CP* 61 (1966): 223–35; G. H. Gellie, *Sophocles: A Reading* (Melbourne, 1972); M. Sicherl, "The Tragic Issue in Sophocles' *Ajax*," *YCS* 25 (1977): 67–98; O. Taplin, "Yielding to Forethought: Sophocles' *Ajax*," in *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox* (Berlin, 1979), pp. 122–30; R. Scodel, *Sophocles* (Boston, 1984), p. 23. The following commentaries are cited below: R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles*, part 7: *The "Ajax"* (Cambridge, 1896); J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1953); W. B. Stanford, *Sophocles' "Ajax"* (London, 1963).

In this paper I am not primarily concerned with (though I inevitably touch upon) these old and difficult problems. First, I outline some of the conventional ways in which Greek poetry refers to unexpected events, both good and catastrophic. Second, I argue that Sophocles alludes to, and manipulates, these conventions during the deception speech; the consequences of this manipulation for the speech, and for the play as a whole, are explored. Finally, I suggest that the deception speech anticipates the messenger scene that follows it, and that the messenger scene, in turn, expands upon ideas that appeared in the deception speech.

I. DESCRIBING THE UNEXPECTED

A stunned Ajax begins the deception speech with this observation (646–52):

ἅπανθ' ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος
φύει τ' ἄδηλα καὶ φανέντα κρύπτεται·
κοῦκ ἔστ' ἄελπτον οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἀλίσκεται
χῶ δεινὸς ὄρκος χαί περισκελεῖς φρένες.
κἀγὼ γάρ, ὅς τὰ δεῖν' ἐκατέρουν τότε,²
βαφῇ σίδηρος ὥς ἐθελύνθη στόμα
πρὸς τῆσδε τῆς γυναικὸς· οἰκτίρω δέ νιν . . .

More than one commentator has seen a possible echo of Archilochus fragment 122. 1 χρημάτων ἄελπτον οὐδέν ἐστιν οὐδ' ἀπώμοτον.³ The connection is certainly present, but it is probably neither as simple nor as direct as has been suspected. The fragment of Archilochus begins (122. 1–4 West):

χρημάτων ἄελπτον οὐδέν ἐστιν οὐδ' ἀπώμοτον
οὐδὲ θαυμάσιον, ἐπειδὴ Ζεὺς πατήρ 'Ολυμπίων
ἐκ μεσαμβρίας ἔθηκε νύκτ' ἀποκρύψας φάος
ἡλίου †λάμποντος, λυγρόν† δ' ἤλθ' ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους δέος.

If Zeus can snatch the sun from the midday sky, nothing is ἄελπτον or ἀπώμοτον or θαυμάσιον. This particular marvel leads to a more general conclusion (5–9):

ἐκ δὲ τοῦ καὶ πιστὰ πάντα κάπτελπα γίνεται,
ἀνδράσιν· μηδεὶς ἔθ' ὑμέων εἰσορέων θαυμαζέτω
μηδ' ἐὰν δελφῖσι θῆρες ἀνταμείψωνται νομόν
ἐνάλιον, καὶ σφιν θαλάσσης ἡχέεντα κύματα
φίλτερ' ἡπείρου γένηται, τοῖσι δ' ὑλέειν ὄρος.

The following elements are repeated in the passages above:

(a) We should not believe that anything is impossible: *Aj.* 648–49 ἀλίσκεται / χῶ δεινὸς ὄρκος, frag. 122. 1 χρημάτων . . . οὐδέν ἐστιν . . . ἀπώμοτον, 5 πιστὰ πάντα.

2. The punctuation here (with a comma after τότε in 650 and no comma after ὥς in 651) follows R. D. Dawe, "Miscellanea Critica," *CP* 83 (1988): 104.

3. Kamerbeek (p. 135) on 648–49, Stanford (p. 143) on 646–48.

(b) Anything is to be expected: *Aj.* 648 κούκ ἔστ' ἄελπτον οὐδέν, frag. 122. 1 χρημάτων ἄελπτον οὐδέν ἐστίν, 5 πάντα . . . ἐπίελπτα.

(c) No one should be surprised at anything: frag. 122. 1-2 οὐδέν ἐστίν . . . θαυμάσιον, 6 μηδεὶς . . . θαυμαζέτω.

The connection is not simply between the two passages. Archilochus and Sophocles are both drawing upon a more generalized topos.⁴

The underlying idea, our inability to predict the future, can have either good or bad implications. Thus, an anonymous comic poet states (frag. 770 Kock): οὐδέν οὐτ' ἐξ οὐρίων θεουσὶν ἔστ' ἀπώμοτον (a), / οὔτε τῆς νεὼς λυθείσης ἔστ' ἀνέλπιστον (b). Nothing is impossible, not the most improbable bad fortune, or the most unlikely good luck. Failure thus afflicts even those who try their best, while the gods can confer success upon a fool (cf. Solon frag. 13. 65-70 West = [Theog.] 585-90, Theog. 149-50). Because the future is unpredictable, mortals should neither exult too freely in good fortune nor yield to despair (cf., e.g., Archil. frag. 128, Theog. 657-66).

The purely negative aspect of this idea is so widespread and well known that it needs little comment here: human existence is fragile; the gods can easily deceive mortals (see, e.g., Simon. *PMG* 525). What is good may seem bad, or the bad may seem good, so we should be cautious in our emotions (e.g., Theog. 401-6). Misfortune should never catch mortals unawares, since the gods can quickly turn everything upside down (Simon. *PMG* 527) and may at any time replace mortal prosperity with disaster.⁵

The unpredictability of fate, like many of the darker sides of life, can also be treated ironically. Note how the speaker in Archilochus fragment 122 strings together various ἀδύνατα to illustrate his own position: if Zeus can cause a midday eclipse, then wild beasts can move to the sea, dolphins live on dry land—and the speaker can have a daughter who is less than beautiful.⁶

More important for this paper, our uncertain state can even assume an optimistic aspect, one that has attracted less attention, though it is also well attested in Greek literature. Here, the emphasis is less on the uncertainty of the human condition than on divine power. Nothing is difficult for a god (Pind. *Pyth.* 2. 49-52):

θεὸς ἅπαν ἐπὶ ἐλπίδεσσι τέκμαρ ἀνύεται,
θεός, ὃ καὶ πτερόεντ' αἰετὸν κίχρε, καὶ θαλασσαῖον παραμείβεται
δελφίνα, καὶ ὑψιφρόνων τιν' ἔκαμψε βροτῶν,
ἐτέροισι δὲ κῦδος ἀγήραον παρέδωκε.

4. Although not in Sophocles, item (c) does reappear at Pind. *Pyth.* 10. 48 (discussed below) and thus illustrates the topos as a whole.

5. See, e.g., Simon. *PMG* 521, Hdt. 1. 32, and J. C. Opstelten, *Sophocles and Greek Pessimism* (Amsterdam, 1952).

6. See Arist. *Rh.* 1418b28, with schol. ad loc. (quoted in full by West on Archil. frag. 122). This is not the only possible interpretation of the passage: A. P. Burnett, *Three Archaic Greek Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 67-69, accepts a version in which the father expresses his incredulity that anyone would want to marry his ugly daughter. In both interpretations, however, the ἀδύνατα would be ironic. For other discussions of this fragment, see F. Lasserre,

Thus if, thanks to divine help, a hero miraculously survives some hopeless mission, we need not yield to disbelief. No situation is so desperate that the gods cannot come to the rescue. Already in Homeric narrative this simple statement appears obliquely, in an exchange between Telemachus and Athena disguised as Mentor (see *Od.* 3. 226–28, 230–31). Sophocles' Ajax himself, when his delusion passes and he pictures his enemies safely mocking him, presents his own version of this idea. Whereas elsewhere a divine rescue is a miraculous and joyous event, Ajax sourly acknowledges (455–56) that “even an ignoble man can escape he better, if some god gets in the way (βλάπτει).”

Other passages express this idea in language similar to that used by Archilochus and Sophocles. In Pindar, Perseus manages to bring back the Gorgon's head and wreak vengeance upon his enemies (*Pyth.* 10. 48–50 ἐμοὶ δὲ θαυμάσαι / θεῶν τελεσάντων οὐδὲν ποτε φαίνεται / ἔμμεν ἄπιστον). Such a miraculous success does not surprise the poet (compare θαυμάσαι with item (c) above), nor should it seem unbelievable (compare ἄπιστον with item (a) above). In Bacchylides, Croesus is rescued even as he mounts the pyre in despair (3. 57–58): ἄπιστον οὐδὲν (a), ὅτι θ[εῶν] μέριμνα / τεύχει. Again, Theseus returned from his perilous trip to Crete (*Dithy.* 17. 117–18): ἄπιστον (a) ὃ τι δαίμονες / θέλωσιν οὐδὲν φρεονάρις βροτοῖς. Good fortune is never beyond belief—ἄπιστον . . . οὐδὲν—when the gods are behind it.

Consider in particular the following passage in Pindar. Bellerophon, against all hope, subdues Pegasus (*Ol.* 13. 83): τελεῖ δὲ θεῶν δύναμις καὶ τὰν παρ' ὄρκον (a) καὶ παρ' ἐλπίδα (b) κούφαν κτίσιν. The phrase παρ' ὄρκον corresponds to ἀπώμοτος in the first line of Archilochus fragment 122 and anticipates the more extended language of *Ajax* 648–49. Likewise, παρ' ἐλπίδα, that which is contrary to one's ἐλπίς, corresponds to ἄελπτος in Archilochus. The presence of both ideas strongly suggests either that Pindar had this particular passage in mind or, perhaps more likely, that the collocation of ἀπώμοτος and ἄελπτος represents a convention upon which both Archilochus and Pindar drew.

Consider also the Euripidean choral tag appended to the *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Andromache*, *Helen*, and *Bacchae*:

πολλαὶ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων,
πολλὰ δ' ἄέλπτως (b) κραίνουσι θεοί·
καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἐτελέσθη,
τῶν δ' ἁδοκῆτων (c) πόρον ἡῦρε θεός.
τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα.⁷

In each play, these lines specifically remind the audience that the amazing events of the play are the work of divine intervention.

“Le fragment 74 d'Archiloque,” *MH* 4 (1947): 5–6; S. Luria, “Zu Archilochos,” *Philologus* 105 (1961): 183.

7. The *Medea* ends with the same final four lines but has πολλῶν ταμίας Ζεὺς ἐν Ὀλύμπῳ instead of πολλαὶ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων in the opening line; the other four plays end with these five lines. Diggle gives the testimonia for the tag in the apparatus to *Alc.* 1159–63 in his OCT.

Elsewhere in Sophocles this formula appears in its full form. When, in the *Antigone*, someone sprinkles a small amount of dust upon Polynices' corpse, the watchman endures an angry tirade from Creon and gloomily retreats. When he later makes his triumphant return, he describes, with more enthusiasm than discretion, the reversal in his fortunes (388–94):

ἄναξ, βροτοῖσιν οὐδέν ἐστ' ἀπώμοτον (a)
 ψεύδει γάρ ἢ 'πίνοια τὴν γνώμην (b)· ἐπεὶ
 σχολῇ ποθ' ἤξειν δεῦρ' ἂν ἐξηύχουν ἐγὼ
 ταῖς σαῖς ἀπειλαῖς αἷς ἐχειμάσθην τότε.
 ἀλλ', ἢ γὰρ ἐκτὸς καὶ παρ' ἐλπίδας (b) χαρὰ
 ἔοικεν ἄλλῃ μῆκος οὐδὲν ἡδονῇ,
 ἦκω, δι' ὄρκων καίπερ ὦν ἀπώμοτος (a) . . .

Here, the watchman—as nervous, indiscreet, and chatty as he was in the previous scene—not only (like Archilochus and Pindar) joins both ideas, but also (like the speaker in Archilochus) repeats the collocation within a few lines. First we find ἀπώμοτος at 388; in the following line the phrase ψεύδει ἢ 'πίνοια τὴν γνώμην (“afterthought belies our plans”) corresponds to Archilochus' ἀέλπτος and Pindar's παρ' ἐλπίδα.⁸ The watchman, after dwelling upon his relief (389–91), then restates these two ideas in reverse order: his joy is ἐκτὸς καὶ παρ' ἐλπίδας (a stronger phrase than the simple παρ' ἐλπίδα in Pindar), while he himself has arrived ἀπώμοτος, though he had sworn that he would never come back. Here, as with the unhappy father in Archilochus, there is a touch of irony as the watchman excitedly (and indiscreetly) describes his miraculous change in fortune. More important, perhaps, the repetition in this passage suggests that the topos was, for Sophocles, a flexible, living entity.

Finally, in the *Ajax* itself, compare the language of the chorus when, confident that Ajax has regained his wits, they conclude their wild song of rejoicing (714–18):

πάνθ' ὁ μέγας χρόνος μαραίνει,
 κούδὲν ἀναύδητον (a) φατίσαιμ'
 ἄν, εὐτέ γ' ἐξ ἀέλπτων (b)
 Αἴας μεταγενώσθη
 θυμοῦ τ' Ἀτρείδαις μεγάλων τε νεικέων.

These lines recapitulate the sentiments with which Ajax opened the deception speech and thus round off the episode and stasimon that precede. A reference to time opens both passages (646 and 714); once again we find the unexpected, as Ajax changes his mind (716 ἐξ ἀέλπτων; cf. 648). Neither ἀπώμοτος nor any derivative of ὄμνυμι appears, but the statement κούδὲν ἀναύδητον φατίσαιμ' ἄν (“I would say that nothing

8. On ἐπίνοια as “after-thought,” not “forethought,” see the comments ad loc. by R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles' "Antigone"* (Cambridge, 1900), p. 79; J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles*, vol. 3 (Leiden, 1978), p. 88.

should not be said," i.e., nothing should be said to be impossible) comes very close to "never swear that anything is impossible."

To summarize, the basic concept is simple: sudden (and drastic) events, both beneficent and destructive, are always possible. This idea, marked by key words and their derivatives (e.g., ἄπιστος, ἄελπτος, ἀπώμοτος), is invoked at sudden, dramatic twists of fate. In its simplest form, the poet merely says that nothing is unexpected or refuses to swear that anything is impossible. The fairly standardized language is important primarily because it underlines the fact that we are dealing with a conventional idea. The most important aspect of this idea is the following: if the speaker looks for causes, he looks to the gods, for whom nothing, however fantastic it may seem to mortals, is difficult.

II. THE UNEXPECTED AND THE DECEPTION SPEECH: TIME OR THE GODS?

When Ajax declares κοῦκ ἔστ' ἄελπτον οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἀλίσκεται / χά δεινὸς ὄρκος, he is repeating a conventional association between that which is ἄελπτον and that which is ἀπώμοτον. Further, the sentiments that he expresses are not simply conventional but also conventionally imply, even before he provides us with any particulars, that fortune has suddenly and unexpectedly reversed itself. Whether this change has been for good or evil normally depends upon the situation. In the *Ajax*, it depends upon one's point of view.

The unexpected event is simple enough: the tears of Tecmessa have begun to weaken Ajax' determination, and the unyielding resolve that he had so passionately defended at 585-95 has begun to soften.⁹ He sees that before long his wrath will pass, that he will yield to the gods (666-67) and seek reconciliation with the Atreids.

More than one critic has (and with some justice) criticized the chorus:¹⁰ one might indeed expect them to notice the bitterness of Ajax' tone. But as far as the chorus is concerned, any sudden and unexpected change must be for the good, given the current tenor of events: further deterioration would be a cause for alarm or even deeper dejection, but not for surprise. Ajax' state of mind has filled them with despair. They want him to cease his abnormal behavior, and they seize upon the positive interpretation: Ajax has been miraculously restored to them. Nearly hysterical with relief (693-700), they dance for joy.

For Ajax, the same revelation has a very different significance: he realizes that he cannot, in the face of Tecmessa's appeal, maintain his harsh and (as he sees it) noble stance. Even as he employs the language of σωφροσύνη and of moderation (669-77) to describe the change that

9. A. M. Dale, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 154-55, and Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, p. 48, for example, argue that since Ajax describes the softening of his resolve in such bitter terms, and since he ultimately does kill himself, he cannot really mean that his feelings have begun to change; but though much of what Ajax says in the *Trugrede* is clearly, even theatrically, ambiguous, there is no reason to doubt those statements that are explicit.

10. See, e.g., Gellie, *Sophocles: A Reading*, p. 17.

he feels in his heart, Ajax displays his bitterness. He finds the keen edge of his temper softened by a woman's words.¹¹ He will abase himself before the Atreids (667 σέβειν).¹² If Ajax' emotions are transient, and if he will be reconciled with his bitterest enemies, then he should limit both his anger and his affections (678–83), for today's friend is tomorrow's enemy. Surrender would, in such a context, debase friendship. Thus, Ajax faithfully recites the arguments of σωφροσύνη but couches them in such language that σωφροσύνη appears degraded and intolerable.¹³

For both Ajax and the chorus the event is the same: Ajax has begun to yield, and he uses the "nothing-is-unexpected" topos to describe the change that has overcome him. But does the topos wear its positive or negative aspect? A miracle for the chorus is a catastrophe for Ajax. Both interpret the topos correctly—but Ajax has not yielded quite yet, and Ajax still has his sword. Sustained by the waning fire within him, he steals away and puts himself and his resolve far beyond the reach of pity and of time.

Thus, the topos reveals yet another of the many dramatic ironies in Sophocles; but that is not all it reveals. Ajax varies the topos in ways that shed light upon his own idiosyncracies and, ultimately, upon his death.

First, the topos normally describes events that are miraculous and almost supernatural: Archilochus applies the topos to an eclipse; if a speaker in Archilochus portrays his ugly daughter as a prodigy, the irony is self-evident and reinforces the normal force of the topos; the excited watchman in the *Antigone* views his delivery with wonder. In more serious contexts, however, sudden rescues are no laughing matter. In Pindar, Perseus kills Medusa, Bellerophon tames Pegasus; in Bacchylides, Apollo whisks Croesus from the pyre itself, Theseus survives his encounter with the minotaur—and in Sophocles, Ajax changes his mind.

Earlier in the play, Ajax has no doubt that he is a better man than any of his enemies (see, e.g., 455–56). In the deception speech, Ajax' eyes are opened, his view of the world expands, and he recognizes, perhaps for the first time, his real position in the scheme of things. Yet, at the same time, Ajax sees this unexpected shift in his emotions as an event of cosmic dimensions—it is this very shift that stuns him and forces him to

11. See 651 ἐθελύνθην στόμα; my text here paraphrases Jebb. The metaphor is tangled: Ajax has just spoken of himself as tempered steel (650–51) that has lost its edge, and in the Hippocratic corpus we find both θηλύνω (*De artic.* 7. 52) and ἐκθελύνω (ibid. 55) used to describe the softening of the flesh. The verb is not common, but when it is applied to men, it clearly means "to make effeminate" and is not a complimentary term: see Eur. frag. 360. 28–31 Nauck, Xen. *Oec.* 4. 4. 2. The sort of reproach that we find in these passages is surely present in the *Ajax* as well. Dawe, comparing *Aj.* 650–52 with Aesch. *Ag.* 611–12 ("Miscellanea Critica," p. 104), suggests that "'unmanned' would be the nearest one-word English equivalent."

12. On the choice of words here, see below, at n. 18.

13. See H. North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, vol. 35 (Ithaca, 1966) pp. 60–61; on Ajax' cosmic view of σωφροσύνη and its similarity to that which appears later at Pl. *Grg.* 506, see her discussion at pp. 159–65 (esp. pp. 162–63).

recognize a larger world. For Ajax, this change of heart is as great a marvel as the most daring heroic exploit, the most bizarre event or sudden *deus ex machina*. Nothing demonstrates the intense self-absorption of the Sophoclean hero more eloquently than the way in which Ajax views his feelings.

Second, consider the role that Ajax allots to χρόνος: the endless expanse of time can do anything, and nothing is unexpected. This by itself is not entirely new. Solon and Sophocles, for example, observe that time ultimately reveals everything.¹⁴ Pindar even refers to ἀνακταῖ τὸν πάντων υπερβάλλοντα Χρόνον μακάρων (frag. 33) and observes that not even Χρόνος ὁ πάντων πατήρ can undo what has been done (*Ol.* 2. 17).¹⁵ One could thus portray time, like μοῖρα or ἀνάγκη, as one of those grand impersonal forces to which even the Olympian gods were subject.¹⁶ According to Ajax, time is the reason that “nothing is unexpected,” and Menander, a century and a half later, echoes Ajax’ language (frag. 593 Kock οὐκ ἔστ’ ἄπιστον οὐδὲν ἐν θνητῷ βίω . . . πολλὰ ποικίλλει χρόνος κτλ.).

But, in the fifth century, Ajax is introducing an innovation into the *topos*. Traditionally, time is not the agent. If any agent is named, it is the gods: in Archilochus, Zeus is responsible for the initial miracle that makes the other ἀδύνατα possible; at *Pythian* 2. 49–52, Pindar repeats θεός for emphasis; Perseus’ rescue is no surprise θεῶν τελεσάντων (*Pyth.* 10. 48); Bellerophon wins Pegasus because of the θεῶν δύναμις (*Ol.* 13. 83); at Bacchylides 3. 57, Croesus benefits from the θεῶν μέριμνα; Theseus returns because δαίμονες were responsible (Bacchyl. 17. 117); when in the *Septem* Eteocles stresses πειθαρχία, the chorus reproaches him by remarking θεοῦ δ’ ἔτ’ ἰσχύς καθυπερτέρα (226), and then reminds him that the gods can always save mortals (227–29). Ajax himself, having encountered Athena in the prologue, frankly acknowledges that the gods have prevented him from killing his enemies. The watchman in the *Antigone* does not, it is true, immediately attribute his rescue to divine aid, but he clearly sees a divine hand in the mysterious storm that precedes Antigone’s appearance (421 θεία νόσος; cf. 418 οὐράνιον ἄχος). The Euripidean choral tag may be ironic or embittered when it stresses the marvelous works of the gods, but it does drive home the fact that marvels are conventionally attributed to θεοί: it emphatically begins with the remark, πολλαὶ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων. The unexpected nature of life directly results from (and demonstrates) the strength of personalized divinities.

Within the context of archaic and classical values, some divine force is responsible for all things that happen, both good and bad. The con-

14. See Solon frag. 9. 1, 2 West, *Soph. frag.* 301, 918 Radt; for further references, see J. de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca, 1968), pp. 33–58.

15. Though note that we do not have the context for frag. 33, and that the “theology” of *Ol.* 2 is, at best, mysterious.

16. The power of μοῖρα and ἀνάγκη is made emphatically clear at Aesch. *PV* 514–18; see also Pind. *Paean* 6. 94, Hdt. 1. 91; and M. Griffith, “*Prometheus Bound*” (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 17–18.

temporaries of the Aristophanic Strepsiades, who listened to poets such as Simonides after dinner, were probably young men when they watched the *Ajax*. They all knew that without the gods there is no ἀρετή (Simon. *PMG* 526; cf. Pind. *Isthm.* 3. 4–5, *Pyth.* 1. 41–42). In the Theognidean corpus we hear unambiguously that mortals have no control over their lives: the gods are responsible for everything, both ἄτη and κέρδος (e.g., Theog. 133–42). The θεός causes ὕβρις in the bad man when it prepares to destroy him (e.g., Theog. 151–52). Sometimes, when the divine agent is anonymous, the poet may choose the term δαίμων (e.g., Theog. 149–50), but always the underlying force is either personal or readily personified. This tendency, like any habit, can become mechanical, but even in the early fourth century its meaning has not entirely evaporated: the speaker of pseudo-Lysias 6, prosecuting Andocides for his part in the desecration of the Mysteries twenty years before, attributes all of Andocides' experiences from the time of the crime to the active malice of the gods (see esp. 6. 1, 19–32). Traditional Greek thought emphasized the power of personalized divine power that, sooner or later, evened out the balance between good actions and good fortune.

Herodotus offers perhaps the sharpest contrast to Ajax' attitude. The Herodotean Solon (1. 32) calculates, at some length, the number of days in a man's life and stresses that since no one day is quite like another, no one can predict all the things that will happen to him. He concludes (1. 32. 4) that πᾶν ἐστὶ ἀνθρώπος συμφορῇ, which may be paraphrased "man is himself nothing but an accident" or the result of events over which he has no control. In this, Solon comes quite close to what Ajax says. Both stress that men are subject to larger forces and that these forces, applied over time, will have effects that no one can predict.

In Herodotus, however, Solon begins this disquisition on time with the remark: ὦ Κροῖσε, ἐπιστάμενόν με τὸ θεῖον πᾶν ἐὼν φθονερὸν τε καὶ παραχῶδες ἐπειρωτᾶς ἀνθρωπῶν πρηγμάτων πέρι. The unpredictability of life appears explicitly as a proof of divine power. No figure or scene in Herodotus is more self-consciously programmatic. Solon argues for the archaic view of man and god, and Croesus himself dramatically validates this view as he sits, a doomed man, upon his pyre (1. 86). In the end, Croesus' fate both stresses the fact that the gods are subordinate to fate and vindicates the prestige of Apollo and of his servants at Delphi.¹⁷ Herodotus in fact clearly felt that the overriding power of fate, which doomed Croesus, was a threat to religious institutions, and he structures the entire Croesus-episode to overcome this threat. The historian's sensitivity is as significant as the explicit *apologia* at 1. 91.

We, the audience, having seen Athena in the prologue mock Ajax (and Odysseus as well), can hardly close our eyes to her power. Likewise, Ajax has spoken directly to Athena, and he understands very well what she has done to him. Ajax does mention the gods in the deception

17. See Hdt. 1. 91, where Apollo actually explains himself to Croesus: even he could not παραγαγεῖν Μοῖρας, but he did persuade the Μοῖραι to put off Croesus' destruction for three years.

speech, but in a way very different from that of Solon. Ajax does not see the unpredictability of life as a proof of divine power. He speaks of fleeing the μῆνις of Athena (656) and of yielding to the gods (667), but they are, like Hector or the Atreids, just another part of a larger world. When at 667 he claims that he will yield (εἵκειν) to the gods and worshipfully reverence (σέβειν) the Atreids, he reverses the normal terminology and shows little respect for either gods or Atreids.¹⁸ His gods are simply another set of ἄρχοντες (668), more powerful, perhaps, but hardly transcendent. Thus, when the Herodotean Solon emphasizes that time is a forum in which the gods ultimately demonstrate their personal and malevolent power, Ajax regards time as a transcendent force and hardly a tool for divine will.

Certainly, Sophocles, whether or not he was familiar with the Herodotean Solon, was familiar with the ideas that the Herodotean Solon expresses. Immediately after the deception speech, the chorus presents its own optimistic (and mistaken) interpretation of Ajax' words. They too, like Ajax, attribute the change in his emotions to time (714): πάνθ' ὁ μέγας χρόνος μαραίνει. They have, however, already attributed their restored Ajax directly to Ares (706; cf. Ajax' mention of the gods at 666–67) and have asserted that Ajax will, as part of his newly regained good sense, elaborately worship and honor the gods (710–13): Αἶας / λαθίπονος πάλιν, θεῶν / δ' αὖ πάνθ' ὑτα θέσμι' ἐξ- / ἦνυσ', εὐνομαίαι σέβων μεγίσται. Unlike Ajax, and like the Herodotean Solon, they do see ὁ μέγας χρόνος not as a self-sufficient force, but as an impersonal framework within which divine will takes its course. Thus, at a climactic moment, the chorus restates, in conventional terms, a position that the Sophoclean hero sees in a far less traditional light. By showing the norm, they provide, as Pindarists put it, the foil to Sophocles' main figure.¹⁹

Ajax is no atheist: although he may hate Athena, he certainly believes in her existence. But he has already (589–90) scandalized Tecmessa by declaring that he no longer owes the gods anything. Now, when he stands back and views the infinite variety and possibilities of life, he does not deny that the gods exist. Even substituting time for the gods in the “nothing-is-unexpected” topos does not, by itself, indicate a major change of perspective—the Sophoclean chorus at 710–14 shows how one could make this substitution and still adhere to a traditionally pious view.

But Ajax, in his view of time, goes a step beyond Pindar: although Pindar states that time is greater than the gods (*Ol.* 2. 17, frag. 33), he certainly does not seek to minimize our dependence upon divine good will. Ajax, however, focuses on time and ignores the gods. The subtle

18. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, p. 49, emphasizes the sarcasm of this wording.

19. So, e.g., at *OT* 1097–1119 the chorus' banal misinterpretation of Oedipus' speech (1076–1085) throws the true significance of that speech into sharp relief.

substitution that Ajax makes in the opening of the deception speech introduces into the play precisely that anthropocentric attitude which, as the audience will soon for the first time learn, is the cause for Ajax' predicament.

III. THE MESSENGER SCENE

The messenger scene at 719–814 has drawn far less attention than the deception speech that precedes it: those who have written on the *Ajax* normally allude to it without considering its role within the play. Such attention as it has drawn has stirred more confusion than praise.²⁰ Why should Athena's wrath last only a single day? Certainly, the time limit adds a measure of suspense;²¹ but is this, as even Reinhardt seems to believe, simply an arbitrary dramatic datum used to obvious dramatic effect?²² Further, now that Ajax is already alone by the sea, he will surely kill himself: the limit placed upon the operation of the divine wrath can be of no benefit to him.²³ The theatrical effect has been criticized as clumsy; the revelations of Calchas, it is said, cannot bear comparison with the later confrontation between Oedipus and Teiresias.²⁴ Why do we learn the reason for the gods' wrath against Ajax so late in the play, not in the prologue? And why do we learn the reason indirectly from Calchas?²⁵ Whatever its overall merit, however, the messenger scene plays an important role at this juncture, complementing, even glossing, the mysterious and difficult deception speech.

First, the infamous time limit portrays, from a divine perspective, the same phenomenon that Ajax describes at 650–53. Internally, Ajax' wrath has already begun to fade. Externally, Athena's wrath will pass (778–79) after only a single day. The Atreids, whatever threats they make when Ajax is conveniently dead, represent a far more tractable problem than an angry Athena. If even Athena will forget her anger, a reconciliation between Ajax and all parties becomes a realistic prospect.²⁶ Why should Athena not forget her anger if a new, wiser Ajax has learned his own limitations and his proper place in the world, has learned, in fact, σωφροσύνη? The short duration of her μῆνις confirms that Ajax really will change his mind. But, of course, then Ajax would no longer be Ajax.²⁷

20. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, pp. 38–43, is a notable recent exception to this.

21. Gellie, *Sophocles*, p. 18.

22. *Sophocles*, p. 37.

23. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, pp. 42, 43.

24. Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, p. 38.

25. Gellie, *Sophocles*, p. 17.

26. As to what would have happened if Ajax had refrained from suicide, see Gellie, *Sophocles*, p. 16; Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles*, p. 43, n. 96, remarks: "the question so obviously will not arise that perhaps Sophocles did not mean us to consider it."

27. See esp. C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), p. 70.

Second, we learn from Calchas why the gods were angry with Ajax. Ajax' offense against the gods is less grievous than its model (the Lesser Ajax boasted that he had escaped the sea against the will of the gods).²⁸ The relationship between man and god represented in these anecdotes does not, as Reinhardt critically observes, go beyond conventional archaic ethic:²⁹ Ajax wants to give the gods too little credit, and himself too much.

Calchas then tells another story, which both reinforces the previous anecdote and explains why Athena in particular is angry. When Athena came to urge Ajax on against the enemy, Ajax told her to give help where help was needed: he could hold his part of the line by himself (774–75). Ajax does not deny the gods, or even display any particular hostility toward them. He simply does not feel that he needs them. The two anecdotes presented in this scene show, *ex post facto*, that Ajax' point of view in the deception speech is perfectly in character.

Ajax' two indiscretions gloss, in some measure, his outlook in the deception speech. When at 764–65 Telamon urges him—τέκνον, δορὶ / βούλου κρατεῖν μέν, σὺν θεῷ δ' αἰεὶ κρατεῖν—he introduces into the play the standard idea that one must attribute, and thus subordinate, everything to the gods, from ἀρετή to catastrophes. If by turning to χρόνος instead of a divinity Ajax had implicitly defined his attitude, his proud answer to Telamon brings it out into the open (766–69):

ὁ δ' ὑψικόμπως κάφρόνως ἡμείψατο·
 πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἄν ὁ μηδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ
 κράτος κατακτήσται· ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα
 κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ' ἐπισπάσειν κλέος.

Third, Calchas' revelations are more effective in their present position than if they had come earlier in the play. Had we already in the prologue learned of Ajax' boasts, his unbalanced behavior would have been clear enough. But Reinhardt would also have been right to complain that the play does not go beyond the traditional form of the archaic ethic of moderation: without the wonder and revelation that Ajax experiences in the deception speech, the drama would become far simpler—almost a classical Greek morality play.³⁰

When Ajax shocks his father (762–70) and snubs Athena (770–75), he forgets the gods because he sees himself as independent and self-sufficient. The deception speech, however, shows an Ajax with a vast picture of the world, a world that dwarfs men and gods alike. He no longer sees himself as an immutable and all-powerful entity, but his new perspective does not correspondingly enhance his respect for gods such as Athena. He forgets the gods, because he has suddenly perceived larger and more powerful forces. Athena could deceive him, humiliate him

28. Scodel, *Sophocles*, p. 19.

29. *Sophocles*, p. 38.

30. *Ibid.*

before his fellows, but in the end Ajax flees time and its relentless effect upon human life. Calchas' revelations give us a rule against which we can measure the intellectual distance that Ajax has traveled when his eyes are finally opened and he sees, for the first time, the greatness of the world.³¹

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31. I have benefited from use of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*; I would also like to thank B. Seidensticker and the anonymous referees of *CP* for their comments and suggestions.