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SOPHOCLES' *AJAX* AND THE HEROIC VALUES OF THE *ILIAD*

From a careful and persuasive analysis of Sophocles' debt in the *Ajax* to Homer's picture of Hector and Andromache's farewell in *Iliad* 6, P. E. Easterling concludes that in the *Ajax* 'we have the paradox of an author's distinctive originality finding expression through his reading of another's work'.[1] In what follows I wish to show that the validity of this statement extends to an aspect of the play which is touched upon by Easterling (indeed in an illuminating way), but which I would like to single out for special attention: the preoccupation with the problem of what constitutes noble action, or, in the play's own terminology, what is the nature of εὐγένεια.

In a recent study of loyalty in the *Iliad* I tried to construct a model of the different types of virtuous behaviour in which a hero can be engaged, and the different considerations which can stimulate him to it.[2] I found that, quite apart from the 'competitive excellences', like the individualistic pursuit of honour, which A. W. H. Adkins and others have made so familiar,[3] there exist, already in the *Iliad*, 'co-operative virtues' such as loyalty, which I, like others, believe Adkins has underestimated. I tried in particular to demonstrate that the motivations for a hero's noble co-operation are much more complex than has so far been suggested. In my view these include the impulse of affection, and a sense of justice, but also the heroic drive for τιμή itself, so that, to use Adkins's terms, co-operation can be secured by the competitive urge. An inquiry into the possible nexus between these considerations led me to argue that feelings of friendship and the 'quieter' virtues like the sense of fair play are *ultimate* motivations, which more often than not need to be sanctioned by the more 'persuasive', *proximate* criterion of τιμή-driven competition.

An example of this mechanism is provided by Ajax' speech in reaction to Achilles' rejection of the embassy in *Iliad* 9.624–42. Ajax shows that ideas of fairness are operative, for he calls Achilles σχέτλιος and νηλής and his heart ἄγριος, where it should be ἴλαος. Evidently he also thinks that the ambassadors' claim to being pre-eminently κήδιστοι and φίλτατοι towards Achilles is a factor to be taken seriously, for he appeals to him with these terms at the very climax of his speech, and he earlier makes the famous comment that Achilles 'does not even remember the φιλότης of his companions'. But, equally clearly, Ajax thinks that not even the appeal by φιλότης will be persuasive on its own, and provides it with the backing of τιμή and αἰδώς. We see him reinforcing his appeal by the special bonds of friendship between the ambassadors and Achilles when he says that because of their friendship Achilles should 'have *shame* before the house' – αἴδεσσαι δὲ μέλαθρον – that is, have reverence for the obligation he has incurred by receiving them in his home. And he says that the φιλότης of his companions was something with which they honoured him above all others – ἐτίομεν ... ἔξοχον ἄλλων – which, given the strict reciprocity associated with τιμή, implies that Achilles is bound to show φιλότης in return; in other words, the

[1] 'The Tragic Homer', *BICS* 31 (1984), 8.

[2] 'Loyalty in the *Iliad*', *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar* 6 (1990), 211–27.

[3] Initially through A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 30–60; see Zanker, art. cit. (n. 2), for the subsequent literature.

co-operation that arises out of φιλότης is proximately motivated by competition. Of course, it is at least ostensibly on the precise issue of τιμή that Achilles rejects Ajax' appeal: ὥς μ' ἀσύφηλον ἐν Ἀργείοισιν ἔρεξεν | Ἀτρεΐδης, ὡς εἴ τιν' ἀτίμητον μετανάστην (647f.). Thus our example also demonstrates the tension which could arise between an essentially honour-based, individualistic heroism and the claims of affection and fairness on heroic behaviour, a tension even more obviously operative in Hector's farewell to Andromache, the model for the Tecmessa-scene in Sophocles' *Ajax*.

This is the context in which I wish to consider the *Ajax* as a meditation on the *Iliad*.[4] Moreover, if I can demonstrate that Sophocles' play explores the ethical tensions within heroism and nobility in terms which are strikingly similar to those of the *Iliad*, I hope to show also that the play helps substantiate the model that I have proposed in my study of loyalty in the epic. Furthermore, if I am right about the value-systems of the *Iliad* and the *Ajax*, the problems inherent in heroism that I suggest lie at the very heart of the *Iliad* were ones which were perceived by Greek society in Sophocles' day not as any mere poetic construct, but as live issues. This will in turn increase the likelihood that at least this aspect of Homeric society is 'historical'.

In the course of its analysis of what it means to be 'noble', εὐγενής, the *Ajax*, I suggest, pits the claim of τιμή against those of affection and δίκη; it resolves the tension by acknowledging the different sorts of nobility involved in the two sets of criteria and by demonstrating the need for a combination of fairness and a generosity which is based on human emotions like pity and friendship.

The champion of the τιμή-standard is Ajax. At lines 764–75 the Messenger recalls the parting advice of Ajax' father, Telamon, to his son as he set forth on the expedition to Troy; this was that Ajax should desire to be victorious in battle, but to do so with the gods on his side (764–5). The motif of the father who encourages his son to be pre-eminent while at the same time entering a caveat is familiar from epic, the nearest parallel being Peleus' valedictory words to Achilles. These are recalled by Nestor at *Iliad* 11.784, where Peleus is said to have urged Achilles always to ἀριστεύειν and stand above all others, and by Odysseus at *Iliad* 9.254–8, where Odysseus quotes Peleus' advice that Athene and Hera will give might (κάρτος) to Achilles if they choose, but that he himself should check his unruly passions – φιλοφροσύνη γὰρ ἀμείνων.[5] In the *Ajax* the caveat has been turned from advice about being co-operative into a stricture about the need to maintain right relations with the gods, which is a comparatively minor element in Peleus' counsel. In both cases the advice is directed at the son's particular weakness, and in the *Ajax* Telamon's suggestion is met with Ajax' proud insistence that even nonentities can win might (κράτος) with the aid of the gods, while Ajax has confidence that he will win κλέος even without their support; he later tells Athene to stand by other sections of the Achaean army on the grounds that wherever he is there to defend the line it will never be broken (766–75). The idea that a hero might boast that he does not need divine aid

[4] Discussions of the influence of the Homeric view of heroism on the *Ajax* include B. M. W. Knox, 'The *Ajax* of Sophocles', *HSCP* 65 (1961), 1–37; R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 15–19; J. Gould, 'Homeric Epic and the Tragic Moment', in *Aspects of the Epic*, ed. T. Winnifrith, P. Murray and K. W. Gransden (London, 1983), 32–45, esp. 38–40; Easterling, art. cit. (n. 1); S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 154–61; P. E. Easterling, 'Notes on Tragedy and Epic', in *Papers given at a Colloquium on Greek Drama in Honour of R. P. Winnington-Ingram*, ed. L. Rodley (London, 1987), 52–61.

[5] The need for a restraining influence on Achilles is also implied in Menoetius' parting admonition to *his* son, Patroclus, quoted by Nestor at *Il.* 11.785–9.

is foreign to the *Iliad* and belongs more properly to fifth-century tragedy,[6] but a hero's confidence in his own prowess is of course quite within the realm of Iliadic concepts of heroism.

Now, however, Ajax is overcome by shame after his failure to be allotted the armour of Achilles and his subsequent crazed attack on the cattle and sheep. When Tecmessa and the Chorus first meet him after the carnage, which he now recognizes as such, he makes a bitterly ironic comparison between his former martial prowess and the might with which he has attacked mere animals, and grieves over how he has been reduced to a laughing-stock (*γέλως*) and how he has been shamed (*ὑβρίσθην*) (364–7).[7] Later, addressing the Scamander, he uses a vaunting tone typical of epic when he claims that Troy never saw his equal, only to close his assertion with the comment that he now lies prostrate, without honour, *ἄτιμος* (418–27); the epic tone and sentiment – we think especially, perhaps, of Achilles' remark that he has no equal among the Achaeans (*Il.* 18.105), a remark made precisely when he is racked by feelings of shame, guilt and grief on hearing of Patroclus' death – adds significantly to the bitterness of Ajax' reference to his loss of *τιμή*. The thought is developed in the speech that immediately follows, in which Ajax compares his achievements with those of Telamon, who came to the same place, and won Hesione, *τὰ πρῶτα καλλιστεῖ' ἀριστεύσας στρατοῦ* (435), bringing home *πᾶσαν εὔκλειαν* (436), while Ajax after no less effort is perishing *ἄτιμος* among the Greeks (440). Ajax deplores the thought of appearing before Telamon without gifts of honour, the source of Telamon's 'great crown of glory' (*εὐκλείας*) (462–6).[8] He declares it *αἰσχρόν* that a man who has unvaryingly bad fortune should want to have a long life (473–4), and concludes that the man who is noble, *εὐγενής*, should either live *καλῶς* or die so (479–80).

Here is heroism's competitive drive in all the shapes in which the *Iliad* presents it, apart, that is, from Ajax' proud disclaimer of the need for any divine aid. Sophocles confronts it head-on, first with the claims of affection, or, to use his own word, *χάρις*. In her answer to Ajax' speech of shame, Tecmessa uses almost all the arguments with which Andromache implores Hector to fight within the walls of Troy,[9] but also some of those with which Priam supplicates Achilles for Hector's corpse. Significantly, she

[6] N.b. 127–33 (Athene on *σωφροσύνη*). It is noteworthy that Ajax' *ὕβρις* is absent from his words at *Il.* 17.634, but that the concept is present in the *Odyssey*, when, at 4.504, the Locrian Ajax defiantly asserts that he will cross the sea in safety *ἀέκητι θεῶν*; Sophocles seems to have transferred the *ὕβρις* of the Locrian Ajax to the Telamonian; see J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles, Part I: The Ajax* (Leiden, 1953) on lines 767, 768. The handling of the *ὕβρις* theme in the *Ajax* has most recently been discussed by G. Crane, 'Ajax, the Unexpected, and the Deception Speech', *CP* 85 (1990), 89–101, esp. 99–101; prior studies of Sophocles' fifth-century perspective on Homeric heroism will be found in the works detailed above, n. 4.

[7] The effect of Ajax' dishonour on his followers, moreover, graphically illustrates the socially competitive aspect of shame: at 141–7, 154–61, 173f. and 187–91 the Chorus of Ajax' men bewail their insignificance as *σμικροί* and their consequent inability to defend themselves on a competitive level against the charges of dishonour to which their master has exposed them.

[8] With ironic appropriateness, therefore, it is the *δῶρον* of Ajax' enemy Hector, the sword given to him by the Trojan when they ceased hostilities at *Il.* 7.303ff., with which Ajax chooses to end his life (815–22); ever since he obtained it from Hector, he has received nothing *κεδνόν* from the Achaeans, which on the heroic logic of esteem must include any gift (661–5). Moreover, Sophocles makes Hector and Ajax *ξένοι* as a result of the exchange, so the sword is a *ξένιον*, and the dramatist can play on the incongruity of the inauspiciousness of the gift (665), and of the idea of a *ξένος* being 'most hated' (817f.); see G. Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 60 n. 56, with Easterling, art. cit. (n. 1), 6f. The case of Hector, whom Sophocles makes receive Ajax' belt after the duel, is similarly ironic, for the belt is used to bind Hector's corpse to Achilles' chariot; together with the irony of Hector's gift to Ajax, it makes Teucer conclude that the gods have planned the neat coincidence (1028–39).

[9] See Easterling, art. cit. (n. 1), 1–5.

echoes the Iliadic Hector as he pictures Andromache's captors gloating over the depths to which his wife will sink, and hopes that he will be dead and buried before hearing her cries in captivity (*Il.* 6.459–65). She picks up the shame-motif and makes a forceful point out of it: σοὶ δ' αἰσχρὰ τἄπη ταῦτα καὶ τῷ σῷ γένει (505).[10] So shame does form part of her entreaty. But the burden of her plea is directed at Ajax' affections. She argues that Ajax should have reverence for his old father and his mother, who longs for his homecoming (506–9), a thought which in all likelihood goes back to Priam's persuasive words to Achilles about Peleus.[11] He should pity their son, Eurysaces, whose fate she goes on to describe (510–13) just as Andromache does for Astyanax at *Iliad* 22.490–8 after she has seen that Hector has been killed. And he should pity Tecmessa. She introduces this consideration early in her speech when she reminds Ajax that she is his allotted slave and has shared his bed, so that she is concerned for his well-being and can entreat him in the name of Zeus of the Hearth not to abandon her to his enemies (487–99). Later, she argues that Ajax is all to her (514–19). Here she echoes Andromache's famous words to Hector (*Il.* 6.411–30), with the difference that in Tecmessa's case Ajax has destroyed her homeland, while for Andromache Achilles, the enemy, has done so, so that Tecmessa's dependence on Ajax is even more poignant.

But all this is merely a prelude to the appeal that forms the climax of her speech. She reasons that a man should not forget if he has enjoyed something pleasant, τερπνὸν εἴ τί που πάθοι, for kindness, χάρις, always begets kindness, χάριν, and whoever forgets being treated well is no noble man – οὐκ... εὐγενὴς ἀνήρ (520–4). With these words she is directly challenging Ajax' competitive definition of the εὐγενής as the man who must either live or die nobly, and by her word τερπνόν she is answering Ajax' question about what pleasure (τέρπειν) the day can bring when a man's misery is unrelieved (475–6). She is doing nothing less than defining the noble man as one who is responsive to kindness and affection. Ajax' reaction is instructive. He admits that even he, who formerly was 'as hard as tempered steel, felt his edge grow soft, unmanned', 'made like a woman' (ἐθηλύνθην),[12] at Tecmessa's appeal, and that he feels pity for her and Eurysaces (650–3); but this is insufficient to change his resolve to die.[13] The word ἐθηλύνθην illustrates the honour-driven warrior's contempt for the affective appeal, while it is clear that Ajax is far from entirely unmoved.

However, this is by no means the sum total of what the play has to say about χάρις, 'kindness', or 'kind favour'. For one thing, there is the thought that 'gratitude' should be shown for past services. Ajax gives indirect expression to this when he says that if his old repute has been destroyed (εἰ τὰ μὲν φθίνει) he will have nowhere to flee and the Achaeans will kill him (404–9). The Chorus lament the fact that the Atreidae do not appreciate Ajax' former deeds of the greatest ἀρετή (616–20). Teucer makes the point most clearly, perhaps, in his speech to Agamemnon when he turns to address the dead Ajax and takes the ingratitude of the Atreidae as proof of how

[10] Her reminiscence of Hector's τις-*Rede* powerfully amplifies the shame/honour aspect of her appeal; on τις-*Reden* see J. R. Wilson, 'Καί κε τις ὧδ' ἐρέει: An Homeric Device in Greek Literature', *Illinois Classical Studies* 4 (1979), 1–15; I. J. F. de Jong, 'The Voice of Anonymity; tis-speeches in the *Iliad*', *Eranos* 85 (1987), 69–84.

[11] *Il.* 24.486–94; see esp. 487, with which compare *Aj.* 506f., for the similarity of phrasing on the γῆρας of Peleus and Telamon.

[12] Cf. his low estimation of men who weep, reported by Tecmessa at 319f., and his impatience with the tearfulness of women, expressed at 525–8 and 578–82.

[13] See Easterling, art. cit. (n. 1), 5f. on the limited but real softening of Ajax' attitude to his φίλοι which is discernible in the Deception Speech; see now also Crane, art. cit. (n. 6), 89–101, esp. 94–9 (with lit.).

quickly χάρις disappears (1266–71). In all this we remember Achilles' complaint to the embassy at *Iliad* 9.316f. that there has been no χάρις forthcoming in return for his continual fighting against the Trojans, so here too Sophocles seems to be picking up a theme cardinal to the epic.[14]

It is time to consider the thought behind the arguments of those in the play who are prepared to take Ajax' part before Agamemnon and Menelaus. Teucer concludes his speech to Agamemnon by saying that it is more noble, καλόν, for him to labour on Ajax' behalf than on that of the Atreidae over Helen (1310–12). He has just been defending himself against Agamemnon's taunts about his low, barbarian birth (1288–1307; cf. 1228–35, 1259–63), so context would seem to suggest that καλόν here involves the aristocratic *agathos*-standard of virtuous behaviour, which Teucer in fact never really deviates from. At 1125 he urges the claims of justice, and does so in the face of Menelaus' insistence that as a mere archer he has no right to have 'high thoughts' (1120–5). But he does so only after he has defended his bowmanship against the charge of being a βάναυσος τέχνη. At 1299–1303, moreover, he argues that his parentage was 'really' noble; and at 1093–6 he expresses the traditional thought that εὐγενεῖς should set an example for the low-born.[15] It is therefore within the competitive τιμή-framework that Teucer praises Odysseus as ἄριστος and ἐσθλός for his justice and generosity towards Ajax (1381, 1399).

The attitude of Odysseus is most important for our inquiry, however, for while Tecmessa and Teucer, as φίλοι of Ajax, have reason to defend the hero, Odysseus and Ajax are rivals and enemies, and Odysseus still extends χάρις to his dead opponent. When Agamemnon expresses surprise at this, Odysseus admits that Ajax was an enemy, but noble, γενναῖος, all the same, and says that Ajax' ἀρετή moves him more than their enmity (1354–7). He says he cannot approve of 'a hard heart' (σκληρὰν ... ψυχήν, 1361). What are Odysseus' reasons for wanting to see the body of his enemy honoured with decent burial? To Agamemnon he says that he himself would not dishonour Ajax, for he was the ἄριστος among the Achaeans after Achilles, and he says further that the king would be unjust (οὐκ ἐνδίκως, 1342) to dishonour him: Agamemnon would be attacking not him but the laws of the gods, and it is in any case 'not just (οὐ δίκαιον, 1344) to harm the ἐσθλός when he dies, even if you happen to hate him' (1336–45). Here a sense of justice, located in the laws of the gods, tempers the heroic τιμή-response illustrated by Agamemnon. In fact, Odysseus reveals even deeper motives much earlier in the play, when Athene has goaded Ajax into attacking the cattle and sheep. The goddess has just asked Odysseus whether it is not the 'sweetest mockery' to mock one's enemies, and he has replied that it would have been sufficient for him that Ajax stay inside, an oblique way of saying that he did not want to look upon Ajax' misery (79–80). After the display of Athene's power, Odysseus can only say that he pities (ἐποικτίρω, 121) Ajax because he has been yoked to an evil doom, and he perceives that his own position is no less precarious than Ajax' since all humans are mere images or insubstantial shadows (121–6). Here we have the ultimate factor preconditioning the just and generous response: pity for one's fellow man, even one's enemies, motivated by the experience of the suffering which human life can entail. Near the close of the play Odysseus even offers to join in and help with the burial and to do all that mortals should do in the case of 'the best men' (τοῖς ἀρίστοις ἀνδράσιν) (1376–80), which prompts Teucer to

[14] The motif is also used in connection with Tecmessa, when she is made to say that she has been cast out of τῆς παλαιᾶς χάριτος (807f.).

[15] See A. W. H. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece* (London, 1972), pp. 65–7.

praise him, in traditional terms maybe, for his generosity and for his sole defence of his former enemy (1381–99); 'Be assured,' he says, 'that you are an ἐσθλός as far as we are concerned' (1398f.).

Once again Sophocles is evidently thinking of the *Iliad*. The model for Odysseus is the Achilles of *Iliad* 24, who pities his enemies Priam and Hector in part because of his experience of the meaning of mortality (*Il.* 24.503, 516, 540), is prepared to bend the rules and keep Priam's presence a secret from Agamemnon (650–5), has Hector's corpse washed and anointed and lifts it on to the bier himself (580–95), and promises an eleven-day truce while Hector is buried. The tragedian has, of course, shaped the model in his own way, in particular by making the theme of justice more explicit and direct, but the use of Odysseus to mediate in the dénouement of the quarrel over Achilles' armour is even more powerful when we realize that his sentiments and moral outlook are based on those of the 'original' Achilles. Thus Odysseus' generosity represents the crowning form of εὐγένεια in the *Ajax*. However grand and awe-inspiring Ajax' devotion to τιμή, however moving the appeal to affection given expression by Tecmessa, it is Odysseus' combination of the sense of justice and the conditioning factor of emotional responses like pity which finally succeeds in resolving the quarrel over Achilles' armour in its last stages.

In Ajax' unwillingness to compromise himself in his standing as a τιμή-warrior, in Tecmessa's appeal to him (partly) in terms of affection, in Teucer's and especially Odysseus' insistence that the Atreidae behave justly towards Ajax' corpse, and in Odysseus' generosity in accepting that he has a duty to his rival and enemy which is founded on the pity he feels for a fellow mortal, we have all the ingredients of the tension in moral values that I have suggested operates in the *Iliad*. The fact of the remarkable overriding similarity between the two sets of heroic values in turn helps to support my reading of the *Iliad*'s values, as well as point to the probability that the problems posed by the conflicting claims of honour and generosity were as real and engaging for the early audiences of the *Iliad* as they evidently were for those of a dramatic production like the *Ajax*.[16] Above all, however, we have gained an added dimension to our understanding of Sophocles' reception of Homer.[17]

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[16] In the *Philoctetes* of 409 we observe Sophocles in some ways reduplicating the scheme of values that he explores in the *Ajax*. He reflects not only on his sources from epic, in particular the *Cypria*, *Little Iliad* and *Iliu Persis*, but also on the plays of the same name by Aeschylus and Euripides, by introducing Neoptolemus as the agent for securing Philoctetes' bow. Neoptolemus is characterized as compassionate, generous and thus ultimately concerned to see that Philoctetes is treated fairly (906, 965f., 1074f., 1224–34), in stark opposition to Odysseus, whose exclusive interest is to achieve his purpose (75–85, 108–34, 1049–62); see in general R. C. Jebb, *The Philoctetes* (Cambridge, 1898), pp. xix f., xxiv ff. Success, which Odysseus calls 'victory', is of course an essential ingredient of the competitive τιμή-mentality. This opposition of values is very different from what we can glean of the *Problematik* of Aeschylus' and Euripides' Philoctetes-plays; see Jebb, op. cit., pp. xiv–xxvi. Indeed, it is possible that in the *Philoctetes* he uses the τιμή/generosity tension to shape his cast and their characterization. In the case of the *Electra*, however, Sophocles' reading of Homeric epic, this time the *Odyssey* with its revenge theme, feeds into a very different set of moral concerns; see most recently J. F. Davidson, 'Homer and Sophocles' *Electra*', *BICS* 35 (1988), 45–72. This suggests, perhaps, that Sophocles particularly regarded the tension as one inherent in the *warrior*-ethic of the epic tradition.

[17] My thanks to K. H. Lee and *CQ*'s anonymous reader for helpful comment on this study.