

Ajax, Hector, and the Unity of Sophocles' Homeric Drama

The final 300 lines of Sophocles' *Ajax* present a notorious dilemma. There is a clear break in the drama after the suicide of the hero, and the dialogue that follows registers an unfamiliar tone. The heroic greatness of Ajax seems inconsistent with the squabbles that follow his death. Ajax is indeed one of Attic tragedy's best representatives of the individualistic ethic of the Homeric hero at odds with the democratic – or perhaps simply political – world of the *polis*. Sophocles clearly flags Ajax' Homeric quality by creating a scene in which Ajax and Hector resemble each other in their interactions with their frightened sons. This paper will argue that the parallelism between Ajax and Hector is deeper and more pervasive than this single scene represents, and that by this parallelism Sophocles has reversed the friendships and enmities of the *Iliad* to highlight the conflicts of citizenship.

The similarities between Ajax and Hector are threefold: First, each hero frightens his son with the gear or gore of battle and thereby presents a jarring contrast between the life of the family man and that of the warrior. Second, each hero gives a long soliloquy in which he expresses internal uncertainty. Third, the interactions over the burial of each warrior bring about the conclusion of each poem. The last similarity will be the focus of this paper.

At the end of his last speech, Ajax calls on the springs and rivers of Troy as much as on his homeland. These are presumably the same springs where Hector had fled and died. Teucer, also, notes that the tokens of friendship between Hector and Ajax were implicated in each one's death. What has not been sufficiently understood is that Sophocles' *Ajax* follows an Iliadic pattern in the scenes that follow the death of the hero. If we are meant to view Hector and Ajax as parallel, then the speeches over the latter's death are as important to Sophocles' play as the meeting of Priam and Achilles are to the *Iliad*. In the *Iliad*, the meeting is personal; in *Ajax*, the speeches are political. This contrast corresponds exactly to Sophocles' striking presentation of the contest over Achilles' arms as a political debate rather than as a direct struggle. The death of Hector led to a conciliatory act between two enemies; that of Ajax leads to the end of civil strife.

Ajax' death directs Odysseus' verbal skill, which had won him the armor and initiated the strife in the first place, toward the public good rather than his own personal glory.

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