

Cyclopean Ajax

I focus on how an implicit comparison in Homeric epic between the Achaean hero Ajax and the Cyclops Polyphemus intensifies into a crisis in Sophoclean tragedy. I first briefly show how Homeric epic places hero and monster in the same conceptual slot. Hugeness fundamentally characterizes both of them, and both receive the same epithet, *pelôrios*, four times each.

Polyphemus and Ajax have size in common, but a type of size that marks more than physical appearance: monstrous conduct (Edwards, Kirk, Whallon). They are also Odysseus' two main opponents—one at Troy, the other during the wanderings. I thus examine how the language of Sophocles' *Ajax* draws on these epic connections to turn his eponymous hero into a monster.

While the text quite insistently calls Ajax a man (ἄνθρωπος), not a monster, even when he is engaging in monstrous activities, that insistence is actually the point. Indeed, in *Ajax*, *anêr* occurs 109 times. The first scene thus focuses our attention quickly, with Ajax being called simply “man” nine times (9, 19, 39, 59, 69, 77, 78, 81, 119), while Ajax is only named twice (4, 19) before Athena calls him out of his tent, addressing him by name twice (73, 89). Sophocles ironically calls special attention to Ajax's inhuman acts, his blurring of the line between man and animal, as is confirmed by Athena's description of his delivery of the flocks to his tent “as if they were men” (ὡς ἄνδρας, 64).

Closely examining Sophocles' *Ajax* shows a preponderance of Homeric language and images that further point towards a deliberate Cyclopean representation of Ajax. The scenario is distinctly Cyclopean: a dark enclosure inhabited by a huge being who does not respect sacrificial or dietary codes and whom Odysseus fears. It has driven a mixed flock of livestock into its residence. It tries to attack Odysseus but is struck instead with blindness. It screams words incomprehensible to its companions. It reaches out to grab Odysseus to avenge itself, but grabs

instead a ram. After Odysseus escapes, the monster's final words are a curse. The exactitude and the sheer scale of this homology between the *Ajax* and book 9 of the *Odyssey* cannot be coincidental.

The early moments of the *Ajax* stress the dehumanization and monstrosity of Ajax in language and imagery that evoke Homer's Polyphemus. The setting of both scenes at the edge of the sea (ἐσχάτην, 3-4; ἐπ' ἐσχατιῇ 9.182) and Odysseus' reaction to both situations are fairly similar, starting with the trials Odysseus makes of Ajax and Polyphemus. Odysseus hunts Ajax like animal (2, 5-6). Ajax bellows ferally inside his cave-like hut, a place itself littered with the bodies of animals killed as no man should and where humans could be, and should have been, killed.

Ajax, like Polyphemus, mistakes the ram because Ajax is struck with a madness compared metaphorically to blindness. As Long comments (1968: 124-25), Sophocles here uses *omma* as an abstract periphrasis and metonymy—eye for the face as a whole. The play, especially its first third, features an unusual number of words for sight and a strange stress on Ajax's singular eye that suggests a Cyclops. Metonymy easily allows “eye” to be read as “face,” and eyes do conform to the play's symbolism of light and darkness. But the singular's persistence through the drama is odd—three times plural, and six times singular—and begs for clarification. Ajax, during the *kommos*, screams a phrase which could come from Polyphemus' mouth as Odysseus escapes his island: ἴδοιμι μὴν νιν, καίπερ ὄδ' ἀτώμενος (384). The optative wish—“If only I could see him”—is balanced by the participle ἀτώμενος, which literally means “being struck with ἄτη,” and *atê* is a disaster strongly associated with blindness. The great speech on time features a metaphor for Ajax's earlier hardened condition—the dipping of hot iron in water or oil (651)—precisely the image that describes the sound of the hot log in the eye of the Cyclops

(9.391-93). The language in the two passages is very similar. Moreover, Ajax's stated independence from the gods seems modeled on Polyphemus.

Polyphemus and Ajax both represent for Odysseus the danger that he will forget human limits and deny the gods and that he will find himself with no community. The Cyclops embodies the extreme form of the hero's desire for independence and singularity and his capacity for destruction— a dark mirror for the Homeric warrior. Thus, the evocations of Hector and Andromache in Ajax's scene are deeply ironic, as Ajax has become not the heroic Hector, but the monstrous Polyphemus.

Bibliography

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