

A Thing for All Seasons: Neo-Archaic Media in Sophocles' *Ajax*

This paper argues that a theme, the representation of old things as new, is more widespread in the *Ajax* than generally recognized. It proposes instances in which Sophocles describes 'things' in a way that makes them contemporary. Mueller has already pointed out that the shield of Ajax is both archaically constructed and still has a handle like a modern hoplite shield. It thus 'bridge[s] the distance between past and present' (Mueller 2016 146). I propose five other instances: the footsteps and tent of the prologue, descriptions of the body of Ajax by Agamemnon and Teucer, his lot, and his corpse's impact on the relationship between characters. In the play, old values result in an objectification of an archaic hero (Bradshaw 1991 99-125; Kirk 2005 181). A countervailing effect is old objects taking on a life of their own, even as media of democratic values. This transforms a part of this play also into a 'story of things' (Purves 2015). The etymology Ajax chooses for his name is αἶ εἶ (430). Perhaps Athena accidentally hit upon another with the first word of the play, αἶ εἶ.

The prologue shows Athena guiding Odysseus away from textual interpretation in the past towards drama in the present. The 'naval tents' suggest the *skênê* of an Athenian theatre (καὶ νῦν ἐπὶ σκηναῖς σε ναυτικαῖς ὄρω 3). Sophocles twice points out that 'since long ago' (5, 20) he has been tracking Ajax and that the tracks have been 'newly pressed' (6). The participle describing the tracks, χάραχθ', can describe both a person's 'character' and inscriptions (*s.v. LSJ*). Athena orders Odysseus to remain, μίμνε (68). Its sound may be a play on μιμῆ, 'you are imitating' and her subsequent promise to hide his face may play with his real role, a masked actor. The lot was integral to the myth of Ajax. In Homer, it 'jumps out of the helmet' (7.182). Sophocles doubles down on the

lightness of the lot. It 'jumps lightly' (1285-1286). He also denies an image of mass to Ajax that should apply to him. Teucer says his lot was not a 'clod,' although his name is related to γαῖα (cf. γαῖα κατέσχευεν / Αἴανθ', *Od.* 11.549-550). This matters in a city using pebbles and 'solid' voting disks to vote. Although his shield is like his body in Homer, here his lot is not. His body is compared to a crowd. Agamemnon says that big men are not the most reliable (1251). He says that smart men are supreme because they are whips controlling a large beast. The analogy of political to bucolic leadership makes the crowd seem like both a beast of burden and the body of Ajax (1250-1254). His corpse fulfills what is arguably the sociological purpose of tragedy because it ends up dissolving master-slave and Greek-foreigner divisions between Odysseus and Teucer (Seaford 1994; 1381). In contrast, the living Ajax was a divider, a 'living bulwark' (Schol. D II 6.5).

Some Athenian ears may have pricked up at the play's end: 'for still the warm *syringes* [of Ajax] pour forth black force' (ἔτι γὰρ θερμαὶ / σύριγγες ἄνω φουσῶσι μέλαν / μένος, 1411-1413). That the veins of a man now dead for around 721 lines still bleed is a surprising (ἔτι) and even gratuitous detail. The paper's final point confirms Nooter's conclusion that Sophoclean heroes, especially Ajax, are unique for becoming more musical as their struggles climax (Nooter 2012 53). His corpse remains 'musical.' The pipes of the crude syrinx, an instrument likely not played in tragedy (Weiss 2014 48) and yet the precursor to the sophisticated *aulos* apply to the anatomy of an infamously crude man (*rudis*, Ovid *Met.* 13.290) and μέλαν μένος may pun on μέλος, melody. Although it is true enough that Ajax is an unconscious prop in the second half of this diptych, a 'mere' prop perhaps goes too far (cf. 'stuffed 'dummy' Esposito 77 § 384). In this play about an archaic and objectified hero, Sophocles finds among these crude ruins the very

instruments of Athenian democracy.

Bibliography

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