

## Initiating Ajax: Mystery Ritual in Sophocles' Play

I contend that three major plot movements in Sophocles' *Ajax*—the slaughter of the herds, Ajax's suicide, and the dispute over Ajax's burial—form a progression that strongly evokes initiation ritual, especially the Dionysiac Mysteries. The most comprehensive treatment of ritual in this play is Brook 2014, which analyzes these same portions of the play through 'ritual conflations' and argues for a reverse rite of passage. Accepting Brook's astute observations on such conflations, I suggest that a more intuitive progression of ritual emerges if we focus on mystic initiation.

Different spheres of ritual are conflated in each of these three parts of the play. Brook demonstrates that the funereal and sacrificial spheres are conflated in the slaughter of the herds. To flesh out how sacrifice operates here, I add that the themes of sight and madness are associated with sacrifice both elsewhere in Greek myth and in this play. Sight, madness, and sacrifice coincide in a number of myths about Dionysus, e.g. Paus. 7.19.2-20.2. More famously, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Agave's vision is deluded by her madness, which leads her to sacrifice Pentheus (Seidensticker 1979). Language describing sight, madness, and sacrifice is scattered throughout the episode of Ajax's slaughter of the herds (Winnington-Ingram 1980, Tyrrel 1985, Falkner 1999). Like Agave's madness, Ajax's madness deludes his sight and makes him sacrifice the wrong victims, cattle instead of the Atreidae.

Ajax's suicide and the speeches leading up to it also touch upon several spheres of ritual, including purification, sacrifice, gender fluidity, salvation, and assimilation to the divine. All of these spheres are present in Greek initiation rituals and myths. The Eleusinian Mysteries combine seaside purification and sacrifice. Ample evidence is available for the effeminacy of Dionysus, who has his own set of mysteries (Isler-Kerényi 2015). The Bacchic gold tablets

suggest that Dionysiac initiates attain salvation, becoming heroes or even gods through their ritual purity (5. 1-3, 9 G); and Pentheus, Dionysus' initiate, is assimilated to the god in the *Bacchae*. Ajax's so-called 'deception speech' (646-92) conflates seaside purification, sacrifice, and salvation in oblique reference to his suicide; and in killing himself, Ajax blurs the line between sacrificial officiant and victim, thus divinizing himself (Brook 2014). This same speech also has Ajax say that he has been womanized (651), fitting for assimilation to Dionysus. Finally, Ajax's language is highly suggestive of mystic initiation (Seaford 1994). Examples include the words λουτρά ('baths'), παρακτίους λειμῶνας ('seaside meadows'), and σεσωμένον ('saved') (654-55, 692).

The dispute over Ajax's burial conflates the ritual spheres of burial, supplication, curse, salvation, and hero cult (Burian 1972, Brook 2014). As the Bacchic gold tablets show, burial was the culmination of initiation. Only the initiated could be buried with tablets to remind them of the secret passwords needed to gain access to a happy afterlife (Graf and Johnston 2013). Burial and supplication are prerequisites for hero cult; supplication could be interrupted only under pain of curse (Burian 1972). Ajax's son, Eurysaces, supplicates his father's corpse, and a curse designed to protect him threatens exile (1171-81). The language of salvation is carried forward into this section from the last (e.g. 1079-80). Such language is associated in tragedy, especially in *Oedipus at Colonus*, with ritualized burial and hero cult (Wigodsky 1962), the latter of which Ajax received in several locations.

Taken in order, all of these conflated ritual resonances suggest that these three phases of the play are evocative of initiation ritual. First, Ajax performs a madness-induced, visually-deluded sacrifice, described in funereal language to foreshadow his death. These Dionysiac resonances are echoed further when Ajax is 'initiated,' assimilating himself to the god through

his gender reversal and divinizing self-sacrifice. Ajax's implied hero cult and 'salvation' culminate and complete his muddled, horrific initiatory process.

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