

The Second Best at Center Stage:
The Odyssean Framework of Sophocles' *Ajax*

Sophocles' *Ajax* often earns the title of the most Homeric among his surviving plays. This designation stems in part from the high density of Homeric characters populating the play, including the titular Ajax as well as Odysseus, Menelaus, Agamemnon, and Teucer. It also stems from a single scene that represents one of the most extended and direct allusions to Homer in Greek tragedy. When Tecmessa attempts to talk Ajax out of suicide and the hero holds up his young son, readers from the scholiasts onward have recognized the influence of *Iliad* 6, when Andromache entreats her husband not to return to battle and Hector speaks to their infant son, Astynax (Cantarella 1970). Easterling 1984 has shown that Sophocles does not merely copy or undercut his Homeric model, but engages with it in a more complex way that adds significant depth to the portrayal of Ajax and Tecmessa on stage. Given the prominence of this scene and repeated references in the play to the duel between Ajax and Hector in *Iliad* 7, the study of Homeric allusions in this play has focused almost exclusively on the *Iliad*. This paper argues that these Iliadic references are set within a beginning and ending that allude to the *Odyssey*. This Odyssean framework prioritizes Ajax's behavior in the brief but memorable *vékoua* scene of book 11, in which his refusal to speak displays an obstinate anger that differs substantially from his actions in the *Iliad*. This same unyielding anger will characterize Ajax in the play (Zimmerman 2002, Gregory 2017). Using this Odyssean framework, Sophocles shows his audience how Ajax could have transformed from the cooperative bulwark of the Achaeans to the stubbornly hateful enemy of Odysseus.

The *Ajax* begins with a scene that prioritizes the close relationship between Odysseus and Athena, whose divine support drives much of the action of the *Odyssey*. As the goddess describes how she has handled Ajax's rage, she frames the situation as very similar to the opening of the *Iliad*, in which she convinces Achilles to restrain his violent anger against Agamemnon because they are both dear to the gods (Barker 2009). In Sophocles, however, Athena acts with Odysseus as her clear favorite, and instead of restraining Ajax's violence directs it so that he brings about his own destruction. In this opening, we encounter the gods' malicious caprice, which Odysseus blames for Ajax's death at *Odyssey* 11.555-560, and see what havoc it has wreaked on Ajax. Later, the play alludes to the stubborn silence with which Ajax rejects Odysseus' entreaties in the underworld. In his final lines before his death, Ajax says that he will now speak only in Hades (864-5). As the audience is aware, Ajax will pointedly not utter a word after his death. This reference to Ajax's silence not only occurs here, at the close of the first half of the play's diptych, but also recurs at the end of its second half. There, Odysseus re-appears and brings about the burial of Ajax, but Teucer nonetheless bars Odysseus from the funeral rites because he imagines that the deceased man would not wish it (1393-1395). Once again, the audience is aware that Ajax will not forgive Odysseus even in death, and Teucer has judged his brother's wishes correctly (Murnaghan 2020). These references to the *véκτια* scene show how the Sophoclean characters are behaving just as they do in the *Odyssey* scene: Odysseus blames the gods and tries to reconcile with his former ally, while Ajax remains implacable in his anger. This Odyssean scene frames the Iliadic play, and much of Sophocles' drama presents how Ajax's stubbornness could have developed at a post-Iliadic Troy. Writing in the gap of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Sophocles harmonizes their disparate portrayals of his tragic hero.

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