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THE TRAGIC HOMER

P.E. EASTERLING

For R.P. W.-I.

It was a cliché of ancient literary criticism that Sophocles was “most Homeric”: Polemo put the idea epigrammatically when he said Homer was the epic Sophocles and Sophocles the tragic Homer.¹ Modern scholarship has tended to endorse this view without paying very close attention to the particular ways in which Sophocles uses his epic models or to the new kinds of perception and sensibility he brings to bear on them.² Of course there are important similarities: Sophocles seems more interested than either of his great rivals in heroic behaviour and (in the extant plays at any rate) characteristically chooses models of human experience that are very like those of the epic, as when he shows a great individual pitting his moral strength against the rest of the world in a sort of test of man’s endurance. Moreover he sets these patterns against a background of thought which is close to that of Homer and archaic poetry, portraying man as frail, helpless, vulnerable, and at the same time capable of great achievements. He is also less obvious and less pointed than either Aeschylus or Euripides in his acknowledgement of contemporary life; we have only to think of Aeschylus’ allusions to the Argive alliance and the Areopagus in *Eumenides*, or Euripides’ characters who discuss topical issues in obviously contemporary terms – women in *Medea*, theology in *Bacchae*, politics in *Supplikes* – in order to gauge the difference.

But there are also striking ways in which Sophocles departs from his epic models. Many important issues in his plays have no analogy in Homer’s world: the conflicting claims in *Antigone*, for instance, or the question of Oedipus’ innocence in *O.C.*, or the problem of ends and means in *Philoctetes*. Besides, by comparison with Homer’s heroes are much more “out on their own”, their actions far less involved with the gods; so that however profoundly Sophocles may have been moved by his reading of Homer³ he was surely tackling new problems and offering new sorts of answer. And despite his extremely discreet and subtle artistry, which creates a homogeneously “heroic” play world, we do catch contemporary tones of voice: in Menelaus’ Spartan/oligarchic programme in *Ajax*, Odysseus’ sophistic arguments in *Philoctetes*, or the pointed dialectic of the *Antigone*.⁴ Most important of all, the language he uses is highly synthetic: it may feel “most Homeric” but it betrays a keen awareness both of other literature and of contemporary life. As A.A. Long concludes in his careful study of abstract nouns in Sophocles, “the use which he made of Presocratic thought, particularly Heraclitus, his medical knowledge and concern with politics, and the interest which he shows in sophistic methods and arguments, all exemplify a mind which was completely involved in the intellectual life of fifth-century Athens”.⁵

Assuming that Sophocles is likely to be transmuting his sources into something new and distinctively his own, how can we get nearer to the actual workings and see more precisely what is involved? The only way is through close examination of specimen passages. I have chosen a speech with an incontrovertible Homeric model: Tecmessa’s appeal to Ajax, which from the time of the scholiasts⁶ has been recognised as based on Homer’s famous scene between Andromache and Hector in *Iliad* 6 (392 ff.). It is not just a matter of general Homeric colouring: there is a specific echo, or series of echoes, which most scholars believe are there to be felt – recalling ironically the tenderness and pathos of the exchange between Hector and Andromache in the far more brutal situation of this play. Unlike Hector, Ajax has committed a shameful act in his frenzied killing of the cattle, and Tecmessa is in a weaker position than Andromache, since she can appeal to him only as concubine and not as wife.

Broadly speaking, the critical consensus on this speech is that it is a pathetic and futile plea for pity: Tecmessa, the “spear-won” captive of Ajax, has nothing like the authority of Andromache, and appeals to Ajax on grounds with which he is unlikely to have any sympathy. The force of the allusion to Homer is thus essentially to point a contrast. Reinhardt’s assessment of the scene has been very influential: “when she pleads, she expresses herself only from her own point of view; and that is hopelessly out of touch with her husband’s . . . they speak without communicating to each other — each speaks his own language to which the other does not listen.”⁷ I do not deny that we are given a strong sense of the hopelessness of Tecmessa’s position and of the distance between her and Ajax; but I would argue that in detail the effect of her speech is different from what Reinhardt suggests. We need to consider first the scene in Homer, then what Sophocles has done with it, and what the differences tell us about his manner of using his source.

In *Iliad* 6 the encounter between husband and wife is given elaborate and sympathetic preparation: Hector goes home in search of Andromache, but she is out on the battlements, anxiously watching the fighting, with a nurse carrying the baby Astyanax. They meet by the Scaean gate; Hector smiles to see the child (369–404). Their conversation has three phases. 1) Andromache rebukes Hector for not pitying her child and her; and the essence of her plea is for herself: “There will be no joy for me when you are dead. I have no parents — Achilles killed my father Eetion and my seven brothers. Hector, you are my father and mother and brother and husband. Don’t leave your child an orphan and your wife a widow. But come into the city and fight from there” (405–39). 2) Hector refuses to take his wife’s advice, but his deep feeling for her (deeper, he says, than for any of his *φιλοί* — parents, brothers) is expressed in his thoughts about what will happen to her: she will be taken off to Greece as somebody’s slave “subject to inescapable necessity”. And people will say, seeing her weep, “This was the wife of Hector, the greatest Trojan champion when they fought at Troy” (440–65). 3) Hector tries to take the child in his arms, but Astyanax is frightened by the nodding plume of the helmet, and his parents laugh. Hector puts down his helmet, picks up his son and prays for him: “May he be great . . . and may someone say of him ‘He is much greater than his father’ as he comes back from battle. And may he bring bloody spoils, having killed an enemy, and may his mother rejoice in her heart” (466–81). Note that we are not surprised to find that Hector, for all his pity and love, in fact rejects Andromache’s advice and goes to fight on the plain as he intended.

The first thing to notice about Sophocles’ use of this material is that he disposes it quite differently. There is nothing at all that could be called copying in the way he handles it. Ajax speaks first — and expresses the total desolation he feels now he has killed the cattle — then Tecmessa answers him at almost equal length; and only after that is the child brought on stage. Ajax lifts him up, talks to him about the future, and at the end of the scene makes it clear that he is taking no notice of Tecmessa’s plea: he still seems firmly intent on death. Tecmessa’s speech borrows from Andromache’s, and Ajax’s speech to the child from Hector’s, but it is important that Tecmessa also uses themes from Hector’s speech (and other small echoes occur too, which we must consider later): the whole situation has been thoroughly re-thought and the model transformed without losing its recognisability.

It is surely also very important that what Sophocles gives us is a sort of *agon*, not as explicit as the set debate between Teucer and Agamemnon later in the play, but quite clearly a pair of matching speeches, of which the second pointedly answers the first. If John Finley was right, this play marks “the beginning of a new era when the art of debate was for the first time seriously studied”,⁸ and what we have here and later in the play may well show the influence of “modern” forms such as Protagoras’ *Antilogiai*. We have nothing exactly like it in extant Aeschylus; *Ajax* may not have been Sophocles’ first play to show this influence, but it is the first one extant (if we can assume that it is earlier than *Antigone* or *Trachiniae*). Those scholars who see Tecmessa’s speech as a carefully-designed reply to Ajax’s⁹ are surely nearer the mark than the majority, who are content to treat it merely as a rather misjudged appeal for pity.

Ajax has emphasised his sense of shame and despair (430–80). He has – he believes – been wrongfully deprived of the arms of Achilles and has been cheated of the victims he wanted to punish – the Atridae and Odysseus – who must be laughing at him now he has been deluded into butchering animals instead. Everbody hates him – the gods (evidently), the Greek army, the Trojans. He can neither go home and face Telamon after this disastrous failure nor die fighting gloriously at Troy – that would only gratify the Atridae. The only way to prove his real moral quality to his father – to salvage his heroic identity – is to die: the well-born man must either live nobly or die nobly: *ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι*.

I follow Stanford's analysis and divide Tecmessa's reply into five sections.

1) 485–90. The need to accept necessity. We note how she begins: *ὦ δέσποτ' Αἴας* – “master” sets the tone (and she uses the term elsewhere). He does have the power of a master over her and she uses this fact as part of her appeal. She starts with a resounding *gnome*: there is no greater evil for men than necessity. I know from my own experience – I too was once fortunate and then enslaved. As Stanford says, the implication is “can't you too accept your change of fortune?” – or perhaps “this is something that might happen to anybody”. Tecmessa was born daughter of Teleutas, king of Phrygia, a place of legendary wealth. Now she is a slave – enslaved by Ajax himself. This matter of status is something we hear more of later in the play; here it stresses the mutability of human fortunes: as Kitto observed, it confirms strikingly Athena's statement in the prologue “A single day can overthrow anything human”.¹⁰ And it also lays emphasis on Tecmessa's subjection to Ajax (but we have been told earlier that she is different from just any concubine – as the Chorus has said, *επει' σε λέχος δουριάλωτον | στέρξας ἀνέχει θούριος Αἴας* 211 f.).

2) 490–505. The first section merges quickly into the second; Tecmessa can hardly labour the point that Ajax must accept his change of fortune, and moves at once into an appeal by their union: “So since I have shared your bed I wish you well; don't abandon me and our child to the abuse of your enemies. This will bring disgrace to you and your family”. Tecmessa spends less time than Andromache in asking for pity, and concentrates attention on two points which might weigh with Ajax: their relationship, which imposes obligations, and the need to avoid a bad reputation through the shame of what happens to one's dependants. First she appeals by Zeus *εφέστιος* to the bed they shared, laying great emphasis on the reality of this union and her devotion to Ajax, giving it therefore the same kind of weight as a marriage relationship. Then she stresses the bad repute she will get if Ajax dies. She will be seized as a slave by the first comer (495) and (echoing Hector's words to Andromache) people will talk about her: “then one of my masters will speak mockingly of me, with taunting words”. She uses emotive language to bring home the horror of it: *πικρὸν πρόσφθεγμα, ἰάπτων, ὀμεινέτω* (made emotive by the context, not in itself derogatory), *οἷας λατρείας ἀνθ' ὅσου ζήλου τρέφει* – “what slavery she suffers instead of what esteem” – a compliment to Ajax, treating her present state of subjection as concubine as *ζήλος* (and everything we have heard earlier about Ajax and Tecmessa, especially 211 f., 410 f., suggests that we should take it seriously). “As for me, fate will drive me on” (sc. as it likes); this is not the important thing, but *σοι δ' αἰσχρὰ τᾶπη ταῦτα καὶ τῷ σῶ γένει* (505), a clear answer to Ajax's words at 473 ff. about what is *αἰσχρόν* for a man who is *εὐγενής*.

The force of this echo is surely not just pathetic. Of course there is a contrast with the Homeric model, in which Hector imagines with pity and horror what people will say when Andromache is made a slave, and prays that he will be dead before it happens. As the critics note, Tecmessa has to say it herself: she cannot rely on Ajax thinking such compassionate thoughts. But there is also the point that Tecmessa is using this imaginary scene, not just – or even mainly – in order to arouse pity (though this is the effect it has on us) but to make Ajax feel he cannot risk the disgrace. Tecmessa is very sensitively adapting her argument to her understanding of Ajax's character. And so it is not true to say “she expresses herself only from her own point of view; and that is hopelessly out of touch with her husband's”. Tecmessa understands that it is part of Ajax's greatness to be protector of his own *φίλοι* (158–61, 410 f.) – Ajax among his *φίλοι* is a very important theme of the first part of the play – and she presents herself as the *φίλος* who can make the strongest claim on him. Winnington-Ingram perhaps limits Tecmessa's arguments

too much when he asks “How much could it be expected that the mutual obligations of a sexual relationship would weigh — and weigh with an Ajax? If they weighed with Hector they could not outweigh the claims of his honour. Do they weigh with Ajax at all?”¹¹

3) 506–9. Tecmessa picks up a further point in Ajax’s speech. He said he could not go home to face Telamon. But Tecmessa suggests that it would be worse to abandon him by killing himself. “Feel *aidos* at abandoning your father in grievous old age, feel *aidos* for your mother who has a share in many years”. *Aidōs* is something a *eūgenēs* ought to feel, especially towards his parents. The strongly Homeric echo in *λυγρῶ / γήρα* reinforces the power of her appeal: *γήρα* . . . *λύγρω* is used of a father whose sons are taken from him in battle in *Iliad* 5.153. *κληροῦχον* by contrast is a strikingly untraditional and unpoetic word, a metaphor from contemporary political life; but Sophocles can use it without giving us a sense of gross anachronism because etymologically it is perfectly at home, since *κλήρος* is a word known to Homer and the adjective need not carry a strongly technical sense.

4) 510–13. “Pity your son, reflecting what a great evil you will give him — and me — if he has to live without you, deprived of *τροφή*, under the care of guardians who will not be *φίλοι*.” Again this is an appeal to the sense of obligation of the nobly-born man, not just to his sense of pity. It is the father’s duty to provide *τροφή* and protection for his children; and *ὀρφανισταὶ μὴ φίλοι*, whether *φίλοι* means “friendly” or “kith and kin”, cannot be an attractive idea.

5) 514–22. The speech ends with a reminder of the opening: Tecmessa reverts to her own situation, her total dependence on Ajax. “You destroyed my country, my parents are dead” (Sophocles is probably thereby avoiding the special horror of the idea that Tecmessa has been cohabiting with the man who killed her father), “you are my only *πατρίς* and *πλοῦτος*” (another echo of Andromache, but once more with a difference, the reminder that Ajax himself was responsible for her change of fortune). Even here Tecmessa does not confine her appeal to a plea for pity, but again tries to make Ajax think of his obligations: the need to feel gratitude. “Have remembrance of me — a man should remember if he receives benefits”: *τερπνὸν εἴ τί που πάθοι*, a delicate reminder of their shared bed (not to be interpreted as by Ronnet, who speaks disparagingly of Tecmessa being reduced to evoking memories of the “entente charnelle”, claiming Ajax’s gratitude for the pleasure she has given him¹²). Like the good pleader she is, Tecmessa strengthens her appeal with a double *γνώμη*: “for *χάρις* is what begets *χάρις* (their *χάρις* has been that of the marriage bed), but if a man who has received benefits doesn’t remember them he can no longer count as a *eūgenēs* *ἀνὴρ*”. She is offering a clear answer to Ajax’s own words about being *eūgenēs*, and doing so in the way of those who “cultivate the art of debate”, by means of a pair of gnomic generalisations, ranging the specific case under a general heading. As Stanford notes (on 523–4), this appeal to gratitude is “skilfully directed to a man who is burning under a sense of his own unrequited benefaction to the Greeks”. It seems wide of the mark to credit her with no understanding of Ajax’s motivation, as Ronnet does: “Comment pourrait-elle comprendre qu’on préfère la mort au déshonneur?”¹³ This is precisely what she is trying to persuade him not to do: she clearly understands all too well. (When she eventually finds the dead Ajax’s corpse she recognises with fierce pride that he died “to his own content”, *αὐτῷ δὲ τερπνός* 967.)

Ajax makes no direct response to Tecmessa’s speech, but asks peremptorily for the child. Perhaps this suggests that he has been listening; but he called out earlier for Eurysaces at 339 (*ὠὸ παῖ παῖ*) and we cannot feel sure that he is taking notice of Tecmessa. (This is good drama: the situation is left open for the audience to interpret the characters’ motives. One might compare Antigone rejecting Ismene’s claim that she shared in the burial [*Ant.* 536–60]: is she angrily disowning her sister or trying to protect her? When Odysseus threatens to leave Philoctetes alone on Lemnos without the bow [*Phil.* 1054–62] is he bluffing or is he in earnest? There is no “right” answer.) But Ajax does grudgingly praise Tecmessa for keeping the child out of his way during his fit of madness, and there are hints to come that he is not wholly unresponsive to her, fierce and brutal as his manner towards her is. Critics have often pointed out that the echoes of the *Iliad* in this part of the scene bring out his grimness by comparison with Hector’s tenderness; but perhaps the picture is more complicated. “Lift him up here”, he says, “he won’t be afraid of the newly-shed blood, if he’s truly my son. He must at once be broken in to his father’s fierce ways

and moulded to the likeness of his nature. Boy, may you be more fortunate than your father, but like him in everything else, and you won't be *κακός*". Astyanax, we remember, had been frightened by the plume of Hector's helmet, and Hector had taken off the helmet to soothe him. Hector had prayed that his son would be better than his father: the contrast here certainly emphasises the shameful violence of Ajax and his persistent pride despite the shame, but the echoes are more complex. "One day", says Ajax, "you will grow up and learn your ancestry".

Meanwhile "feed on light breezes" (the image is the Homeric one of a young person growing like a young plant¹⁴) *νέαν | ψυχὴν ἀτάλλων* "fostering your young life", *μητρὶ τῆδε χαρμονήν* "a delight to your mother here". The phrase *νέαν ψυχὴν ἀτάλλων* was perhaps suggested to Sophocles, as Jebb thought, by the description in *Iliad* 6.400 (at the opening of the scene) of Astyanax in his Nurse's arms as *ἀταλόφρων*; at all events it does something to soften the impression of brutality and pride that we have just been given. I would argue that *μητρὶ τῆδε χαρμονήν* — the only glimpse Ajax gives us of tender feelings for Tecmessa — is an echo of Hector's words in his prayer for Astyanax: "and may he come home victorious and may his mother rejoice" — *χαρείη* (481). These touches seem to me to add interesting complexity to the scene: the possibility that in his own way Ajax may be making more response to Tecmessa's appeals and to his ties with his *φίλοι* than he would care to admit. Of course we must not be sentimental: he is brutally dismissive of Tecmessa in the next little exchange, and in the rest of his farewell to the child, when he speaks of the dispositions that Teucer will have to make for the boy and his grandparents, he says nothing of the boy's mother. But he does make these dispositions: he does in fact acknowledge his responsibilities.¹⁵

If I am right in suggesting that the analogy with Hector is subtler than critics usually suppose — and the effect of the comparison with the Iliadic scene is not simply "just off key and to the disadvantage of Ajax"¹⁶ — then it may also be fleetingly at work in the most celebrated scene of the play, the so-called Deception Speech, when Ajax in a long and meditative quasi-monologue declares that he is going to the sea-shore, convincing his wife and crew that he intends to bury his sword and purify himself, having unexpectedly given up his stubbornness. Whatever may be the tone of the whole speech, I think we can gauge the effect of the opening a little more precisely if we keep our Iliadic analogy in mind.

Ajax has left the stage at the end of the previous scene telling Tecmessa that she is a fool if she thinks she can "school his temper": *εἰ τοῦμόν ἦθος ἄρτι παιδεύειν νοεῖς* (595). Now, after the choral song, he emerges saying quite extraordinary things: "Long and immeasurable time controls everything, it brings dark things to the light and hides what has been shown forth. Nothing is beyond expectation, even the dire oath and the stubborn will are overcome. For even I, who used to be so remarkably firm, like iron hardened in the dipping, I have been made womanish in my words ("have felt the keen edge of my temper softened", Jebb) by this woman. I feel the pity of leaving her a widow among my enemies and my son an orphan". Ajax is saying "everything is susceptible to change, even the hardest things, myself included", and the rest of his speech suggests that in future he will understand how to think mortal thoughts, acknowledging the inherent weakness of even the strongest things in the world. In fact he goes out and kills himself, with appalling curses on the Atridae and the whole army. Has he changed? Has he acquired new insights? Or is the speech to be taken as no more than a bundle of lies? Certainly it is ambiguous in its effects: Tecmessa and the crew think he has given up the idea of killing himself; we the audience strongly suspect he has done no such thing, and we are proved to be right when later we see him on the seashore with his sword. But Sophocles gives no indication of how far the ambiguity is Ajax's deliberate and deceptive choice, and so there can be no answer to the question of what he intends vis à vis the people who hear his speech. But this does not mean that we cannot ask a different question: how seriously are we to take the insights the speech expresses?

Ajax prefaces his meditations with words about his wife and son: *οἰκτίρω δέ νιν | χήραν παρ' ἐχθροῖς παῖδα τ' ὀρφανὸν λιπεῦν* (652 f.). The ambiguity of these words has often been noted: *οἰκτίρω λιπεῦν* could mean either "I feel the pity of leaving them" (sc. but I still have to do it), which suggests itself readily to the audience, or "I feel the pity of leaving them" (sc. so I shall not leave them after all), as Tecmessa and the sailors take it. Either way, there is no reason to suppose that Ajax can be imagined to

feel no pity at all. I base my reading of this sentence on the hints that Ajax has given in his scene with Tecmessa and the child, particularly *μητρι τῆδε χαρμονήν* at 559, on the affection he has so evidently inspired in the past in all his *φιλοι* (for which the whole play up to this point is evidence), and on the fact that these words about leaving his wife and child are surely one last echo of Hector and Andromache. At *Iliad* 6.432, at the climax of her appeal to Hector, Andromache says *μη παιῖδ' ὀρφανικὸν θεῖης χήρην τε γυναῖκα*. This echo strongly suggests to me that we should take Ajax's words seriously and resist those critics who refuse to accept *ἐθελύθην στόμα πρὸς τῆσδε τῆς γυναίκος* at its face value. A.M. Dale, for example, remarks, "The falseness of the pretence should be so strikingly apparent as to warn us against believing the rest of the speech".¹⁷ But suppose this untranslatable phrase refers not to Ajax's impending behaviour but to the words he now finds himself uttering? "Tecmessa's appeal has made me change the way I look at — and speak about — myself and the world . . ."

If this interpretation is correct it would strengthen the arguments of those critics who claim that something happens to Ajax before he kills himself, something that is reflected in the Deception Speech. He does speak as if he had become aware of truths about man and time and change — and about himself in this scheme of things — that he was blind to in the earlier part of the play. And when he kills himself, though he has lost nothing of his hatred for his enemies, he seems to have found a way of overcoming his shame, which was so powerful an emotion in all the earlier scenes. Admittedly he does not change his mind in response to Tecmessa, but neither does Hector in response to Andromache; Hector still goes to fight in the Trojan plain, but no one calls in question the seriousness of his expression of pity. The only way in which we can imagine Ajax's thoughts, which have no existence independent of the text, is by listening to his words. The Deception Speech itself constitutes the evidence in support of his claim that he is "made womanish" in his words. On this reading *ἐθελύθην στόμα* does not have to carry the implication "in my words but not in my heart",¹⁸ and Tecmessa paradoxically can be seen to have had a greater effect than Andromache.

So the analogy with Hector and Andromache appears to be more complex than critics have normally allowed; and I should like to go on to suggest ways in which it is related to the rest of the play. But first I must stress that my argument about the force of the echoes is not dependent on our actually picking up and identifying them in detail as we watch or read *Ajax*, though I think Sophocles could rely on his audience's familiarity with the *Iliad* and their ability to recognise Hector and Andromache in the background. What I am claiming is rather that by studying Sophocles' reading of Homer we can more precisely gauge the tone of this part of the play and use it as a guide to interpretation. Sophocles' technique is a very subtle one — I can think of no poetry before this date that uses Homer in the same way (the closest analogy that occurs to me is Virgil) — and I would see it as a sample of his originality, an indicator of what is really "new" in his work.

There are several points to be made about the links between the Tecmessa scene and the rest of the play, all of them related to the issues considered so far.

1) First we might note that the impression conveyed by Tecmessa's speech of her sensitive understanding of Ajax's personality is reinforced by the scene when she finds his body. She, we feel, is the right person to find it: she knows what to do and say, and this is more than just a matter of making lamentations. When the Chorus think of the mockery of his enemies she fiercely retorts (961–70) "Let them mock — perhaps they'll miss him now he's dead. He died as a source of pain to me rather than as a joy to them, but to his own content, *αὐτῷ δὲ τερπνός*. For what he longed to achieve he has won for himself, the death he wanted". Tecmessa understands what Ajax wanted, as she showed all too well in her speech of appeal to him.

2) Second (and very important): the analogy with Hector and Andromache in the Tecmessa scene is reinforced and deepened by the frequent naming of Hector in the play, particularly in the allusions made by Ajax and Teucer to the sword — Hector's sword — with which Ajax kills himself (a stage property of enormous significance¹⁹). "I will bury this sword, most hateful of weapons", says Ajax at 658 ff., "for ever since I took this gift from my worst enemy Hector I have never had any good from the Greeks. It is a true saying that the gifts of enemies are no gifts and bring no good." This is a reference to the episode in

Iliad 7.303 ff. when Hector and Ajax exchanged gifts after fighting a duel – a sword and a belt. At 817 f. the idea is recalled in Ajax's suicide speech: "the gift of Hector, the most hated of ξένοι to me, and my greatest enemy" δῶρον μὲν ἀνδρός Ἑκτορος, ξένων ἐμοί| μάλιστα μισηθέντος ἐχθίστου θ' ὄραν. And Teucer elaborates at 1027 ff., "Consider the fortunes of two men: Hector with the very belt he had been given by Ajax was gripped to the chariot rail and mangled till he died, and Ajax had this gift from Hector by which he perished in his deadly fall".²⁰ The interlocking fates of these enemies is what is important. Finally in Teucer's speech at 1266 ff. the great deeds of Ajax are deeds performed in fighting Hector. The two heroes are significantly alike as well as opposed.

3) The link between Ajax and Hector is closely related to the theme of Tecmessa's origins, which is emphasised in her speech to Ajax and mentioned several times elsewhere in the play (210–12, 331, 894). Like Hector, Tecmessa is a Trojan. She is a concubine, like Briseis or Laodice a hero's battle prize, who however has a special status since Ajax has no other wife, no Penelope or Clytemnestra waiting at home for him (and therefore the issue of Eurysaces' legitimacy is not raised²¹). Her subordinate role as δούλη is important in her appeal to Ajax, as I have suggested; but there is surely special point in her particular origins, as daughter of the Phrygian ruler Teleutas. Like Teucer's mother Hesione, as it turns out, who was the daughter of Laomedon himself (1301–3) – and even Agamemnon is descended from the Phrygian Pelops (1292). These connections help to develop a theme of cardinal importance in the play, that of friends and enemies.

Ajax has started behaving like an enemy to people who ought to be his friends – his comrades – and it is this that leads to his despair in his opening scene with Tecmessa: he can see no way (since his φίλοι are now ἐχθροί) of recovering his heroic identity.²² His great speech on time and change, arguably the most intense moment in the play, has much to say about friends and enemies and expresses an awareness of the possibility of change between human beings, set in the context of the great recurrent changes in the natural order: winter giving place to summer, night to day, winds to calm, sleep to waking. This theme, though explored with greater ambiguity by Ajax, his perception deepened by suffering, has already been presented to us by Odysseus in the prologue. Athena asks Odysseus to contemplate the mad frenzy of Ajax: "Look at him now, was there ever in the past a more sensible man, or one who was found more valiant in emergencies?" (119 f.) "No", says Odysseus, "and I pity him in his misery although he is my enemy οἰκτίρω δέ νῦν| δύστηνον ἔμπας καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ, because he is bound fast to an evil fate. I think of my own situation as much as his: for I see we are nothing, we who live, but phantoms, or a fleeting shadow" (121–6). In the end it is the petty-minded Menelaus and Agamemnon who are too rigid (as Ajax once was) and who refuse to accept that having once become an enemy he could ever again be treated as a friend. But Odysseus, asking for the burial of Ajax as a favour to a friend, demonstrates the superiority of his ethic. He bases his claim for the honourable treatment of Ajax on grounds of his nobility – what he did at Troy – and also on the mutability of things: "Many are friends at one time and foes at another" ἢ κάρτα πολλοὶ νῦν φίλοι καῦθις πικροί (1359), and again: "I tell this to Teucer: I am ready to be his friend from now on, as staunch as I was once his foe (1376 f.)".

Now the connection of Tecmessa with all this is that she is Ajax's closest φίλος and is herself a living example of the enemy – the Trojan whose city he sacked – who has become a friend. So it is right that she of all people should be able to help him arrive at a new understanding of things, of human subjection to time and change.

4) Finally, there is another major theme which is also closely linked with Tecmessa's speech: the theme of birth. Who is εὐγενής, in what does εὐγένεια consist?²³ Is it Ajax, Teucer, Agamemnon, who is truly noble? Tecmessa, now a slave but born a princess, offers Ajax a definition of εὐγένεια which involves obligations to φίλοι and remembrance of past benefits. These ideas are not lost in the play; Ajax does take thought for his φίλοι in his own way when he makes his dispositions in the speech to the child; and in fact, as things turn out, his death proves unexpectedly to have protected them (though I hesitate to go as far as Taplin, who suggests that Ajax could foresee it²⁴). As for gratitude – μνηστis – Tecmessa's words at the end of her speech are echoed by Teucer in reply to Agamemnon's insults: "Ah gratitude to the dead – how quickly it falls away from men and is found to betray them, if this man has no longer the slightest remembrance for

you, Ajax — a man for whom you toiled so often, risking your own life!” (1266–70). Teucer’s words χάρις, διαρρεῖ, μνηστis all echo those of Tecmessa at the end of her speech; and Agamemnon’s lack of gratitude is ultimately replaced by Odysseus’ insistence on recalling Ajax’s heroic services. The theme is thus not to be detached from the play as a whole and treated as Sophocles’ nostalgic harking-back to aristocratic ways of thinking and behaving: Odysseus and Ajax are ultimately linked.

The evidence that we have just been considering suggests that Sophocles’ highly individual response to Homer had profound significance for the composition of *Ajax*. Even in the last part of the play, where it may be right to detect contemporary tones of voice and allusions to contemporary political types, as when Menelaus at 1071 ff. makes specious use of oligarchical slogans, the power of the themes relating to Hector and Andromache is still paramount: birth, friends and enemies, stubbornness and *σωφροσύνη*, time and change. So we have the paradox of an author’s distinctive originality finding expression through his reading of another’s work. Eduard Fraenkel was perhaps not exaggerating when he remarked “*De Sophocle Homeri discipulo è il lavoro che vorrei fare, ma una vita non basterebbe*”.²⁵

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NOTES

This paper began life as a lecture to the Classical Association under the title “Old and new in Sophocles” (summary in *Proc. Class. Ass.* 78 [1981]). I have since benefited from correspondence with Professor E.A. Havelock.

1. Quoted by Diogenes Laertius 4.20; see also *Life* 20.
2. But see G.M. Kirkwood, “Homer and Sophocles’ *Ajax*”, in *Classical drama and its influence*, ed. M.J. Anderson (London 1965) 53–70, especially 54 n. 1.
3. I use the term “reading” in its literary-critical sense, without wishing to imply that Sophocles relied primarily on study of the written text for his deep knowledge of Homeric poetry.
4. See especially *Aj.* 1071–88 with Teucer’s remarks at 1100–4; *Phil.* 79–85, 96–9, 1047–62; *Ant.* 726–61.
5. A.A. Long, *Language and thought in Sophocles* (London 1968) 167.
6. 499, 501b, 514, 545a, 550nn., see τὰ ἀρχαῖα σχόλια εἰς Αἴαντα τοῦ Σοφοκλέους, ed. G.A. Christodoulou (Athens 1977).
7. K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, Engl. trans. by H. and D. Harvey (Oxford 1979) 19.
8. J.H. Finley Jr., “The origins of Thucydides’ style”, *HSCP* 50 (1939) 53.
9. For example, W.B. Stanford in his commentary on the play (London 1963), G.M. Kirkwood (n. 2 above), and particularly R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles, an interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) 29–32, who characterises the speech as “complex in structure and dense in thought”. I have learned much from the two chapters on *Ajax* in this important book.
10. H.D.F. Kitto, “The *Rhesus* and related matters”, *YCS* 25 (1977) 323.
11. *Sophocles* (n. 9 above) 30.
12. G. Ronnet, *Sophocle, poète tragique* (Paris 1969) 105.
13. *Ibid.*, 106.
14. Similar language at *Trach.* 144–7; *Il.* 18.56 f. lies in the background.
15. See O. Taplin, “Yielding to forethought: Sophocles’ *Ajax*”, *Arktouros* (Hellenic studies presented to B.M.W. Knox, Berlin and New York 1979) 122–9.
16. R. Lattimore, *The poetry of Greek tragedy* (Baltimore 1958) 68.
17. A.M. Dale, *Collected papers* (Cambridge 1969) 223.
18. *Contra*, for example, Stanford on 651 “‘womanish . . . with regard to my speech’, implying that his inner will remains unsoftened”; B.M.W. Knox, “The *Ajax* of Sophocles”, *HSCP* 65 (1961) 15; Winnington-Ingram (n. 9 above) 48 n. 111.
19. See O. Taplin, *Greek tragedy in action* (London 1978) 85–7; C. Segal, “Visual symbolism and visual effects in Sophocles”, *CW* 74 (1980/81) 127–9.
20. Sophocles is not afraid to diverge from Homer when the Homeric version of a story does not suit him. See Jebb’s Appendix on 1028–39. On the link between *Ajax* and Hector, see W.E. Brown, “Sophocles, and Homer’s Hector”, *CJ* 61 (1965/66) 118–21.
21. See Winnington-Ingram (n. 9 above) 30 n. 57.
22. On friends and enemies see C. Segal, *Tragedy and civilization* (Cambridge, Mass. 1981) 150.
23. Teucer’s words at 1093 ff. show what a problematic question this is.
24. “Yielding to forethought” (n. 15 above) 126 f.
25. *Due seminari Romani di Eduard Fraenkel* ed. L.E. Rossi et al. (Rome 1977) 15.