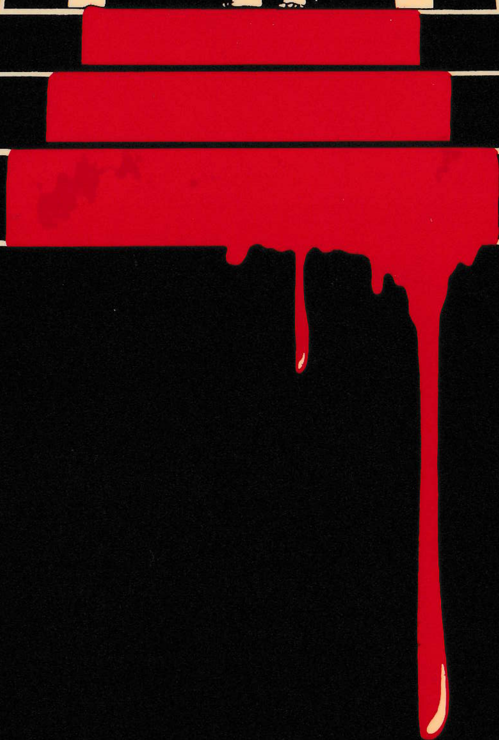

GREEK TRAGEDY IN ACTION

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shape, in making it immediate through the behaviour of people, and in presenting that behaviour through the medium of the theatre. It is, I think, above all because he is such a craftsman of the stage that he touches most directly and most painfully the very sources of human suffering. George Eliot was asked how Sophocles influenced her and went straight to the point: 'in the delineation of the great primitive emotions'.[5]

Ajax has reduced critics to bewilderment. For in Ajax himself we have one of the most powerful figures in heroic poetry; yet he seems to compromise his own uncompromising greatness, and, worse, he is dead too soon, leaving the play to drag on for another five hundred lines. Despite the critics, I have always felt that this is a great – not necessarily flawless – tragedy. Working on the assumption that Sophocles was in control of his art, the purpose of the sublime poetry of the (so-called) 'deception' speech (646–92) becomes at once the great problem and the key to the play. How does it relate to the heroic resolution that has preceded; and how does it bear on what follows it, especially on Ajax's unflinching death speech (815–65)? And then what are we to make of the last third of the play (866–1420)? 'Sophocles has more time than he quite knows what to do with', patronizes one critic (A. J. A. Waldock). Why is so long spent on the crude wrangling with Menelaus and Agamemnon? What are we to make of the changed attitude of Odysseus? And is anything solved by the end of the play? Whence this feeling that out of despair and meanness there is a rightness, a fitness to the scheme of things in the final funeral procession?

OT presents no such blatant problems of unity. The whole play revolves around the great will of Oedipus and around the very greatness that makes his fall all the more terrible. Often since Aristotle's *Poetics*, *OT* has been cited as the epitome of tragedy. And yet, while the reversal which hinges on appearance and reality may exemplify the tragic movement, the exciting 'jigsaw' or 'detective story' element of the play is certainly not typical. And there are plenty of problems. What are we to make of Tiresias, and of Oedipus' apparent inability to pay attention to him? Why the virulent clash with Creon? Why Oedipus' great distress at 726ff., too soon for the play to have reached its catastrophe? And this play also has closing scenes which are not straightforwardly related to what has preceded. For the moment which the play has been leading up to – Oedipus' realization of the whole truth – comes at 1185, still 350 lines before the end. Why the protracted recriminations, the final scene with Creon, the daughters? And what happens at the very end? But here, as much as anywhere, the most urgent problem is to ask what questions the play itself is and is not raising. Does Sophocles ask why Oedipus suffers, whether he

deserves to suffer? Is Oedipus uniquely unfortunate? Or an archetype for Man?

It may be that *OT* has suffered from adulation since Aristotle singled it out as the flower of tragedy's growth: *Philoctetes* on the other hand has been generally underrated, though it has recently attracted more of the attention it deserves. It is easy to see why readers have been put off: there is no death, no thrilling action, no women characters at all – in fact the drama is largely made out of the interplay of only two characters, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. But in performance there is a great deal of action, on a small but none the less telling scale. And Philoctetes and his bow stand for an entire world view, also represented by Achilles and Heracles, both dead: Neoptolemus is torn between their values and the very different world of Odysseus and the Greek generals. Out of this conflict Sophocles draws a supremely tense and subtle series of shifting relationships. Questions well up: What is the place of the bow? Of the oracle of Helenus? When and why does Neoptolemus first waver? Why the new start at 1222? Is Philoctetes too stubborn? Why does Sophocles press him on until an external intervention is required? Is Odysseus vindicated by the outcome, or is he utterly discredited? But the question which subsumes them all is – how does Sophocles wring so much tension and such profundity out of such spare material?

Euripides did not, as is often carelessly implied, come after Sophocles. He was a younger contemporary, and, what is more, his influence on Sophocles is clear (and vice versa). Born in the 480s he first produced plays in 455, the year after the death of Aeschylus (though no doubt he saw the original performance of the *Oresteia*), and thirteen years after Sophocles' first production. He died in 406, a few months *before* Sophocles (whose death so soon after seems to have been a problem for Aristophanes in composing his *Frogs* of 405). Euripides composed about 65 tragedies; but in his case, as well as the usual selection of 7, a single manuscript fortunately survived containing another 10 tragedies. So we have about a quarter of his output.[6] Nine plays can be dated for sure, and the rest within a few years; and it emerges that only 2, *Alcestis* (438) and *Medea* (431) – 2 of the best – come from the first half of his 49 years of activity in the theatre, and 8 at least date from his last decade.

It may be misguided to attempt to arrange our random sample of plays into periods. But the earlier plays, e.g., *Medea*, *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, fit best a 'classic' idea of tragedy. Noble figures struggle and endure in a world that gravitates towards destruction and waste. Sometimes they endure with dignity; sometimes they become savage, though none the less with a strength that gives them tragic

and dishonoured. After the trial their destructive attention is turned from the individual to the city, and they are prepared to blight Athens with their poison, although they will suffer for it. If they blight the city, then they will wander homeless again; so Athena must persuade them to do the opposite – to bless and to stay.

> I shall not tire of offering you honours,
> so you may never say that you, old gods,
> by a new god and by these citizens
> were cast away dishonoured from his land. (881–4; cf. 851ff.)

So the long-term issue is also put in terms of theatrical space: will the Furies depart from a poisoned land, or will they stay? In return for a home, a cult, and an honourable function they decide to withhold their withering poison and to grant instead unblighted fruitfulness to their new home [see further 9.3.2]. Earlier Apollo drove them from Delphi and told them that by pursuing Orestes they would only find more pain (226), and that their proper home was a blood-lapping lion's den (193f.); but in fact, they find a civilized home and an end to their thankless wanderings. The trial of Orestes founds Athenian justice; and the solemn and benevolent procession at the end of the trilogy inaugurates Athenian prosperity. The justice of the civilized city must incorporate an element of fear, even the Furies [cf. 6.3.2].

[4.4.1] Sophocles' *Ajax* opens with a most unusual dumb-show whose significance is only revealed in the ensuing dialogue between Athena and Odysseus. First, Odysseus enters cautiously, looking closely at the ground, then looking about, prowling tensely, approaching the doors of the *skēnē* with great wariness. After him comes Athena, who watches him calmly. Her opening lines at last clarify this puzzling charade:

> I have for ever found you, Odysseus,
> hunting to snatch some chance against your foes:
> so now I've long watched you beside
> the tent of Ajax at the camp outpost,
> long watched you following and scanning round
> his fresh tracks to see if he is in or not.
> And your searching, like some keen-scented hound's,
> has surely brought you to your prey. (1–8; cf. 36–7)

This explanation is furthered by Odysseus' reply, which follows a similar sequence of expression:

> Athena speaks, closest to me of gods,
> how well I know you, even when unseen . . .[12]
> so now you have well understood that I
> am on the track of a dangerous enemy,

> Ajax of the famous shield. It is Ajax,
> no other, I have long been hunting down. (14–15, 18–20)

Odysseus is, then, the wary dog *par excellence*, the hunter who tracks his enemy to the death, and no difficulty or danger will stop him from getting his man. Athena is a goddess of marked friendships and hatreds: Odysseus is her special favourite and she enjoys watching his skill. Ajax is a special enemy. Not only does she protect Odysseus and the Greeks from Ajax, she openly exposes his fatal madness for Odysseus to see and to tell all (see 66ff.). The dumb-show, inexplicable until put into words, presents the audience vividly with the dispositions and gambits which open the play.

[4.4.2] Gods do not, or need not, change their purposes and their enmities: mortals must, when appropriate, shift their ground and give way. But Ajax is too unyielding to change until too late; and in the end he has to yield and to die [see 8.4.1]. Odysseus will live and prosper, for he is a lesser man; but he is the wisest of the lesser men. He immediately takes the lesson of the prologue:

> Yet I still pity him, although my foe,
> seeing him yoked with cruel disaster –
> in this I am thinking of myself no less.
> I see that we are nothing more than wraiths,
> we mortals, insubstantial shadows. (121–6)

We do not see Odysseus again for nearly 1200 lines, but Sophocles has already prepared for the role he will play at the end, when he is responsible for the rehabilitation of Ajax. Compare his second entry (1316) with his first. When he returns there is nothing cautious or devious about him; there is not even the formality of an entrance-announcement, instead the chorus suddenly addresses him (1316–17) 'have you come to tangle or to loosen?'. Odysseus' entry is abrupt and forthright, and accords with his vision of the truth: 'I too shall come to this' (1365). On this firm ground amid the shifting sands Odysseus takes his stand.

[4.4.3] Odysseus is perhaps the most obvious of the many interlacing fibres which bind together a tragedy which is clearly and deliberately split in two by the death of Ajax [see 9.4.1]. Another visible and concrete bond is made by the two exits of the chorus. *Ajax* is another of those few plays in which the chorus leaves the stage during the course of the play and then returns [on *Eum* see 4.3.1]. As soon as Tecmessa hears from Teucer's messenger that Ajax should not have gone off alone, since his death is prophesied for this very day, she takes immediate action and organizes the chorus to search for him:

> Alas, my friends, protect me from this fate.
> Some of you hasten Teucer's coming back,
> and some go to the western coves, and some
> the east, to seek his fatal sortie out . . .
> Ah, what am I to do, my son? Not stay;
> I too will go wherever I am able.
> Come on, let's hurry. This is no time to rest.
> (803–6, 809–11)

In a few more moments the scene is cleared; the chorus hurry off by either *eisodos*, and Tecmessa and the boy presumably go within. Suddenly the world of Ajax's tent, which has become familiar through the first 800 lines, is dissolved, scattered: the scene is set for Ajax alone. Quickly and unceremoniously the entire setting, including even the chorus, is dispersed in a last desperate attempt to save Ajax, the man round whom this miniature society was built.

[4.4.4] With this hopeless dissolution in mind consider now the second exit of the chorus at the end of the play. Ajax's corpse has long lain there in full view (see p. 189 n.5). It has been the subject and the stage-focus of the preceding scenes, while its treatment has been contested: will it be moved and taken off to proper burial, or will it be left to lie there in the open for carrion (see 830 etc.)? At last the matter is settled, and Teucer gives the final instructions:

> Enough. Too much time has been let slip already.
> Some hurry and dig out the hollow grave,
> some set a lofty tripod over the flames
> ready for the last ablutions,
> and let one group fetch his armour from the tent.
> And you, boy, take hold with love your father's frame
> and lift him up to the best of your strength.
> The warm ducts still spout up dark gore.
> But come everyone, any here who claims the name of friend,
> hurry, go, and do your final service
> for this best of men, when he was one. (1403–16)

So all the close dependants of Ajax – Teucer, Tecmessa, the boy, and the faithful sailors from Salamis – take the mighty corpse off in a funeral procession. The purposefulness and unity and decorum of the action puts its meaning in clear visible terms: Ajax is saved, his honour is preserved, and his dependants live on together under his protection. Earlier the chorus had dispersed in disarray on a lost cause: now they march together on a mission which leads to a secure success, even as it marks the final fate of the tragic hero.

[4.5.1] *OT* is by no means one long crescendo building up to the moment when Oedipus sees the truth about his past: on the contrary, it is a tempest of emotion, as Oedipus' self-confidence now rises, now sinks. He is at his most vigorous and elated, though most vulnerable, shortly before the truth strikes him in all its clarity [9.5.2]. A series of entrances and exits by secondary characters articulates the ups and downs of his state. When in the prologue Creon returns from the oracle at Delphi, Oedipus is eager for his news, which seems to be good. The king seems to have been almost superhumanly provident in his care for Thebes. Creon returns pat on his cue, and Oedipus eagerly addresses him even before he has a chance to speak (78ff.). Later, Oedipus has with similar foresight sent for the blind seer, Tiresias, who, it seems, cannot but help in the search; and when his approach is announced (297–9), Oedipus similarly importunes him to speak out, and addresses him for no less than fifteen lines, as Tiresias silently approaches (300–15). Quickly Oedipus' goodwill turns to exasperation, and then his fury turns to disquiet, so that the scene ends on a very different note [see 4.5.2 below]. And there is another entry in the play which seems to bring good news, while it serves, in truth, to take Oedipus one step nearer disaster: the messenger from Corinth at 924ff. [see also 6.5.1]. At the end of the previous scene Oedipus had reached a low ebb of foreboding and distress, consoled by a single hope; but when he hears that Polybus of Corinth, whom he supposed his father, is dead, he relaxes in giddy ridicule of his own fears (964ff.); and as more and more of the truth is revealed he becomes still more elated [9.5.2].

[4.5.2] When Tiresias arrived Oedipus spoke while he remained silent: at the end of the act there is a reversal, and Tiresias has the last speech while Oedipus stands in silence (447–62). At the end Tiresias goes down the *eisodos* and Oedipus into the palace (he must go, since he comes back on at 531). It is unusual for any character in Greek tragedy to go off in silence, let alone one as dominant as Oedipus. It is so strange that some scholars have conjectured that Oedipus must go off at 446, and that the blind Tiresias speaks to thin air; but, apart from the fact that a theatrical trick of this sort is unlike the straightforward technique of Sophocles and that it would serve no purpose beyond its own ingenuity, this neglects the function of Tiresias' lines. Why should Sophocles have Oedipus stand silent and then go without a word?

> I'm telling you, the man you have long sought
> with threats and edicts, the murderer of King
> Laius, that man is here in front of us.
> Supposed an immigrant, he will emerge
> as native Theban; yet will take no joy

Apollo received his shrine as a gift from the older gods (*Eum*, 1–33); and it may seem we are given a glimpse of a peaceable solution to the questions which hang over the end of *Cho* [4.2.2]. But after her preamble she goes inside to take up her prophetic throne: for a few seconds the stage is empty, nothing happens, and then she bursts out again in horror (dramatic technique without parallel in the fifth century):

> Oh, terrible to tell of and to see:
> horrors drive me back from Apollo's temple.
> I have no strength to keep myself upright –
> I run on hands, not feet. A terrified
> old woman is no better than a child. (34–8)

Scholars have been reluctant to face the clear consequences of these words: the venerable priestess crawls out on all fours. What can Aeschylus mean by this crude and undignified stage-direction? The Furies within are quite beyond her comprehension and outside the scope of her everyday piety. Faced with this hideous disruption she is, for all her age and sanctity, no better than a child, mentally and *physically*. She can only leave the matter to Apollo to deal with (60–1). But the overthrow of her opening Delphic speech prefigures Apollo's own failure to understand the power and significance of the Furies [cf. 4.3.3]. It needs a god, Athena, of far deeper wisdom to accommodate this monstrosity ('Zeus has granted me, too, some intelligence' 850); and eventually her city, Athens, will receive the Furies as completely as Delphi had rejected them. By reducing the Pythia to her hands and knees, Aeschylus has characteristically embodied his meaning in the boldest physical terms and translated it into theatre. Some have felt that he here drives his inventiveness to the verge of the grotesque: but how is he to present more effectively the response of a world still without understanding to the repulsive aspect of the Furies?

[5.3.2] The jurors have probably been sitting quietly on benches throughout the trial scene of *Eum*: at the end they rise to place their voting pebbles into two urns (708ff.). The voting is evidently completed by 734, and it seems highly likely that one juror cast his vote during each of the eleven couplets of dialogue 711–33.[4] Athena then announces that her casting vote goes to Orestes, and tells the officers of the jury to turn out the votes and count them (734–43). The votes are counted during lines 744–51, and then Athena pronounces the verdict: 'This man is acquitted of the charge of murder, since the votes are equal on each side' (752–3).

So the voting and counting is rather a long drawn-out piece of stage-business; and rather than putting this down to a mere desire for spectacle or verisimilitude we should ask what else Aeschylus may be trying to convey. It is only a partial explanation to say that the suspense over the outcome is kept up as long as possible, since, while this is the main concern of the dialogue during the counting (744–51), it is nothing to do with the couplets during the voting (711ff.). The dispute between Apollo and the Furies shows how the voting reflects the conflict as well as resolving it. And perhaps a further point is that this is a fixed procedure, and any effective law-court has to have a dependable procedure. This court is, after all, presented as the fundamental precedent of the court of the Areopagus for all time. Note how Athena opens her founding charter:

> Hear now my statute, men of Attica,
> who are to judge the first trial ever held
> for bloodshed: this council of jurors shall
> exist for all of future time among
> the folk of Aegeus. . . . (681–4)[5]

A further point to the stage-business may be the crucial importance of the way the court votes: the votes are *equal* on both sides. The rights and wrongs of the case are so evenly balanced that half vote one way and half the other; and Athena's vote is based on an external, miraculous and 'irrelevant' factor (see 736ff.). Now it is stressed that the jurors are the choice representatives of the city, and that they scrupulously vote according to their best judgement (see 481–9, 573, 674–5, 704–6, 881ff.). This means that, although Orestes is acquitted, the city has not actually rejected or dishonoured the claims and rights of the Furies. This is the first point that Athena must make in her attempt to win round the Furies from blighting the city to blessing it [see 4.3.4, 9.3.2]:

> Be ruled by me: do not complain so harshly.
> You did not lose: the judgement was honest,
> the votes were equal, and your honour saved. (794–6)

[5.4.1] Ajax's young son, Eurysakes, was played by a boy with no speaking lines at all; nevertheless he has his part in the tragedy, indeed he is in some ways a vital nerve. Ajax sees his son as his successor and replacement, and his safety, which he repeatedly commits to the protection of Teucer, is one of his chief concerns. Indeed, before we even see Ajax after he has recovered his sanity, we hear him call 'Ah, boy, boy' (339) and then call on Teucer (342f.). Before the son is actually summoned on stage Ajax has made in 430–80 an irrefutable case for suicide – his conclusion is compressed into two lines: 'The noble man must either live well or die well. That is all I have to say' (479–80). So when he calls for his son (530ff.), it is evidently to make

his final farewell to him. He takes him to his arms as he still sits among the futile slaughtered cattle:

> Bring him here to me. He will feel no fear
> at the sight of such new-shed blood as this,
> not if he is really mine, his father's son. (545–7)

He goes on solemnly to entrust the boy to Teucer's care, and adds that he shall be a comfort to his aged parents in his stead. He bequeaths to his son his strength, his bravery, all his great qualities except his misery; and finally gives him his shield, the mark of the great warrior Ajax of the *Iliad*:

> But you, my son, take what you are named after,
> my seven-hide impenetrable shield (*sakos*),
> and wield it by the strap, Eurysakes.
> The rest of my arms will be buried with me. (574–7)

(The text leaves it uncertain whether the shield is actually brought on stage – perhaps not.) Then, abruptly, without any sentimentality or further farewell, he thrusts the boy away from him:

> Now quickly, take the boy away, and shut
> the building – and no mournful tears outside. (578–80)

This is the end of the last embrace; his son is cast off into the world without his protection, at least without his living protection.

Ajax is apparently at this point bent on killing himself immediately, inside among the cattle, almost in the presence of Tecmessa, the boy and the chorus. Yet he enters again at 646, and makes a speech which Tecmessa and the chorus take to mean that he has decided to live on, even though subservient to his former enemies. This 'deception speech' is at once one of the greatest problems of the play, and necessarily, one of the cornerstones of its interpretation [see further 8.4.1]. Whatever its point, this previous scene with his son is clearly and irreversibly his last contact with his son, his final testament and blessing. What should be noted in it, and in his previous justification of suicide, is its *finality*: Ajax evidently has everything arranged and has demonstrated the inevitability of suicide in such a way that we can never doubt it, whatever he may say in the next scene. What we should remember from the apparently insensitive way that Ajax lets go of his son is the sureness and resolution with which he sets about what has to be done: this same decisiveness is also the keynote of the 'deception speech', for all its ambiguity.

[5.4.2] Eurysakes will, however, touch his father again before the play is done. Tecmessa went on the search for Ajax without him and so left the boy at the mercy of his enemies. Almost as soon as he enters

Teucer, true to his trust, realizes this and sends for him (983ff.). Once he arrives (1168ff.) Teucer tells him to kneel with his hand on the body of Ajax as a suppliant, thus treating Ajax as a sort of asylum or sanctuary. This is discussed in 7.4.2; what I observe here is the symbolic action with which Teucer ratifies this sacred tableau. For the Greeks an oath or a curse was activated, or at least strengthened, if it was associated, as it was uttered, with some concrete object or action. Thus, for example, in the first book of the *Iliad* (233ff.) Achilles swears that the Greeks will miss him as surely as the sacred sceptre in his hands will never again put out foliage, and he flings it on the ground; and in Aesch. *Agam* (1598ff.) Thyestes at the feast of his own children is said to have kicked over the banquet-table with the curse 'thus perish the whole race of Pleisthenes'. So too Teucer, as he cuts a lock from his hair to give to Eurysakes, says:

> If any from the army tries to tear
> you from this corpse, then may he vilely die
> and lie unburied, cast outside the land;
> and may his race be hacked down at the root,
> even as I now shear off this lock of hair. (1175–9)

[5.5.1] When Jocasta tells the story which seems to show that he was the murderer of Laius (711ff.), Oedipus flinches. She asks 'what is the worry that makes you turn and say this?' (728); and it may be that Oedipus physically turned away from her for a moment – away from the truth. Oedipus even comes to regret the vigour with which he has searched and laments that he has cursed and outlawed himself (817–20; cf. 767–8, 1381–2), and at the end of the act he goes inside, almost a broken man (862; cf. 914ff.). Later on, however, when he is near to discovering the truth of his parentage (though he does not yet suspect the enormity of it), he does not flinch, but approaches the truth full-face. When the old shepherd arrives (1110ff.), even before he speaks, Oedipus has the Corinthian identify him (1119f.), and then says 'Hey you, old man, here, look me straight in the eye and answer everything I ask you . . .' (1121–2). As the scene progresses, the old man desperately tries to stop the truth from coming out, but Oedipus does not falter [4.5.3]. At one point he even threatens him with torture:

> *Oed*: If you won't talk willingly, you'll regret it.
> *Shep*: No, by the gods, don't maltreat an old man.
> *Oed*: Seize his arms immediately. . . . (1152–4)

It is likely that Oedipus raised his hand but did not actually strike the old man, and his attendants did not, perhaps, actually lay hands on him. None the less, the threat of force wrings out the truth, and

Hermes (1ff., 124ff.). The lock is the tangible token which brings them together, first in wish and then in reality: though from the head of Orestes, it might as well have been from Electra's (see 172, 176). It constitutes a solid proof of grief for the dishonoured memory of Agamemnon: it is the seed of their reunion, and the demanding memory of Agamemnon is the ghostly yet fertile ground in which it grows.

[6.3.1] Still at Delphi Apollo tells Orestes that he must be pursued to Athens, and that there he should 'take refuge at Athena's ancient statue and clasp it' (*Eum*, 80). Athenians all knew the old wooden image of Athena, which was housed in a temple on the Acropolis (fifty years later the building we know as the Erechtheum was constructed for it). The stage-object which represented the image may have been inconspicuously in sight from the beginning of the play, or it may have been brought on at the change of scene at 234/5; in any case, Orestes on entry (235ff.) addresses Athena, and approaches her statue (242). Evidently he sat or knelt and put his arms round it for the Furies find him 'clasped around the statue of the immortal goddess' (259). He is still there 'cowering' (326) during the 'binding chant', and when Athena arrives she still finds 'this stranger sitting in refuge at my statue' (409; cf. 439–41). After that, however, there is no further reference to it. For the trial the scene shifts from the Acropolis to the neighbouring hill of the Areopagus, and the statue, if still there, is once more disregarded.

The ancient image of Athena provides the inviolable refuge for Orestes from the Furies. It is important for the first scenes at Athens that he must stay still cowering by the image while the Furies perform their 'binding spell' (306ff.) around him and all but overwhelm him.[6] But the statue does not only provide a secure still-point in the stage-picture, it is also the presence by proxy of Athena herself. Even her inanimate presence is able to keep the two sides from brute contact, even though it can do nothing to bring them into communication [7.3.3]. Athena's arrival (443) brings on the arbitrator who will break the stalemate; and before that her solid image provides some sort of promise for a future solution. It is worth noting that the choral song at 490ff., unlike the previous 'binding spell', is not centred on Orestes: it is, rather, concerned with much wider moral and social issues which foreshadow the final resolution. Orestes is (probably) still on stage, but he is no longer at the statue, and no longer in the *orchēstra* and implicated in the choreography. This suggests that Athena has already broken the charmed circle of the blood vendetta, now that her presence has replaced her image.

[6.3.2] The Furies look like nothing earthly. The Pythia is at a loss to describe them; the nearest she can get is that they are like and not like Gorgons, or the Harpies in pictures (*Eum*, 46ff.). They are female, in black, wingless, their eyes stream pus, and they are twined about with snakes, probably on their heads (see *Cho*, 1048–50, 1058; *Eum*, 46–59). Obviously Aeschylus had great confidence in his mask-maker. But while in *Eum* the Erinyes become the Eumenides and undergo a change of aspect from horrific vampires to beneficent guardians of fertility, it is, none the less, important that they do not change their appearance. The theory was once current that they changed their masks: this is not only impracticable, it is contradicted by Athena's lines 'From these fearful visages I foresee great benefit for these my citizens' (990–1). Nor do they change their costume. It is true that at 1028 someone apparently puts on 'purple-dyed garments' (which obviously take up and put to rights the purple cloth of *Agam*); but even if we assume, despite textual trouble, that it is the Furies who don these garments, they do not put them on *instead* of their black: the Greek word *endytois* in 1028 makes it clear that they are put on as well as their basic clothing. The point is that, although the Furies here become beneficent settlers in the city, they remain reminders of that element of dread and awe which a law-abiding city needs. This requirement is spelt out by the Furies themselves in their song at 508ff., it is confirmed by Athena in her foundation speech at 690ff., and she ratifies it in her anapaestic contributions to the lyric dialogue at 916ff.:

> Clearly, conclusively they rule in human affairs;
> to some they bring glad song, to others
> a life darkened by tears. (952–5)

[6.4.1] Many forces conspire to ensure the death of Ajax: the anger of Athena, the shifts of time and fortune, the meanness of his allies, his own determination. But there is also a material object which has an active, almost malign, part in his ending – his sword, which was once Hector's sword. It is debatable when it was first seen by the audience. It is usually supposed that during his first appearance (91–117), while he is still mad, Ajax was holding a whip (see 110, 242), but there is much more stress on the sword, with which he has wreaked such bloody havoc among the cattle (10, 26, 30, 55f., 97, etc.), and so it may be that the gory sword was seen in his hand at this stage.[7] It is also uncertain whether he has it with him during the scene 348–595; there is nothing in the text which certainly shows it was visible. So up until the 'deception speech', whether it was seen or not, the sword, though often mentioned, is simply the instrument with which he shed so much useless blood, and nothing more. But when he enters at 646ff. he has it with him; and he soon explains, with the balanced ambiguity that characterizes this whole speech, what it is he intends to do with it:

1. The theatre at Epidaurus, one of the great sites of Greece, was built as an architectural unity in the mid-fourth century B.C. Like all other Greek theatres it is modelled on the layout developed at the Theatre of Dionysus at Athens. This photograph may be compared with the conjectural ground-plan on p. 10.

2. Over 20,000 spectators are said to have squeezed into Epidaurus to hear Callas sing *Medea*; the theatre at Athens is reckoned to have held some 14,000. The company of such a large audience is indivisible from the experience of Greek tragedy. (Modern performances do not, as a rule, attempt to be authentic in matters of lighting, masks, etc.)

3. These six dancers were painted in Athens in about 490 B.C. (earlier than any tragedy to survive). This fascinating vase, now in Basel, was first published in 1967. The chorus, costumed as young soldiers, are not certainly from a tragedy, but their similar faces and hairstyles suggest masks. The other figure (standing behind the altar, not—as the artist makes it seem—sitting on it) is probably supposed to be an actor. This, unlike almost all later painting inspired by tragedy, appears to represent actual performance.

4. It is a pity that this mysterious painting (Athens, about 460 B.C.) is so fragmentary, since the *aulos*-player and the costume are clear evidence that it is based on tragedy. Some orientals (note the caps and trousers) are busy around a pyre of burning logs: the shoulders and bottom half of the face of a regal figure (Croesus?) are visible above the pyre.

5. These two chorusmen getting into their costume were painted in Athens in about 430 B.C., and supply good evidence for the masks and buskins of the period.

6. The 'Pronomos' vase, painted in Athens in about 400 B.C. (now in Naples) is the best preserved and most detailed evidence for the Greek theatrical outfit. It is named from the famous *aulos*-player seated in the centre. He is shown with the troupe for a satyr play; but the costumes and masks of the three main actors seem to be indistinguishable from those of tragedy.

7. The vase is close in style and date (c. 400) to the 'Pronomos' vase and confirms its evidence for tragic costume. It is based on Euripides' *Andromeda*, produced in 412 B.C., about the same time as *Ion*. The princess Andromeda is left fastened to a rock to appease a sea monster (Perseus—on the right—will rescue her). The painting as a whole is clearly not copied from an actual scene in the theatre.

8. This actor was painted in southern Italy some half a century later, about 350 B.C.; but his mask is still relatively naturalistic and his buskins, though ornate, are not thick-soled. It is uncertain whether his monochrome costume is meant to be royal purple or merely an undergarment. The special interest of this vase is the actor's seedy appearance, ill-shaven and balding: all the player-king has to do is to put on the mask and he becomes a noble hero.

9. This vase was painted in Sicily in the later fourth century B.C., and was dug up there in 1969. Despite poor quality and condition its special interest is that it is not only one of the rare paintings inspired by Sophocles, but even seems to be based on an actual performance of *Oedipus the King* (around lines 1000–1050). Jocasta (right) has now seen the truth, while the old Corinthian (left) tells Oedipus about his past. (The two daughters were added by the painter for emotional effect.)

10. This fine painting (now in Boston) of the murder of Agamemnon shows such a fascination with the bizarre robe-net thrown over the king in the bath that when it was first published in 1966 it was argued that it must be inspired by Aeschylus. But the painting is probably too early (about 470 B.C.) and, in contrast to Aeschylus, it is Aegisthus not Clytemnestra who deals the death blows. The net-robe must have intrigued an earlier narrator, probably the lyric poet Stesichorus.

11. This cup was painted about 470 B.C. by one of the great masters, known as the Brygos painter. Ajax lies dead, and Tecmessa covers his corpse over (compare Sophocles *Ajax* 915 ff.). Again the painting is too early to be inspired by the tragedy we know; but we see the tragic potential in the earlier visual tradition.

12. This painting of the death of Pentheus by the great artist Euphronios has no direct connection with Euripides' *Bacchae*, which was produced a whole century later. But the tragic tension between the Bacchants' elation and the physical horror of the murder seems already captured here.

the play [4.4.4]. But the sword is drawn from his corpse long before that, as he hoped in his prayer to Zeus (quoted above). Teucer's lament (992ff.) has reached a low pitch of hopelessness, as the future looks unrelievably bleak:

> What shall I do? How shall I wrench you from
> this bitter, gleaming spike, on which you died.
> You see how Hector dead was to kill you?
> Consider well the fates of these two men.
> Hector was fastened from the chariot rail
> with the belt that Ajax gave him, and was
> carded on the stones until he died:
> and Ajax had this as a gift from Hector,
> and so was killed by him in his last fall.
> Surely a Fury bronzesmith forged this sword,
> Hades was cruel craftsman of that belt. (1024–35)

But the action of drawing the sword from Ajax is the turning-point away from the low ebb of despair: it is the first stage of Zeus' answer to Ajax's prayer and it marks for Teucer the beginning of a new assertion. Teucer adds to his grim irony some lines of more universal reflection:

> I reckon for myself that all such things
> must be contrived for mortals by the gods. (1036–7)

This is not just 'a rather trite observation', as a recent editor (W. B. Stanford) put it, it is the truth which underlies the final scenes of this play. There is a far from coincidental *appropriateness* in the way that Ajax dies – strong, constant and alone – and there is an appropriateness in the instrument. And it is not all ironic malignancy: for it is also appropriate that Ajax should be buried, that his honour should be restored, and his dependants saved [9.4.2]. The gods see to such things. The 'butcher', the gift of Hector, proves in some ways 'kindly disposed', and plays its ambivalent part in this pattern.

[6.4.2] In this context we might also consider the use that Sophocles makes of the locale of the Trojan plain in *Ajax*, the landscape so powerfully laid down by Homer in the *Iliad*. Though it is not so intimately invoked as in *Phil* [4.6.3], it has its place, nevertheless, like the sword, in the shift from hostility and shame towards some sort of saving grace. The besiegers of Troy have spent the best ten years of their lives by the shore of the Troad, and in the final lines of his great lyric lament Ajax in his isolation calls on the place itself:

> O you sea-surged paths, shore caves, and coastal thickets,
> long, long, too long have you kept me by Troy.
> But no longer, not alive at least. . . . (412–16)

He treats the river Scamander, which irrigates the Trojan plain, as a kind of impartial observer who will witness his dishonour, despite the fact that he is the greatest Greek who has ever come to Troy (418–27). He feels some affinity with the place, and it is away from the encampment along the unfrequented shore that he goes to kill himself. 'I shall go to the bathing places in the meadows by the sea . . .' (654–5). These wooded grasslands are the setting of Ajax's suicide and of all the last part of the play. This is the enemy land in which he fixes his sword (819, quoted above); but this is also the place which he addresses with his very last words:

> . . . you springs and rivers and the Trojan plain,
> I say farewell, my generous sustainers.
> This is the last word Ajax speaks to you;
> the rest I tell to those below in Hades. (862–5)

And the land is not unreceptive: this is, after all, the soil in which he is to be buried, and where he shall have his 'ever-famous tomb' (1165–6). The tomb at Troy represents the restoration of his due honour: the 'enemy' soil does not reject his corpse, but, like the hateful sword, plays its part in his reinstatement.

[6.5.1] There is no stage-property in *OT* which has a sustained meaning comparable with that of the sword of Ajax; and I shall simply pick out two or three which contribute in their place. At the very beginning, for instance, a crowd, probably consisting of old and young people, comes and sits before Oedipus' doors: they carry branches bound with bands of cloth (3; cf. 19f.), the sign of the suppliant. It is the gods they supplicate, but the visual picture, as Oedipus stands before them, inevitably suggests that it is him they pray to. The old priest of Zeus puts this delicately:

> I and these boys sit here as suppliants,
> not holding you as equal with the gods,
> but picking you as first of men in the
> events of life and dealings with the gods. (31–4)

Oedipus is not a god, but he is especially favoured, and among mortals he is the nearest to a god. This all contributes to the picture which is built up of him as the most blessed, most powerful and highest of men: all to be reversed to the opposite extreme before the tragedy is done.

[6.5.2] Even more ironic use is made of the cultic paraphernalia of suppliancy later, in the scene when Jocasta comes out (911ff.) to approach the various gods 'carrying wreaths and offerings' (912–13). First she turns to Apollo, whose altar is by the palace (919–23); and immediately, as though in answer to her supplication, the messenger from

Corinth enters [cf. 4.5.1]. His news – that Polybus of Corinth is dead – seems to be excellent; but he then goes on to divulge more information which serves to bring Oedipus much nearer the truth. The act which began so hopefully for Jocasta ends with her exit to death [7.5.4, 9.5.2]. It was Jocasta who in the previous act tried to undermine the authority of oracles from Apollo and of prophecy in general (705ff., 851ff.), and it is she who, when she hears the Corinthian's news, immediately responds 'All you prophecies from heaven, where are you now?' (946–7; cf. 973, 977ff.). Yet it is Jocasta who, as soon as she is in distress, goes through the motions of supplication to Apollo: so it is appropriate that the character who brings disaster much closer should arrive as an answer to her contradictory ritual. The chorus has just sung that *if* oracles are not fulfilled, then religion is dead (863–910): the reassurance is as prompt as the ritual is futile.

[6.5.3] A word on Oedipus' mask in the final scene. The actor must have changed his mask to one with dark eye-sockets with streams of blood running down from them. The messenger reports in gory detail how Oedipus jabs out his own eyes (1268ff.); and he is, as often, immediately followed by the revelation of the results of the events he has just been narrating (what German scholars have labelled an *Ecce-szene*). The sight of blood has a horrible fascination: it is yet more repellent and more fascinating when one has been told all about its shedding. The great variety of emotional range in the final scenes of *OT* (1297–523) is inaugurated by Sophocles' exploitation of the downright physical shock of Oedipus' bloody, empty eyes. When he is revealed there is a pause before he speaks, and during this the chorus responds to the dreadful sight (1297–306):

> Poor wretch, I cannot even bear to look at you;
> although there's much I want to ask,
> and much to hear, and much to stare at –
> how you make me shudder! (1303–6)

[6.6.1] *Phil* involves a stage property which is, perhaps, the most integrally incorporated of all material objects in the Greek tragedy we have: the bow of Heracles. This calls for a selective survey of the whole play, since the significance of the bow develops and deepens in the light of what is said and done in connection with it. In the opening scenes it is introduced under three aspects. First, it is ordained that Troy shall only fall to his bow (68–9, 113, 197–200) – that is why Odysseus and Neoptolemus are on Lemnos at all. Also, since its arrows unerringly hit the mark, it is Philoctetes' unconquerable defence against his enemies (75–8, 104–7) – that is why Neoptolemus must use deceit, and why Odysseus must not be seen. Third, as Neoptolemus and the chorus see, once they use their imagination enough to

hand there is nothing that the Furies can do, except to repeat their hideous travesty of a sacrificial hymn, and to continue their endless, homeless toils. There is stalemate. And Orestes' refusal to enter on a dialogue, bound in any case to be uncommunicating, captures the sterility of the conflict. There is not yet anything worth saying; it will take the institution of a trial to provide a means of fighting the issue out in words.

[7.4.1] There is a tableau-like nightmare element in Ajax's appearance (91–117). He stands madly exultant in the doorway while he talks to Athena, and Odysseus made magically invisible to Ajax cowers on one side. But in the next act there is a more sustained and yet more elaborately posed tableau (384–595), where Ajax is revealed among the slaughtered cattle. There all the signs of an *ekkuklēma* scene here (see p. 12), including the introductory signal:

> See, I open the doors. Now you may look
> upon his deeds, the man, and his condition. (346–7)

This gory *nature morte* captures with shocking, unalleviated directness the extent of Ajax's disaster. He sits there enmired with dishonour and despair; he cannot move without touching his disgrace. Troy has never seen his like and yet, as he sings at the very end of his lament, 'now I am thus prostrate in dishonour' (426–7). This is the welter from which Ajax must rise up and regain his stature. During this scene he does not, it seems, stand up; but before it is through he has decided on his course of action and begun to implement it [see 5.4.1]. He will go off to kill himself; but that is to rise only in order to fall. When he finally rises it is to be lifted on the shoulders of his funeral procession [cf. 4.4.4].

[7.4.2] Towards the end there is another tableau which is carefully posed and held still for a long time, for over 200 lines in fact. Tecmessa enters with her son (1168ff.) after Teucer's brawl with Menelaus, and he arranges them carefully by the body of Ajax.

> Boy, come here, and grasp in supplication
> the father who begot you; sit here as
> a suppliant, and hold fast in your hand
> a lock of my hair and hers and your own –
> a suppliant's treasure. (1171–5)

[For the cutting of the hair see 5.4.2.] For all the rest of the play the boy sits there and Tecmessa kneels or stands beside him. Sophocles carefully arranges the scene before Teucer leaves (1184), so that it may form a background to the choral song at 1185ff. The whole safety of his dependants still rests on Ajax and he is for them a kind of sacred object; they take asylum at the lifeless hulk and defy any man who

dares to risk sacrilege.[4] They protect the corpse (see 1180), and he in return protects them. Ajax proves big enough, even in death, to save them. So the tableau is not moved an inch until its efficacy is proved.

[7.4.3] Three times in *Ajax* the same cry of despair – *iō moi moi* (ah me, ah me!) – is heard from behind the scenes before the entry of a character. This cry echoes in the ear of the audience, pointing the course of the desolation of Ajax and his dependants. First it sounds from Ajax himself within his tent (333, 336), before he is revealed amidst the carnage [7.4.1 above]. Next it is heard when Tecmessa first discovers the body of Ajax (891, reiterated in the antistrophic stanza at 937); she is seen a moment later at 894.[5] For Tecmessa this is the fulfilment of her worst fears, she can see no hope. Finally, we hear Teucer also before he is first seen (974). He also is in despair; though even in the first rush of grief he thinks of Ajax's son (983ff.). Teucer is the man whose return was so keenly awaited in the first part of the play (342f., 562ff., 687ff., 826ff.; cf. 920–2): he is the lynchpin of Ajax's scheme. After his initial hopelessness, he will rise to the occasion. So, thrice in the see-saw movement of this play (see Athena at 131f.) a low point is marked by this off-stage knell.

[7.4.4] There are no outstanding dramatic silences in *Ajax*, but it may be worth noting two places where Tecmessa stands silent for a long time. Ajax tells her that silence is a woman's part (293; cf. 369, 579f., 587ff.). During the entire 'deception' speech she stands at his side. At first he speaks of her only in the third person (652f.), and at the end he gives her a final instruction:

> And you, woman, go and pray the gods
> they may fulfill the things my heart desires. (685–6)

She goes without a word. She does not understand what Ajax really means by this speech, and it would be out of place for anyone else to speak [see 8.4.1]. Secondly, she is a silent element in the supplication tableau at the end (see above). She is played by a mute actor, but there is, in any case, no place for her to speak at this stage. It is her part to act by not moving, to stand firm by Ajax. Contrast this positive silence with her passivity during Ajax's 'deception' speech.

[7.5.1] *OT* begins with a tableau. A crowd (probably the old priest and a group of boys, but the text of 16–19 is disputed) sit as suppliants at the altars before the palace of Oedipus. They must have entered, of course, but it looks as though, as in several other tragedies (e.g., Aesch. *Agam*), the entry happens before the play begins, so to speak. The audience realizes that it is to neglect the gathering and to imagine that the opening tableau has been in place for some time before the play begins. Oedipus then enters:

Whatever the differences, the similarities are too pressing, too close: the mind goes straight back to *Agam*. The blood feud is repeating itself, it is self-perpetuating. Despite the optimism which has run through *Cho*, especially in the last choral song at 935ff., this new realization of repetitiveness is quickly reflected in the ambivalence of the chorus' first reaction:

> For him who is still here suffering also begins to bloom . . . .
> One ordeal here today: another is still to come tomorrow.
> (1009, 1020)

Clytemnestra had gradually come to see the proven truth of the maxim 'the doer shall suffer' [*Agam* 1560ff., see 9.1.2]. Orestes much more quickly realizes the unfinality of his deed – 'I am pained at what has been done and suffered and my whole house: no one could envy this victory which brings pollution' (1016–17). This soon takes on a more direct form with his encroaching frenzy and his vision of the gathering Furies (1021ff.).

Yet there are still differences. Above all, Orestes has the express sanction of Apollo, and hence of Zeus. And this is brought out by a new – and therefore intrusive – visual element in the tableau in *Cho*. In one hand Orestes probably holds his sword (see *Eum*, 42), which marks him as like Clytemnestra: but in the other he has a suppliant's branch and wreath:

> And that is why you see me here, equipped
> with this branch bound with wool. I shall appeal
> to Apollo's sanctuary, a suppliant. . . . (1034–6)

Now we can see why Orestes ends the play, as he began it, still a homeless wanderer [see 4.2.2]. Clytemnestra ended *Agam* by going into the palace and taking over Agamemnon's power and possessions: Orestes sees that his difficulties are not finished with the achievement of the murder, indeed they have only just begun. The bloody hand and sword attract the Furies and drive Orestes from Argos. The suppliant's branch will take him to Delphi; and Delphi will refer him to Athens, where the chain of the vendetta will in the end find resolution. In a mirror scene any difference will stand out in the repeated surroundings; so in *Cho* the branch and wreath draw the eye as a signpost to the future.

[8.3.1] The mirror-scene I have picked out from *Eum* does not, like those in *Cho*, span the gap between plays and between generations; rather, it gains its effect from its very closeness. If I am right, against the usual view, that the chorus of Furies is not seen until it enters to sing its 'entry song' (*parodos*) at 143ff. [cf. 7.3.2],[5] then we should ask how it made its entry from the Pythian shrine (the *skēnē*). First note that the Furies wake up one by one – 'Wake up; and you wake her; and I wake you . . .' (140) – and next that their opening pair of stanzas is split into short syntactical units, which could easily be distributed among individuals or small groups. This suggests that the Furies did not enter in a block formation, as most choruses did as they came up the *eisodos*, but that they emerged from the door one by one or in small disordered groups. This would make an effective revelation after the horrific reports and sounds [7.3.2] which have led up to this moment. The pouring out of the entry and the 'disarranged' choreography of their song would make the most of their black, inhuman costumes and their masks with their snake-hair and eyes dripping blood and pus (see *Cho*, 1048–50, 1058; *Eum*, 46ff.). It so happens that there is a story in the ancient *Life of Aeschylus*: 'Some say that in his presentation of *Eumenides* Aeschylus brought on the chorus in a scatter (*sporadēn*), and so alarmed the people that children fainted and women aborted.' While we should not for a moment credit this anecdote, since much of the ancient biography of early poets was merely sensational fiction, it is, nonetheless, evidence that at some point in the stage-history of *Eum* the chorus was brought on *sporadēn*; and this may well be the way Aeschylus himself handled it.

The horror of the swarming first entry of the chorus is not discarded, but is, I suggest, re-aroused on their re-entry at Athens at 244ff. It is not likely that this re-entry was made in formation; surely they once again came on in scattered groups which will have been reflected in the 'disordered' choreography of the astrophic lyric 254ff. They are, after all, hounds following a trail of blood which they have tracked over land and sea [4.3.1]. This time they come on from a side *eisodos* and not from the *skēne* doors; but all the same the scenic reduplication is obvious. The audience rarely saw choral entries out of formation (up to three other instances survive) – and in this play they see it twice. The point is that the Furies' pursuit of Orestes is relentless; they dog him wherever on earth he may go. This is conveyed the more vividly and inescapably if the re-entry visually mirrors their earlier blood-chilling entry, which in turn resumes in the flesh their first invisible invasion back in *Cho* ('they come in swarms', *Cho*, 1057). All this could not contrast more tellingly with the ordered solemnity of the Eumenides' final procession to the security of a new home at the end of the trilogy [see 4.3.4].

[8.4.1] *Ajax* is made round two great speeches, the so-called 'deception' speech at 646–92 and the death speech at 815–65. Both times Ajax, with his sword [6.4.1], holds the stage; the first time Tecmessa and the chorus are in the background, the second time he is completely alone. But while there is some hint of a mirror scene which might be made clearer in performance, the thing which makes the two speeches a

pair is, above all, their formal positioning. The first speech is all that comes in between two choral songs (596–645, 693–718); so it is an entire act to itself, and no-one else speaks during the act. This structural technique, while it has some analogy in Aeschylus, is unique in later tragedy. It has the effect of framing the speech as a monolithic unit and of singling it out as a prominent set-piece. The second set-piece is even more strongly isolated and spotlighted, obviously enough; for Sophocles goes to the unusual lengths of sending the chorus off and of changing the scene in order that the speech, like its speaker, may stand entirely by itself.

The death speech shows Ajax at his greatest – brave, forthright, determined. Now, during the performance of the deception speech the audience cannot know that they will soon hear this contrasting companion speech; but does the second speech call in turn for some reconsideration of the earlier one? But before attempting any answer we must look at the deception speech without foreknowledge of its sequel. This speech is one of the great problems of Sophocles, and anything anyone says about it is bound to be controversial; nevertheless I shall start by ruling out some of the explanations which have been proffered. Some say, for instance, that Ajax has gone mad again; but there is no explicit sign of this and it would have no point in the play as a whole: the speech is eminently sane and cannot be so facilely discounted. Others claim that he really has changed his mind about committing suicide. But again this would be totally inconsequential; also it does not do justice to the ambiguities in the speech, particularly towards the end, which indicate that Ajax is still set on death. Nor can we, I think, accept a more plausible and widely accepted account (well-formulated by both Reinhardt and Knox) that, while Ajax recognizes the validity of his observations for the rest of the world, he excepts himself from their application. Not only does this go against our intuitive reponse that Ajax should be committed to the insights he so sublimely expresses; but he also repeatedly applies what he is saying to himself with connectives like 'I too . . .' or 'I therefore . . .' (see 650, 661, 666, 677). The speech is destroyed if these are twisted to be ironic. Above all at 684ff. he does not say 'but in these matters all will be well for *others*, but I . . .', he says, 'but in these matters all will be well [sc. for me], but you, wife, . . . and companions'. Whatever it is that Ajax is saying about time and change in this speech, it must apply to *himself*.

The usual question critics ask is 'Does Ajax mean to deceive his wife and friends by this speech?' I am not sure how far this arises: the question is, rather, 'Does Sophocles mean to deceive his audience?' It is certainly the case that Tecmessa and the chorus are, as a matter of fact, misled, because the speech may be taken to mean that Ajax has changed his mind and decided to live. The chorus is inspired to sing a wild song of relief and joy (693ff.); and Tecmessa says later

> For now I see my husband has deceived me,
> rejected from my old favour with him. (807–8)

Their mistake is a source of tension and pathos, and is also necessary for Sophocles' shaping of the play. Ajax must die alone and there must be time for Teucer to find him and gather his determination before the other Greeks learn of his death. But does the *audience* share their misprision? Surely not. The whole scene from 333 to 595, especially 430ff. puts it beyond all doubt that Ajax is going to kill himself [cf. 5.4.1]. Any spectator who wavers in this conclusion is warned by the absence of any direct declaration to the contrary and by the sustained ambiguities of the speech; and he is finally confirmed by the double meaning of the final lines 685–92 which clearly show his determination to die. For the audience, unlike Tecmessa and the chorus, it cannot be the *suicide* which is at issue. Allowing, then, that whatever it is that Ajax is dwelling on it is not the issue of whether or not he will kill himself, what is he talking about?

It is not, I suggest, by chance that this speech is the subject of such disagreement and confusion among scholars: for Sophocles means it to be a kind of conundrum, and he supplies no obvious or unequivocal solution, not yet. The clue is the concern with *time*, with the long-term view of the world; for this is the preoccupation which has been added to Ajax's concerns of before 595. It is established in the first line ('Long time incalculable . . .') and is carried on throughout the speech. Ajax is not talking about his immediate course of action - that is irrevocably decided – he is talking about the longer future, about all time. An alert member of the audience should at least get this far in reading the puzzle.

Why not take the opening words of the speech at face value, always remembering that Ajax had decided to die?

> Long time incalculable brings to flower
> what was obscure and perishes the blooms.
> Nothing is out of the question: strong oaths
> even and rigid wills are overturned.
> Thus I was marvellous tough not long ago,
> like tempered steel, but now my edge is softened
> by this woman. And pity will not let me
> bereave her and the boy among my foes. (646–53)

What I suggest is that Ajax's new appreciation of the action of time gives him a new view of his death: he sees that it is the best thing for

the others as well as for himself. In the previous scenes he was only concerned about himself: now he pities his wife and child. This makes no difference to his decision to die, but enables him to see it in a different and deeper perspective. Even Ajax, the intractable, has learned to soften. He now sees that not only is he as inevitably subject to change as the seasons, as night and day (669ff.), but that the process may benefit both himself and those he pities. Far from excepting himself from these insights, he sees himself as a mighty exemplar of them – as he is. The lesson he draws is 'And so we must learn to be temperate' (677). This is not ironic. Ajax has learned to be 'temperate' by seeing that even he is subject to the changes of time. Furthermore he sees that the reversal will come both to him *after* his death and to those he leaves behind alive.

Let me at this point do what the audience cannot do: look at what lies later in the play and read it back into this speech. The point is that everything Ajax says here about the shiftiness of the world is confirmed, and it is true of himself *after his death*. His honour, the fate of his corpse and hence of his dependants, will be subject to the gods and will require the acquiescence of Agamemnon. He will depend on others. Odysseus, his enemy, will stand up for him and be acknowledged by Teucer as a friend. I am saying, in effect, that Ajax foresees in outline what will happen after his death; he foresees the last part of the play, so to speak. That is why he finishes:

> For I now take the path that I must tread.
> Do as I say, and shortly you will find
> perhaps that, though low now, I have been saved. (690–2)

I am *not* suggesting that this interpretation of the deception speech is clear at the time of its delivery. Though a shrewd spectator might well have an inkling, the speech becomes clear, rather, in the light of events and it falls into place in retrospect. Sophocles sets the puzzle – if this is not about the suicide what is it about? He gives the speech a prominent place in the articulation of the play and expresses it in such powerful poetry because he wants his audience to concentrate, to dwell on it and to recall it. And the crucial revaluation may come, as I hinted initially, with the death speech. From its very beginning Ajax is decided, and he sets about his death in the manner of a man who has known all along what he is doing. What does this single-mindedness tell us about his earlier insights into cosmic mutability? It is now, I suggest, when death is so imminent and inexorable, that the audience sees beyond doubt that Ajax must have been reflecting on the future, on the world he is about to leave behind. For he must, of course, stay the same if he is to benefit from change. This realization

leads the audience right into the final third of the play which is thus given deep roots in what has passed earlier.

The 'deception' speech has prepared us to look for the effects of time and change, to look for the way they have enabled Ajax to pity his dear ones and the way they might lead to his salvation. 'You will find . . . I have been saved.' By becoming temperate (677, see above) Ajax has made his peace with the gods and that is why he is able to spend much of his death speech at 815ff. in prayer. We remember the words with which Athena closed the prologue (132–3): 'The gods love the temperate and hate the wicked.' At the time we supposed that by the 'wicked', she meant Ajax: now he is temperate we think again. The last third of the play will make it clear who are the 'wicked' in *Ajax*.

I do not deny that I am proposing highly unusual dramatic technique: that a whole crucial scene is deliberately left unclear and unresolved and that its full sense only emerges in retrospect. The nearest analogy may be the Agamemnon scene in Aeschylus [6.1.1]. Sophocles would be requiring flexibility and perspicacity from his audience, and he is running the risk of creating confusion and misunderstanding (and the disagreement among critics might be taken to show that his boldness does no succeed). But this does at least do justice to the balance between these two great central speeches.[6]

[8.5.1] *OT* does not include, so far as I can see, any outstanding mirror scene. There are many patterns and recurrences [see e.g., 4.5.1, 4.5.3, 6.5.2], but none is especially accentuated by visual doubling. This may be because the whole play hinges on Oedipus' discovery that he is the mirror-reverse of all he seemed to be: the most powerful, blessed and wise of men is found to be the most accursed, the outcast, the most ignorant [cf. 9.5.3]. The whole play is the reversal, and the movement is too sustained, perhaps, to allow any particular stage of the reversal to be thus highlighted. Perhaps the nearest thing to a mirror scene is Oedipus' appearance at 1297ff. as contrasted with his entries at lines 1 and 216 [see 7.5.1 and 7.5.2]. Oedipus once more stands in the palace doorway to make a formal appearance before his people. But the polarity lies in the whole situation, not in any particular visual reflection.

[8.6.1] Philoctetes contains, on the other hand, a particularly prominent and important mirror scene. It is a sad commentary on the neglect of the visual dimension of Greek tragedy that it has been overlooked until recently, for the detailed visual repetition is reinforced by verbal echo, and its significance is clearly signalled. At 974 Neoptolemus is on the point of giving back the bow. Philoctetes' speech at 927ff. has struck home [see 7.6.4]. Once he realizes this, Philoctetes presses his point:

there begins a new lyric dialogue structure (916–1020) in which choral stanzas are interwoven with chanted anapaests from Athena. While Athena lays down the foundations of the new cult, the Furies, now Eumenides, far from repeating implacable threats, enlarge with fertile variety on the blessings that they will bring Athens. Once more, and the most important time in the *Oresteia*, a movement has been made from stubborn partiality and blindness to a new rewarding vision. And this time there is no distortion, no qualification, no interruption: the play flows on with a wealth of benediction to its final secure procession [cf 4.3.4].

> Follow us, you august goddesses,
> gracious and beneficent to our land,
> follow by the light of fiery torches
> rejoicing on your way.
> Raise the cry of joy in refrain to our song. (1040–3)

[9.4.1] It is incredible, and yet typical, that the fact that *Ajax* is divided into two parts has so often been treated as though it were some accident or miscalculation, when Sophocles has constructed this division so carefully and deliberately, and when the relation between the two halves is so clearly one of his chief artistic concerns.

If one had to tie the divide to a particular moment then it would have to be the death of Ajax at 865; but it would be a mistake to be so precise. Ajax's last speech (815–65) is at once the last act of the first part and the first act of the latter part, something which becomes clear if we consider the structural sequence. At 814 the scene is suddenly and completely cleared [cf. 4.4.3]. Then Ajax enters alone with his sword, and it is at once clear that the scene has moved to the lonely places by the shore. His speech, while it is the climax and resolution of what has gone before [cf. 8.4.1], all looks forward – above all his prayer to Zeus on the fate of his corpse [824ff., cf. 6.4.1 where some of it is quoted]. The speech is, in a way, a second *prologue*, just as the re-entry of the chorus at 866ff. is a kind of second entry song (in Greek *epiparodos*). Between that and line 1226 there are no less than six entries of major named characters, and Sophocles thus gives the impression of a series of important people arriving and gathering at the scene of Ajax's death. This is achieved by some clever management of the three speaking actors and by some bold structural technique (especially bold if, as is often supposed, this is an early play).

Teucer enters after the '*epiparodos*' at 975, and thus opens a new act in the usual way. Tecmessa's re-entry (893), however, has already been worked into the preceding song; and her lament has also been incorporated by means of the device, not uncommon in later tragedy, of making the act-dividing song into a lyric dialogue. First there are some introductory lines (866–78) during which the chorus re-enters in two parts from opposite sides, searching for Ajax, rather as Odysseus tracked him at the very beginning [cf. 4.4.1, also compare Teucer at 994ff.]. There follows a long and complex lyric structure (879–973) which basically takes the form of a single strophic pair. Each pair has three parts; (a) 874–90 = 925–36, purely choral; (b) 891–914 = 937–60 lyric dialogue between the chorus and Tecmessa (enters at 891ff.); (c) 915–24 = 961–73, a spoken lament by Tecmessa.[3] By these means Tecmessa has found the corpse and entered and given her grief sufficient scope all within the structure of the act-dividing song. Now Teucer can enter, and now there is nothing objectionable in the way that he immediately sends Tecmessa off (985–9 – she does not speak again in the play): it is now Teucer's turn to hold the stage. His lament (992–1039) dwells firstly on the disasters that Ajax's death spells for him, himself; but his observations on the sword [cf. 6.4.1] lead him towards an insight into some larger shaping of events, and he is then prepared to face the inevitable threats of Ajax's enemies.

The arrivals of the chorus, Tecmessa, and Teucer bring friends first to the body of Ajax, as he had prayed in 826ff. ('so that some enemy might not descry me first'). The first of the enemies is Menelaus at 1040ff. He is the meanest and most petty of the heroes whose little world Ajax has abandoned. He is only too eager to kick a man who is down: to harm or dishonour a corpse was the kind of action which the Greeks (as opposed to moderns) really did call *hybris* (cf. 1092, 1151).[4] Menelaus' rhetoric is sly and low; and Teucer, who is no Ajax, is reduced to his level of argument. The scene ends with them bandying vulgar Aesopic tales (1142ff.). Menelaus goes off for reinforcements, but the act does not quite end there. In a curious, separated tailpiece (1163–84) Teucer arranges the suppliancy tableau with the boy and Tecmessa [cf. 7.4.2]. He then goes, and a choral act-dividing song follows.

[9.4.2] In this song (1185–222) the chorus curse war, wish for an end to it, and finish with a longing to escape back home to Attica. This is all a foil to the harsh reality: immediately Teucer returns (1223), just in time to intercept the approach of Agamemnon. Teucer's exit and return are in realistic terms unnecessary, but Sophocles' point seems to be to isolate the pathetic tableau which forms a background to the choral song, and to bring about the tense flurry of movement which opens the next act. Agamemnon is little better than his brother, and Teucer, though desperately courageous, again cannot lift himself above the low level of dispute. A kind of mean, carping deadlock is reached: what is needed is some sort of transcendent wisdom. That wisdom is provided by the last of this long series of entries, that of

Odysseus [1316ff., cf. 4.4.2]. Odysseus learned the lesson of the prologue, and he has something of the insight into time and change which is memorably expressed in Ajax's 'deception' speech:

> *Od*: He was my foe, yes, but he was still noble.
> *Ag*: What? Why such respect for an enemy corpse?
> *Od*: Because his worth far outdoes enmity.
> *Ag*: Men like you make man unreliable.
> *Od*: Many who are now friends will be reversed. (1355–9)

Ajax and Achilles (cf. 1340f.) may to some extent stand outside the shifts of the world, but those who wish to live must also let live. So, through Odysseus' insight, the play reaches its tragic 'happy ending'.

The last third of the play by no means balances the first two-thirds: the world without Ajax is a smaller meaner place. But, as the first part shows that he was too big for this world, so the rest shows how the world must adjust to his departure. Ajax was a great man, even in death, and the lesser world he leaves behind should acknowledge his stature. *Ajax* is not only the tragedy of the death of a hero, but also of the life of a heroic world. To explore this conjunction to the full, Sophocles composed a play in two parts.

[9.5.1] The greater part of *OT*, up to Oedipus' discovery of the truth (1–1185), consists of five acts of increasing and then decreasing length. The longest, central act is that in which Oedipus is first with Creon and then with Jocasta (513–862). The length of the act is to some extent broken up by a divided strophic pair of lyric dialogue stanzas at 649–68 = 678–97, and these snatches of lyric also provide an overlapping transition between Jocasta, who enters just before the first (at 631ff.), and her brother, who goes immediately before the second (677). This transition in mid-act also marks an important change in the direction of the play. During the scene with Creon Oedipus still has no clues towards solving his problem – or none that he recognizes as such – and he vents his frustrated urge to progress in vain suspicion and irritation, as he had in the Tiresias scene. Jocasta, however, quickly gives this aimless energy a new direction when she unwittingly supplies a lead. At 707ff. in an attempt to discredit seers and oracles she mentions in passing that Laius was murdered 'at the junction of three tracks', and this takes Oedipus by way of his urgent interrogation to the near-certainty that he was the murderer of Laius, the damned victim of his own pronouncements [cf. 5.5.1]. In the course of the act Oedipus has moved from domineering confidence to distraught anxiety. The play comes close to a premature ending, an ending unfortunate enough, but nothing compared to the full truth. The denouement is held back merely by a lingering inconsistency in an eye-witness report (see 836ff.). This is small comfort, but it is enough to restrain the final moves of a half-true ending, and to allow the question of the killer of Laius to be replaced by the problem of Oedipus' origins. Sophocles has split the quest into two stages, and now leaves this first track unpursued until it eventually fits into place in the larger fateful map, the chart of the truth.

[9.5.2] Ever since Aristotle the plot construction of *OT* has, quite rightly, been praised. But typical of Aristotle's discussion is the sentence 'In the action there should be nothing contrary to reason; or if there is it should be outside the play itself, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus*.' This somewhat pedestrian and unfortunately influential concern with circumstantial probability (*eikos*) is not altogether obviously appropriate to this plot which depends on several improbable coincidences. Just as it was a coincidence that on leaving Delphi Oedipus should at a lonely place meet Laius on his way to Delphi and that he should then go on to Thebes, so it is coincidentally neat that Polybus should die and the messenger from Corinth arrive at this particular juncture. It is even more crucially coincidental that the messenger from Corinth should be the very man who received the baby on Cithaeron, and that the old man who was eye-witness to the murder should also be the man who took the baby to Cithaeron (118ff., 756ff., 834ff., 1051ff.). In mundane terms these are the most extraordinary, disastrous chances, yet they all add up to a pattern – a pattern known all along to the gods – which makes only too much sense. It could be argued that Sophocles means these 'improbabilities' to go unnoticed. But perhaps not. Certainly we are meant to notice the way that the Corinthian arrives in answer to the prayer of Jocasta [see 6.5.2]. The ultimate shaping of events looks like mere random coincidence to man until he can look back on it. Oedipus is right to see himself as the 'child of Fortune' (1080, see below), but he is too quick to suppose Fortune is kind.

Once again, as with Jocasta and the 'three tracks', the Corinthian supplies a new lead in a well-intentioned reassurance against unpleasant oracles (989ff.). Oedipus' life has included a series of such well-intentioned interventions which all lead towards disaster. Oedipus presses on with increasing urgency until he reaches a state of high elation. At the beginning of this act Jocasta describes how Oedipus 'stirs his emotions to too high a pitch with all sorts of anxiety' (914–15): but here he is at the end:

> Let the storm break for all I care, I still
> want to spy out my birth, however mean.
> She has a woman's pride, and it may be
> she is ashamed at my ignoble birth.
> I count myself the child of Fortune, Fortune
> the bountiful: and that is no disgrace.