

Introduction

– τίς τὰρ ὄδ’ ἄλλος Ἀχαιὸς ἀνὴρ ἧὺς τε μέγας τε
 ἕξοχος Ἀργείων κεφαλὴν τε καὶ εὐρέας ὤμους;
 τὸν δ’ Ἑλένη τανύπεπλος ἀμείβετο, δία γυναικῶν·
 – οὗτος δ’ Αἴας ἐστὶ πελώριος ἔρκος Ἀχαιῶν.

Γ 226–9

Who is this noble and huge man that surpasses the Argives with his head and wide shoulders? Like Priam, I have always been seized by wonder, when encountering Ajax. Helen answers: ‘This is the mighty Ajax, bulwark of the Achaeans’. It is a succinct answer that she gives, but one that is characteristic of Ajax’s portrayal in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The Homeric poems are our earliest extant literary source mentioning Ajax, son of Telamon. Although the hero plays a central role in several important episodes in the *Iliad*, he himself remains somehow shrouded in mystery, as if Zeus refused to dispel the darkness surrounding him. No matter how memorable his Iliadic moments are, nothing really happens to him in the poem. Yes, he fights a duel against Hector, he appeals to Achilles, he desperately defends the Greeks’ ships, and he even rescues Patroclus’ body. But what constitutes his personal story? What is his background?

In the *Odyssey*, what we learn about Ajax is, by contrast, as crucial as it is condensed. In the *Nέκυια*, when Odysseus meets the hero in Hades, we understand that he died at Troy.¹ The encounter is short but unforgettable, as the angry soul of Ajax proudly refuses to speak to Odysseus. For the first time, we get the sense that the hero also had his own story. His behaviour, however, is difficult to understand with the limited information provided by the Homeric poems alone. Ajax’s great silence may be more sublime than any word,² but, for all that, it is not very instructive.

Odysseus briefly alludes to the events that provoked Ajax’s anger, and apparently led to his death:

οἷη δ’ Αἴαντος ψυχὴ Τελαμωνιάδαο
 νόσφιν ἀφροσθήκει, κεχολωμένη εἶνεκα νίκης,

¹ λ 543–64. This can also be inferred from ω 15–8.

² [Longinus] *Subl.* 9.3.

τὴν μιν ἐγὼ νίκησα δικάζόμενος παρὰ νηυσὶν 545
 τεύχεσιν ἄμφ' Ἀχιλλῆος· ἔθηκε δὲ πότνια μήτηρ,
 παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.
 ὡς δὴ μὴ ὄφελον νικᾶν τοιῶιδ' ἐπ' ἀέθλωι.
 τοίην γὰρ κεφαλὴν ἔνεκ' αὐτῶν γαῖα κατέσχευε,
 Αἴανθ', ὃς περὶ μὲν εἶδος, περὶ δ' ἔργα τέτυκτο 550
 τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ' ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα.

Only the soul of Ajax, son of Telamon, kept its distance, angered because of the victory I had won when next to the ships I disputed with him over Achilles' arms. His revered mother had set them up as prize, and the sons of the Trojans judged the matter, as well as Pallas Athena. If only I had not won, given the contest was such. For because of those arms, the earth covered such a man as Ajax, who was the best, in his beauty and in his deeds, of all the Danaans, after the blameless son of Peleus.

λ 543–51

But the account is fragmentary. We can only reconstruct a very basic storyline which forms the following sequence: (1) Thetis organizes a competition for Achilles' arms; (2) the Trojans and Athena are the judges; (3) Odysseus wins; (4) Ajax is angry; (5) Ajax dies in circumstances that are linked to Odysseus' victory; (6) Ajax bears a grudge against Odysseus even in death.

There is no hint that Ajax committed suicide, no indication of the manner in which Athena and the Trojans judged the matter, no allusion to a debate,³ nor to Ajax's madness, but the passage would have nevertheless been perfectly intelligible to a contemporary audience. The popularity of the hero's *gesta* can already be witnessed from the end of the eighth century, as his suicide and his rescue of Achilles' body are popular themes in early archaic art. This is evidenced on a wide range of objects (pots, shield bands, seals, reliefs) from origins spanning from Samos to Magna Graecia, including the Peloponnese and the Saronic Gulf. Odysseus' lacunary phrasing, therefore, is probably meant to invite the audience to engage with his account and contrast it with the traditional version(s) of Ajax's death that were current at the time.⁴ This, in turn, would have made the rhetorical

³ Although the participle *δικαζόμενος* could imply that Odysseus pleaded his case, it does not necessarily follow that the matter was judged through a rhetorical *ἀγών*. A quarrel arose between Odysseus and Ajax regarding the awarding of Achilles' arms when the former claimed the prize, a quarrel which was then settled by the verdict of the Trojans and Athena.

⁴ On the relationship between tradition and reception in the Homeric poems, see Budelmann and Haubold 2008: 19–23. As they rightly note, both words are flexible, and should be deployed on a case-by-case basis. My own usage throughout this study is rather simple. I employ tradition in relation to the horizon of expectation implied by the object I discuss. Any given material is considered to be traditional if it has become influential enough to shape the horizon of expectations of the primary audience receiving the given object. As for reception, it is used to describe the action of using (that is incorporating, adapting, alluding to, etc.) traditional material in a given work.

strategy and underlying agenda of Odysseus in the passage more conspicuous, thereby enriching the aesthetic experience offered by the poem.⁵

One very straightforward implication follows from this observation. Given that the Homeric poems were apparently composed for an audience which was expected to be familiar with the larger tradition of the Trojan War (at the very least), acquiring a better comprehension of the pre-Homeric Ajax should contribute to refining our understanding of his character in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁶ However, the benefits are obviously not limited to the Homeric poems. When Pindar addresses the members of his audience at *Isthmian* 4.35–6b, he explicitly states that he expects them to know the story of Ajax's suicide:

ἴστε μάν	35
Αἴαντος ἀλκάν φοίνιον, τὰν ὀψία	35b
ἐν νυκτὶ ταμῶν περὶ ᾧ φασγάνῳ μομφὰν ἔχει	
παίδεσσιν Ἑλλάνων ὅσοι Τροίανδ' ἔβαν.	36b
Surely you know Ajax's blood-dyed strength, which he cut short late at night with his sword, bringing blame on all the sons of the Greeks who went to Troy.	

By and large, it appears that throughout the classical period, pre-Homeric material still strongly shaped the horizon of expectation of a Greek audience, although their widespread diffusion seems to have gradually shrunk, the more authoritative the figure of Homer became.⁷ A good indicator, perhaps, of the culmination of this process is the creation of the first scholia which reflects the increasing need for information about the context.

⁵ Foley 1991: 1–60; 1999: 13–34; Allan 2005: 14; Graziosi and Haubold 2005; Burgess 2006: 154; Kelly 2007: 5–17. Currie (2012: 185, 192) argues in favour of a model in which it is possible to distinguish between primary and secondary texts, as he considers that '[t]o think exclusively in terms of mythological intertextuality or traditional referentiality may be to limit unduly the possibilities of this poetic tradition'. I doubt that it is possible to systematically ascertain this type of relationship between early Greek hexameter poems in the current state of evidence. I prefer the term traditional referentiality to that of intertextuality, allusion, or (creative) imitation, because it qualifies a weaker degree of relation, and does not necessarily presuppose the existence of written texts. It accounts for allusions within an oral framework (Danek 2002: 5). As Rutherford (2012: 154–5) notes, '[e]ven in oral traditions the form of one particular poem, even if not wholly and permanently fixed, may still be stable enough over a given period of time to become recognisable for an audience, and thus to be the object of allusion or creative imitation'.

⁶ Scodel (1997) is right to note that the knowledge of the traditions that are assumed in the Homeric poems would not have been equally shared among the members of the audience, and it is also true that the plot of the poems is easily followed with little or no prior exposure to these traditions. However, it does not follow that the external references made in the poem are mere artifice used to create a sense of intimacy between the poet and the audience, instead of being genuine cases in which the prior knowledge of the audience is solicited. As Danek (2002: 4) argues, the capacity for a work of art to be able to please both the naive and the experienced audience is 'something which applies to every kind of good literature'.

⁷ One advantage inherent to the use of mythical material lies in the fact that 'the attention of the audience is immediately focused on novelties of detail, the particular interpretation which the artist is putting on his subject' (Griffin 1986: 4).

When receiving a mythical character like Ajax as a modern audience, we thus find ourselves in a difficult position. A great amount of information has been lost to us, and what has come down is inevitably partial. Each act of reception has added a filter through which we must look in order to see the object of our study. As Bloom argues, ‘Poetic Influence... always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet’;⁸ and, therefore, with Fry, ‘once the belated text is written by a strong poet, we can never read the precursor text the same way again... [The] strong misreading of the precursor text is so powerful, in other words, that it becomes our own strong misreading’.⁹ Consequently, the conception we have of many mythical characters is often the fruit of a syncretism between (sometimes competing) paradigms that have been diachronically constituted. As a result, the later characterizations of one hero are often forcefully read into his earlier paradigms, and this can lead to misinterpretation.¹⁰ This is the main problem that arises when studying the reception of Telamonian Ajax, as we will have the occasion to see in the course of this book.

This book is the first monograph which offers a complete overview of the development of Ajax’s myth through a systematic study of his reception in archaic and classical Greece.¹¹ The methodology I have developed is a blend of Jauss’s ‘Reception Aesthetics’, and simple Saussurian linguistic principles.¹² Drawing upon Jauss’s theory, I place importance on the (ideal) first and secondary audiences of the works I analyse, on the horizon of expectations pre-supposed in them, and on the historical context within which they have been produced.¹³ In addition to this, I owe to Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* the emphasis I put on the

⁸ Bloom 1997 [1973]: 30. It may seem odd that I refer here to Bloom’s theory of influence, since the methodology I use is influenced by Reception Aesthetics. I do not share, for instance, the evaluative dimension of Bloom’s views. However, this issue bears little weight on my present endeavour: what constitutes the corpus of influential works from archaic and classical Greece regarding Ajax has been shaped by the accidents of transmission.

⁹ Fry 2012: 184. Needless to say that one is entitled to equate ‘a strong misreading’ to a ‘reinterpretation’.

¹⁰ For instance, the motif of Achilles’ vulnerable heel only appears in Hellenistic times, and it is consequently erroneous to interpret the Iliadic passage in which Achilles is wounded (*Φ* 166–7) as the departure from a tradition known to the poet(s) of the *Iliad*. See Burgess 1995.

¹¹ Currently, Touchefeu (1981), in spite of her focus on iconographical representations, and Gantz (1993: 629–34) offer the most complete diachronic overview on the myth of Telamonian Ajax. Studies tend to focus on one single work or on the production of one single author, which means that external references usually serve the interpretation of the work (or body of works) in question. For instance, Trapp (1961) focuses on the hero’s portrayal in the *Iliad*, while Calabrese de Feo (1984) concentrates on his representation in the poems of Pindar. Hesk (2003) and Finglass (2011)—one in a monograph, the other in a commentary on the *Ajax*—both address the question of Sophocles’ sources, but their treatment of the material is understandably short, and hence inevitably superficial. Fitch (1924) does broach the question of the relationship between Homer’s and Pindar’s Ajax, but he mainly does so to argue that Pindar’s conception of Homer was broader than ours, and included any early Greek hexameter poem based on the larger tradition of the Trojan War.

¹² Foley (1991: 19–22) provides a neat overview of how Saussurian linguistics provides a useful framework about traditions (in his case oral ones) and their evolution.

¹³ Jauss 1982a; 1982b. For a useful summary of Jauss’s theory and the problems it entails, cf. Nauta 1994.

fundamental distinction between synchrony (*l'étude des états*), and diachrony (*l'étude des évolutions*), as well as on the manner in which these two perspectives complement one another.

Accordingly, I first establish the hero's defining attributes, and identify the constituent episodes of his *gesta* in early Greek hexameter poetry. This means that I seek to distinguish the features that appear to have formed the core of his identity for an archaic audience, by comparing the various elements of his character in the poetry and art of the period. This preliminary analysis serves as the basis of further investigations, in which I examine how Ajax's myth evolved in the course of its various receptions within the microcosm of different Greek *πόλεις*, in all kinds of media, such as literature, art, or cultic practice. Each work in which the hero features is put under close scrutiny, with a view to grasping the factors that influenced the development of his myth. I give special attention to the historical and socio-cultural circumstances in which each particular work was produced, as well as to its genre, or to the contemporary beliefs that were held concerning Ajax. It is my premise that the manner in which Ajax is portrayed is intimately connected to the reason(s) that motivated the use of his figure (when it can be traced). It follows from this view that understanding the history of the hero's reception is essential in order to appreciate fully his treatment in a given piece, and, by the same token, some of the central aspects of the works in which he features. Since the material I cover in this study is rather heterogeneous, I shall be more specific about the methodology I use in the introduction to each of the three chapters that constitute this study. For the same reason, listing the various findings I make through this study here would be a rather redundant exercise.

In the first chapter, I consider the portrayal of Ajax in early Greek hexameter poetry as well as in art. I begin my analysis by assessing the different traits pertaining to the hero that are often considered to come from a Mycenaean heritage. I then proceed to delineate the constitutive elements that formed Ajax's *gesta* in pre-Homeric traditions by gathering and analysing all the secondary sources that report some aspects of his treatment in early Greek hexameter poems, as well as by looking at visual representations of the hero. At the same time, I discuss how these elements may have been received and adapted in the Homeric poems.

In the second chapter, I examine how the hero has been portrayed in Aeginetan cultural production in the context of the Persian Wars and of Atheno-Aeginetan rivalry, focusing in particular on the corpus of poems composed by Pindar and Bacchylides for Aeginetan patrons. The reception of the epic figure of Ajax in Aegina is influenced by two main factors: one internal and one external. On the one hand, the Aeginetans considered their island to be the symbolic homeland of all the Aeacidae, including Telamon and Ajax. This means that an important part of their identity was constructed around their link with this family of heroes, and that Pindar and Bacchylides necessarily had to take this fact into account when

writing for Aeginetan patrons. On the other hand, the Greeks' naval victory at Salamis conferred on Ajax a new political dimension in the Panhellenic community, as he became associated with the battle, thereby influencing the way the hero was perceived both within and without Aegina.

In the final chapter, I look into the reception of Ajax in Athens. The material reviewed ranges from the early sixth century to the end of the classical period. During this extended period of time, Athens undergoes many fundamental changes which are reflected in the attitude of its citizens towards Ajax, and in the manner in which they relate to him. Consequently, I have divided it into three sections reflecting consecutive periods of Athenian history: the time of the tyranny, the early years of the democracy (up to the start of the First Peloponnesian War in 460 BCE), and finally the Second Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) with its aftermath. For each of these periods, I closely examine the mechanisms of Ajax's reception in relation to the mutations of Athenian society. In so doing, I take a new look at the question of Ajax's entry in the Catalogue of Ships, analyse the fragments of Aeschylus' plays about the hero, and shed new light on Sophocles' *Ajax*, amongst other things.

In addition to constraints of time and space, I have restricted this study to the archaic and classical eras primarily because these are the periods in which Ajax's myth undergoes its most important genetic changes, which remain largely fixed in its subsequent reception. By this, I mean that the hero's subsequent portrayals fail to reconfigure his myth so as to create a new paradigm. They are variations on existing motifs rather than fundamentally different representations. Even though Ajax does feature, for instance, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or in Quintus of Smyrna's *Post-Homerica*, these texts reinforce, and in the case of the *Metamorphoses* popularize, a pre-existing model.¹⁴

¹⁴ As one would expect, Ovid is innovative in his retelling of the *δπλων κρίσις* in terms of his use of sources and language, but the Ajax he portrays is nonetheless similar to his fifth-century models. We find some rather original treatments of Ajax in works by late authors such as Philostratus, Dio Chrysostom, Dictys Cretensis, Dares Phrygius, or John Malalas. Dictys and Dares were particularly influential during the Middle Ages, as they constituted the main source available on the 'matter of Troy'. Most medieval romances or chronicles are based on them, until Homer is rediscovered during the Renaissance (Beschornier 1992: 2–5). However, even though these works present some factual differences in their treatment of the myth of Ajax (for instance, he does not commit suicide, but is found dead, apparently murdered, in the *De excidio Troiae historia* of Dares Phrygius), the figure of the hero himself remains essentially unchanged: he still is a brave and upright warrior who is undone by the guile and lack of moral principles of lesser men.