



1946

Dramatic Unity in the Ajax of Sophocles

Edward E. Cincoski
Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation

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DRAMATIC UNITY IN THE AJAX
OF SOPHOCLES

BY
EDWARD E. CINCOSKI, S.J.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

NOVEMBER

1946

VITA AUCTORIS

Edward Eugene Cincoski, S.J. was born in Chicago, Illinois, February 18, 1918.

He attended Epiphany Parochial School and St. Ignatius High School in the same city. After graduating from St. Ignatius in June, 1936, he spent a year at Loyola University, Chicago. In September, 1937, he entered the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio. While at Milford from the year 1937 until 1941, he was enrolled at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio.

In August, 1941, he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University and received his degree of Bachelor of Arts from Loyola University in June, 1942. He was enrolled in the Graduate School of Loyola University in January, 1942.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM . . .	1
II. NATURE OF DRAMATIC UNITY	8
III. THE AJAX LEGEND AS TRAGIC MATERIAL	17
IV. THE TRAGIC THEME OF SOPHOCLES	22
V. THE NOTE OF RECONCILIATION	29
VI. THE DRAMATIC UNITY IN THE PLAY	36
VII. CONCLUSION	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY	66

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Ajax of Sophocles is a stirring drama in Greek literature. The feats before the walls of Troy of this Salaminian hero, huge, sturdy, and daring, can thrill mind and imagination. Still, the play with all its interest and movement has a critical defect: it lacks dramatic unity. The Ajax is an ennobling story but a poor drama; the poet has penned an artistic work, but he has failed in unified, dramatic effect. These are, fortunately, not the opinions of all the critics, but they are sufficiently representative of the common opinion of those who attack the Ajax at a vital point.

Such an accusation is serious, and directed, as it is, against one of the three great Greek tragedians, demands careful examination. This thesis purposes to consider what some scholars have stated about the unity of the Ajax; in it will be studied closely the construction of the play, the use of the Ajax legend by Sophocles, and a basis will be established whereupon the Ajax can be judged a unified dramatic production.

Disagreement or divergence of opinion opens up a fertile field for discussion, and scholars who have treated the Ajax of Sophocles have manifested a wide variety in their views. One adversary in

particular states the case clearly and to the point.

The critical difficulty is that though Ajax kills himself at v. 865, the play goes on for another 550 verses, verses which are full of brilliant and hard wrangling about his burial, but which are not obviously a necessary continuation of the story. . . . It is the normal sort of tragedy of character, the tragedy of Ajax and his ὄβρις, but for some reason a disproportionate amount of attention is devoted to the hero's burial.¹

Capps is not as definite in his criticism as Kitte, but after analysing the play in question he concludes:

This last portion, like the close of the Iliad and Odyssey, serves as an epilogue to the real plot, which, to the modern mind, is concluded with the death of Ajax.²

Obviously Capps considers the incidents after the death of Ajax as an anticlimax to the tragic drama, whose plot ends with the death of the hero midway through the play.³

Harry offers a very clear resume of the plot of the Ajax, then adds his comment upon the unity.

The tragedy, from the modern point of view, should end with the suicide. We have become more impatient: the rest of the play seems to be an anticlimax. Jebb says it was essential that Ajax be buried with due rite; but some scholars, especially in Germany, oppose this view.⁴

1 H. D. Kitto, Greek Tragedy, Methuen, London, 1939, 118.

2 E. Capps, From Homer to Theocritus, Scribner's, New York, 1901, 218.

3 The play contains 1420 verses; Ajax dies at verse 865.

4 J. E. Harry, Greek Tragedy, Columbia, New York, 1933, I, 102.

He appears here to be noncommittal; he quotes Jebb, but takes no side with him. Yet, later in the same general passage, Harry affirms "we cannot make the past square with the present."⁵ Thus, the prolongation of the drama did not offend Greek taste in dramatic art, although according to our modern conception of drama, such technique would be considered inferior. Thus, Harry seems to imply that the Ajax to the Greek mind and audience possessed dramatic unity.

Croiset in his work on Greek literature merely states that "the last part of the play is of a larger horizon";⁶ what comprises this "larger horizon" he fails to explain, but goes on with his general commentary on Sophocles. Campbell's short but concise treatment on Greek tragedy has nothing of moment on the dramatic unity of the play. Butcher and Livingstone in their essays on Greece, Greek literature, and Greek culture never touch upon a clarification of this point. Others, among whom are Symonds, Mackail, Tyrrell, and Hamilton, have not left in their works any opinion on the dramatic unity of the Ajax.

Among those who defend the unity of the play, Norwood must be given a prominent place.

⁵ Ibid., 102.

⁶ A. Croiset and M. Croiset, An Abridged History of Greek Literature, transl. by G. F. Heffelbower, Macmillan, New York, 1904, 199.

In Ajax the theme is not his death, but his rehabilitation: the disgrace, the suicide, the veto on his burial, Teucer's defiance, the persuasions of Odysseus, are all absolutely necessary. The culminating point is the dispute about his burial, especially since Ajax was one of the Attic "heroes", and the center of a hero's cult was his tomb. This explanation enables us to regard the whole play as an organic unity.⁷

His stand agrees essentially with that taken by Bowra, who is very clear in asserting that "the last third of it (the play) is taken up with a dispute over his (Ajax') body. This seems ungainly to us, but to the Greeks it was essential to the story."⁸ Bowra further asserts that there is apparent "an awkwardness in the structure and a harshness of tone in the quarrel over the dead body."⁹ These weaknesses he ascribes to the predominance in Sophocles of the poet over the dramatist in the writing of this play; then, too, he adds, Sophocles is inexperienced in combining style with dramatic requirements and "has not yet learned . . . to create a perfect ethical and artistic unity."¹⁰ Bowra sees the shortcomings of the play well, but still he admits the last part of the Ajax as essential to the play.

Rose is defiantly on the side of the unitarians! No modern,

7 G. Norwood, Greek Tragedy, John W. Luce, Boston, 1928, 136.

8 C. M. Bowra, Ancient Greek Literature, Thornton Butterworth, London, 1933, 94.

9 Ibid., 94.

10 Ibid., 94.

in his estimation, can understand the play unless he "takes the Greek point of view,"¹¹ which he then promptly attempts to analyze. For him "the moral interest of the second part is high";¹² this second part is undoubtedly a necessary complement to the dramatic unity of the play. And those who cannot see it, he concludes, should "have no more to do with Greek thought."¹³

Haigh is less emphatic in his view; in point of fact, there is serious doubt whether he justifies the unity of the play or not.

The construction of the Ajax varies in point of merit. In the first part of the play the preparation for the crisis is admirably contrived; . . . But after the death of Ajax, as the scholiast pointed out, there is an end of the tragic interest; and the final scenes with their protracted wrangling over the disposal of the body, are frigid by comparison.¹⁴

Haigh further states that the concluding dialogues between Menelaus, Teucer, and Odysseus are too long; they are interesting in themselves, delightful to the audience, effective on the stage, but, unfortunately, "they fall below the usual level of Sophoclean tragedy."¹⁵

A few words will suffice to show the position of Jebb, often considered the 'father' of all Sophoclean commentators. He is quite

¹¹ H. J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Literature, Dutton, New York, 1934, 163.

¹² Ibid., 164.

¹³ Ibid., 164.

¹⁴ A. E. Haigh, The Tragic Drama of the Greeks, Clarendon, Oxford, 187-188.

¹⁵ Ibid., 188.

sure that in the play

. . . both the dramatic treatment and the diction bear the stamp of Sophocles, though some of the details are not in his happiest vein, and though the form of the whole-- a prolonged controversy-- makes a somewhat exacting demand on the modern reader.¹⁶

A further elaboration of this opinion will be brought out in the succeeding chapters; it is sufficient here to note that Jebb holds to this conviction: the Ajax is a dramatic whole with the interest in the main plot sustained to the very last verse. The action of the play must be viewed in its totality; and in that action Sophocles, according to Jebb, "evinces his command over the highest art of the theatre."¹⁷

What importance can be attached to this problem? For the lovers of Sophocles the settlement of the question means a further renown for the poet and his artistic ability, or a lessening of that reputation which both ancients and moderns have unanimously proclaimed.¹⁸ Of course, the fame of Sophocles will not stand or fall on the merits or defects of the Ajax, but a careful study of the play and an explanation of its dramatic unity will help to vindicate the claims of all the poet's extant works to true greatness.

¹⁶ Sophocles, The Ajax, transl. by R. C. Jebb, University Press, Cambridge, 1907, introd. xlv. All subsequent quotations from the play will be Jebb's translations.

¹⁷ Ibid., xlv.

¹⁸ J. A. Symonds, Studies of the Greek Poets, Smith, Elder, London, 1877, 210; Haigh, 328.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, will be to explain the dramatic unity of the Ajax. There is no claim put forth that the Ajax is the greatest of Sophocles' extant works; the nobility of Ajax himself is not the main point of the discussion. We do not aim to explain merely one scene or speech or sequence of scenes. The thesis will not discuss Sophocles' stage, his language, his tragic irony, his use of actors; these topics may be touched, but only incidentally, in as far as they cast light upon the main question: in what way did Sophocles conceive the Ajax as a dramatic whole? What underlying element can explain the unity of the play? That, and that alone, we hope to discover.

To establish the dramatic unity of the play, an inquiry into the nature of dramatic unity is necessary. Then will follow a few words on the Ajax legend itself as apt material for tragedy. This material then must be used by the author in his own characteristic way to produce the desired effect of tragedy. This naturally introduces a discussion of Sophocles' tragic theme, how his particular genius used the Ajax legend to produce a tragedy. This logically leads to the last and main point of the thesis, the dramatic unity of the play itself, which will flow from the general principles of dramatic unity in itself, coupled with the matter and action of the Ajax legend as employed by Sophocles in his drama.

CHAPTER II

NATURE OF DRAMATIC UNITY

Greek tragedy was from its very beginning an expression of belief in and reverence for the gods. Tragedy, according to one view, "originated in the worship of Dionysus, the deity of wild vegetation, fruits, and especially the vine."¹ To the Greek it always held a deeply religious meaning, a part of the worship of those deities who day by day watched over the fortunes of Athens, brought forth a plenteous harvest, and preserved the people from unseen dangers. Greek tragedy as written and presented at the City Dionysia made an intense appeal to the Greek mind.

Still, this intense appeal of the tragic drama did not arise solely from the deep religious instinct of the Greeks. There was in the construction and presentation of the plays themselves something more immediate, more concrete to hold a Greek audience literally spellbound during the festival days. Was it the lyric poetry that so attracted them? Or was it the soul-stirring themes of the plays? Lyric poetry and sublime story were not exclusive features of the drama; the Greek people had Sappho and Alceus,

¹ Norwood, 1.

Hesiod and Homer. The tales of Achilles, Patroclus, Diomedes, and Odysseus were well known to them. Certainly, it wasn't brilliant costuming or lavish stage presentation which attracted the crowds! It was something higher, more subtle, more intellectual. It was a deep-seated desire for the dramatic!

Here let us beware of a misunderstanding. By dramatic is not meant unusual, sensational, or theatrical; there is nothing 'dramatic' in the sight of an Antigone being led off to her death or of an Oedipus, contrite and remorseful, groping about the stage in his self-inflicted blindness. The Greek desire for the dramatic was not a longing for the bombastic and spectacular; it was a deep desire to witness action on the stage, action that would be representative of life, that would, as Aristotle observes, "present people as doing things."² This action, this 'doing' again was not the mechanical function of moving about the boards, gesturing aimlessly toward the audience and being busy about trivialities. The action could be called a chapter of life, a human experience, a man's aspirations and how they are thwarted or fulfilled. Thus,

² Aristotle, Poetics, 1448a l. 35, transl. by W. H. Fyfe, Heinemann, London, 1939. This and all subsequent references to Aristotle will be taken from Fyfe's translation of the Poetics.

action simply resolves itself into what is called the central idea of Greek tragedy, "the conflict between free-will and fate,"³ "witnessing the main crisis in some great life,"⁴ "a spiritual struggle in which each side has a claim upon our sympathy."⁵ Action thus implies a conflict, a crisis, a struggle; and in the struggle of will against will, in the gradual evolution of the action toward its ultimate goal, the tragedy attained its singleness of purpose, its dramatic effect, its dramatic unity.

Tragedy, again to use Aristotle's words,

is not a representation of men but of a piece of action, of life, of happiness and unhappiness, which come under the head of action, and the end aimed at is the representation not of qualities of character but of some action.⁶

The type of action, of course, in the tragedy is manifold, depending on the personal desire or outlook of the poet. It may center around a hero like Agamemnon; it may concern itself with a dynasty of the ancestral line of Labdacus; or it may deal with the fortunes of many individuals as the Seven Against Thebes does. The action "does not have unity, as some people think, simply because

3 R. C. Jebb, Essays and Addresses, University Press, Cambridge, 1907, 8.

4 L. Campbell, A Guide to Greek Tragedy, Percival, London, 1891, 12.

5 E. Hamilton, The Greek Way, Norton, New York, 1930, 142.

6 Aristotle, 1450a, ll. 19-23.

it deals with a single hero."⁷ Unity of action comes from singleness of purpose: the tragedy portrays a "single piece of action and the whole of it;"⁸ it is derived further from the consistency in the portrayal of the action, and the production of a single effect, always, however, in accord with the general purpose of tragedy, to arouse the emotions of pity and fear.

"Action is the essence of the drama,"⁹ and dramatic unity or singleness of purpose and effect is concerned principally with action.

The aim of the poet, in presenting a story upon the stage, is to divest it of everything that is irrelevant and unnecessary, and to fix the mind of the audience upon a single, all-absorbing issue. . . . In all the more typical tragedies of the Greeks the tendency is to concentrate the attention, not only on one subject, but on a single portion of that subject. . . . They confine the attention for the most part to one central personage, and to one set of individuals.¹⁰

Greek tragedians had a desire for intensity and singleness of impression, rather than for complexity, devious side-plots, and variety of impression. The Greek tragedian set himself a simple

7 Ibid., 1451a, ll. 19-20.

8 Ibid., 1451a, l. 37.

9 Haigh, 333.

10 Ibid., 338-339.

task: to portray a crisis in an artistic background with a unique intensity and concentration which held the attention of an Athenian audience for hours or days at a time. It was action which made the drama.

Action is the essence of the drama; this we know and understand. Yet, we have to push our inquiry another step forward: what is unity of action or dramatic unity, and then, specifically, how does the problem of dramatic unity enter into the Ajax of Sophocles? The action of the drama is nothing else than the plot of the play, and thus does Aristotle understand the term: "It is the plot which represents the action. By 'plot' I mean here the arrangement of the incidents."¹¹ Thus, the question can be put in another manner: how must the incidents be arranged so that the dramatic action be unified?

Aristotle realizes that the proper arrangement of incidents is the first and most important thing in tragedy.¹² He then goes on to explain its nature.

We have laid it down that tragedy is a representation of an action that is whole and

¹¹ Aristotle, 1450a ll. 4-6.

¹² Ibid., 1450b l. 31.

complete and of a certain magnitude, since a thing may be a whole and yet have no magnitude. A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end. A beginning is that which is not a necessary consequent of anything else, but after which something else exists or happens as a natural result. An end on the contrary is that which is inevitably or, as a rule, the natural result of something else but from which nothing else follows; a middle follows something else and something follows from it. Well constructed plots must not therefore begin and end at random, but must embody the formula we have stated.¹³

When we untangle this rather involved English translation, I think we can explain Aristotle's meaning simply. The incidents which are the component parts of the story must be essential to the whole. This means that each incident, each bit of action must result either inevitably or at least probably from what has gone before--that "natural result" of which Aristotle speaks--and must in the same manner, either inevitably or probably, cause what is to follow. Unity of action, therefore, is an essential, causal connection between the incidents of the plot to make the story of the play one story and not a mere series of episodes. A tragedy is an organic whole, not an episodic conglomeration. The dramatist's first business is to make his story one coherent whole. And further, to refer once more to the Stagirite,

¹³ Ibid., 1450b 11. 32-43.

. . . the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed. For if the presence or absence of a thing makes no visible difference, then it is not an integral part of the whole.¹⁴

Thus, a "well constructed plot" embodies a piece of action or struggle, all of whose incidents present a causal relation to the evolution of the whole. The Oedipus Rex with its inexorable decree of banishment from the city for the one who has brought the curse upon Thebes presents a unified plot. Oedipus against the wishes of Teiresias and Jocasta pursues the inquiry into his real identity, and he finds that he alone has brought the curse upon the city. Humbled and disgraced because of his crimes, he gouges out his eyes and leaves his native land. Here there is a logical relation of events, a causal connection between the beginning, the absolute decree, the middle, the revelation of Oedipus' true identity, and the end of the drama, the self-inflicted punishment and banishment of the king. Such a plot we would call unified, such a plot does verify the fundamental notion of dramatic unity.

Now we must approach the nuclear problem of the thesis and determine specifically what must be done. The dramatic unity of the Ajax must be shown: that is, it has to be explained how the action of the play from beginning to end can be regarded as an

¹⁴ Ibid., 1451a ll. 37-42.

organic whole. The idea which pervades it, giving it unity and coherence, must be such that the death of Ajax can be viewed, not as a catastrophe after which everything else becomes just a tame episode, an accretion to the main plot, but rather as a tragic event naturally leading to the events which follow it. Thus the true climax in the play is reached only in that decision which rescues the corpse of the hero from dishonor. This idea we shall elaborate in a future chapter, together with an analysis of the play, whereby we hope to show the causal relations between the many incidents of the play. Thus by fusing the conception of Sophocles' art--the idea behind the play--with the nature of dramatic unity as we have tried to outline it here, we believe that the dramatic unity of the Ajax will be a demonstrated fact.

A more general comment on the other unities of Greek drama is unnecessary, except in so far as they aid to understanding dramatic unity. The so-called unity of time was not originally a law of Greek tragedy, as the words of Aristotle indicate:

But as for the natural limit of the action,
the longer the better, as far as magnitude
goes, provided it can all be grasped at
once.¹⁵

This practical limitation of the magnitude is linked naturally

¹⁵ Ibid., 1451a ll. 11-14.

with the unity of time.

And then as regards length, tragedy tends to fall within a single revolution of the sun or slightly to exceed that, whereas epic is unlimited in point of time; and that is another difference, although originally the practice was the same in tragedy as in epic poetry.¹⁶

The plots of tragedy tend to encompass less than a day, even though some of the early plays of Aeschylus--the Persae, Agamemnon, and Eumenides--seem to depart from this general practice.

No explicit reference to unity of place is found in the Poetics of Aristotle, although it is Haigh's belief that unity of place is "tacitly assumed as a necessary condition of theatrical representation."¹⁷ It is, perhaps, very significant to note that one of the 'violations' of the unity of place occurs in the Ajax of Sophocles, where the scene of the drama shifts from the camp of Ajax to a deserted sea-shore. These unities, therefore, subordinate in importance and practice, have contributed little to the central unity of Greek tragedy, unity of action. Upon this the soul and spirit, the very life of tragedy rests; upon the causal relation between the incidents of the plot rests the art and skill of the tragedian; upon this fact the Ajax of Sophocles shall stand as a unified drama.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1449b ll. 13-18.

¹⁷ Haigh, 340, footnote.

CHAPTER III

THE AJAX LEGEND AS TRAGIC MATERIAL

Before considering at once the dramatic unity of Sophocles' Ajax, another preliminary point remains for consideration. Tragedy is an action or struggle with a unity of impression; it implies a crisis, not in foolish and meaningless episodes, but in the significant happenings of life--happiness, final victory, dire defeat or shame, bloody or violent death. Tragedy is an action "of a certain magnitude,"¹ an action implying serious and awful consequences. Originating as it did as a religious function, tragedy retained its deep notes of solemnity and profundity. The material from which the poets drew their inspiration had to be far above the mediocre; tragic themes had to admit grand, pompous, profound action. In view of the subsequent discussion of the common note of Sophoclean tragedy, it seems fitting and profitable to ask: was the Ajax legend suitable for dramatic presentation?

Commentators on Greek tragedy do not agree on the origins of the Ajax legend. In general tragedians drew their subject matter

1 Aristotle, 1449b l. 27.

from the earlier epic and lyric poets, whose themes and tales were well-known to the ancient Greeks. "From the epic it (tragedy) derived its legendary subjects, and its graceful and majestic picture of the heroic world."² Under the transforming magic of the tragedian the drama was born.

The serene and leisurely narrative of the epic was intensified into an action, rapid and concise, and transacted before the very eyes of the audience.³

The Ajax legend was one of the heroic legends "taken from sources later than the Iliad, but the conception of the hero, though modified by that later legend, is fundamentally Homeric."⁴ In the Iliad Ajax, son of Telamon, has come to Troy from Salamis to aid the Greeks. His qualities of impetuosity and obstinacy shine out in his deeds of valor; he is staunch and steadfast of purpose, pre-eminent for bravery and prudence, qualities which he retains as the chief character in the play. A scholiast says that "the story comes from the Cyclic poets."⁵ Another source points to Pindar, who is thought to have given a peculiar twist to the tale;⁶ even Aeschylus is mentioned as having made an addition to

2 Haigh, 322.

3 Ibid., 322.

4 Jebb, Sophocles, The Ajax, introd., ix.

5 Ibid., xii.

6 Ibid., xv.

the legend.⁷ He handled the story in a trilogy, whose titles alone we possess. Sophocles seems to have assumed Pindar's interpretation about the award of the arms, but for the rest, conformed rather closely to the plot as it is handed down in the Little Iliad. This, at least, is Professor Jebb's conjecture.⁸

Ajax was, therefore, a noble figure, outstanding in character. His life and adventures as related in the legends, diversified as they might be, opened up for Sophocles dramatic possibilities. There was opportunity here for dramatic presentation. Ajax' adventures after leaving Troy could be related with an intensity and concentration, with the beauty and artistic symmetry which would produce the desired dramatic effect. This Sophocles proceeded to do.

The scene of the play is laid before the tent of Ajax on the plain of Troy. Ajax had been enraged by the action of the Greek chiefs in awarding to Odysseus instead of to himself the arms of the dead Achilles. According to the Odyssey the judges in the contest were "the children of the Trojans and Pallas Athena."⁹ Still, Sophocles adopts Pindar's change noted above, an account of the awarding of the arms which was suited "to win sympathy for

7 Ibid., xviii.

8 Ibid., xxiii.

9 Ibid., xv.

Ajax,"¹⁰ and in this way the tragic hero appears at the outset as a victim of jealousy and injustice. Ajax determined to slay the Atreidae in their sleep, but the goddess Athena struck him with mad frenzy, and all unknowing, he butchers a flock of sheep and their shepherds. Ajax with a blood-stained scourge in his hands, boasts with wild laughter of his triumphs; soon, however, he comes to his senses. He feels his shame keenly; he withdraws from his friends, the chorus of Salaminian sailors. He leaves his tender wife, Tecmessa, and retires to a lonely spot by the sea. There, amidst the quiet of the deserted shore, he falls upon his sword. Ajax' own brother, Teucer, filled at the time with strange forebodings of coming tragedy, returns too late to save the hapless hero. He discovers the dead Ajax near the sea. Almost at once Teucer confronts a defiant Menelaus, who forbids burial to Ajax' body. Finally, however, the earnest pleas of Adysseus prevail, and Agamemnon gives orders that the body be consigned to a grave.

With the Ajax legend Sophocles produced what is probably the earliest of his extant dramas.¹¹ The story of this hero is apt material for tragedy; it contains all the necessary elements of action and conflict; it has dramatic effect; it leaves the spectator with a singleness of impression. Ajax, the hero,

10 Ibid., xv.

11 Rose, 162.

is a man dowered with nobility, sensitive-ness, and self-reliance, but ruined by the excess of these qualities. His nobility had become ambition, his sensitiveness morbidity, his self-reliance pride. He offends Heaven by his haughtiness, and is humbled; then, rather than accept his lesson, he shuns disgrace by suicide.¹²

The general outline of the Ajax gives just a glimpse of the profundity of Sophocles himself. His tragic conception was not merely on the surface; it was buried in his plays, not to remain there, a dead, inert thing, but to become the leaven and pulse of his dramas. A closer study of the general tenor of that tragic theme will be necessary to judge the dramatic unity of the Ajax.

¹² Norwood, 133.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRAGIC THEME OF SOPHOCLES

This chapter must begin with an assumption, a theory, which, unfortunately, is not universally held. The study of the Sophoclean plays leaves the reader with the firm conviction that the tragedian had a message to convey to his audience. Behind the fortunes of Orestes, the pathetic struggle of Antigone, the cries of an unfortunate Hercules, there lingers a deeper, more lasting meaning. There is a definite moral lesson which Sophocles is trying to teach.

The plays of Sophocles are far from being mere artistic studies, devoid of moral import. Human nature, to him, has more than a psychological interest. The passions and sufferings of mankind are everywhere painted, not only as they appear in themselves, but also as they appear in relation to the eternal laws of justice and divine government. The mysterious decrees of destiny are always visible in the background of the picture; and the actions of mortal men, when seen under this aspect, acquire unwonted grandeur and impressiveness.¹

The moral implications of the "unwritten laws" in the Antigone are quite vivid; the "over-weening pride" of Oedipus remains a lesson for all. Livingstone notes that

1 Haigh, 168-169.

. . . the agonies and misfortunes . . .
 are agonies we all might conceivably have
 to suffer, misfortunes that might possibly
 befall ourselves.²

Mackail,³ Norwood,⁴ Jebb,⁵ and Bowra⁶ also point out in clear expressions the deeply moral tone of the Sophoclean drama. There is a spirit behind all the plays, a definite moral undercurrent which we believe is a necessary factor in understanding Sophoclean tragedy. The struggles between heroic characters and their destiny, the portrayal of sin and its retribution, the terrible punishment in store for the impudent and insolent--all these themes as revealed in the dramas of Sophocles are too frequent, too definite to be explained as mere dramatic accidents or incidental afterthoughts inserted into the body of the plays. Their insistent and constant recurrence in the plays points them out as something essential to the meaning and understanding of Sophoclean drama.

Here too there is danger of over-stating the case. The plays with their deep moral tone have, too, a dramatic interest which centers about the characters as individual human beings.

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- 2 R. W. Livingstone, The Greek Genius and Its Meaning To Us, Oxford University Press, London, 1924, 166.
 3 J. W. Mackail, Lectures on Greek Poetry, Longmans, London, 1926, 155.
 4 Norwood, 184.
 5 R. C. Jebb, The Growth and Influence of Classical Greek Poetry, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1893, 184.
 6 Bowra, 92; 107.

The action portrayed is something individual, a contest, a striving between man and man, between character and character. Elements of suspense, pathos, conflict are everywhere present; strains of lyrical poetry sound the extremes of sorrow and joy in the dramas. All these elements show the consummate art of Sophocles; they reveal too the human side of his character, his interest and sympathy with men who suffer physical and mental anguish. But they do not seem to touch the core of Sophoclean tragedy, that deep and profound awe, that sense of the religious and moral meaning of human life.

Why should there be such an emphasis upon moral issues in Sophocles' plays? Why should all of his dramas be in unison in sounding that note? It seems that the outgrowth of drama from the religious festivals was the fact which set the tone to tragedy. During Aeschylus' and Sophocles' day tragedy retained its deep meaning; "the drama was an act of worship,"⁷ as Jebb remarks; moreover, "ancient drama was connected with religion, was part of some god's worship, and as such, could be presented only at the time of his festivals."⁸ The subject matter, tone, and style of tragedy reflected the religious nature of its beginnings. Dramatic competitions were held during the City Dionysia, the

7 Jebb, Essays, 8.

8 R. C. Flickinger, The Greek Theater and Its Drama, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1938, 119.

supreme religious festival of the year; how could dramatists, and tragedians in particular, fail to flavor their own productions with their beliefs and convictions about the gods?

Aeschylus set the stage for handling the themes of Greek tragedy. He borrowed from the heroic legends, and his successors followed his example. In Aeschylus tragedy took its simplest and, indeed, grandest form. Sophocles adopted the praeternatural outlook of his predecessor, but his application of it was somewhat different. Without losing any of the religious sweep of Aeschylus, Sophocles turned to the study of human character.

The spectator of a Sophoclean tragedy was invited to witness the supreme crisis of an individual destiny, and was possessed at the outset with the circumstances of the decisive moment.⁹

The relation of the character to his destiny or to the crisis portrayed in the play was the concrete embodiment of the moral background of the play. Sophocles was not as intense in his portrayal as Aeschylus, but the moral sense of his dramas is clear. Professor Symonds has an opinion to the point.

The weakness of the offender is more prominent in Sophocles than the vengeance of the outraged deity. Thus, although there is the sternest religious background to all the tragedies of Sophocles, our attention is always fixed on the humanity of his heroes.¹⁰

9 Campbell, 218.

10 Symonds, 207.

Oedipus and Antigone in their individual crises are like Prometheus and Orestes: their struggles are aspects of the all-pervading rule of Zeus and his supreme power over the actions of men.

Curiously enough this assumption of the predominantly moral nature of Sophoclean tragedy runs counter to an assumption of Kitto, which it is necessary to quote here.

I make one basic assumption of which nothing that I have read in or about Greek tragedy has caused me to doubt the soundness. It is that the Greek dramatist was first and last an artist, and must be criticized as such. (*Italics mine.*) Many Greeks, like many moderns, thought he was a moral teacher. No doubt he was, incidentally. Many English schoolmasters assert that cricket inculcates all sorts of moral virtues. No doubt it does, incidentally; but the writer on cricket does well to leave this aspect of his subject to the historian of the British Empire.¹¹

It is true that the Greek dramatist was an artist first and foremost, who exercised his skill with consummate taste and imagination. In this point there is no disagreement with Professor Kitto. But why should we insist further that the dramatist's moral teaching was merely "incidental" to his work? Moral and ethical teaching, basic human values, are so predominant in tragedy, especially in Aeschylus and Sophocles, that it seems impossible to relegate their influence to a merely "incidental" level. The moral consciousness of the poet Sophocles is too striking, too all-pervading to admit

¹¹ Kitto, Preface, v.

it is only "incidental" to the bone and structure of his dramas.

Kitto's analogy too can scarcely be admitted, since the English game of cricket has not the close association with morality and religion which Greek tragedy boasts of. A writer on the game of cricket does well to let the moral implications alone, since these are very general and certainly not essential in understanding the nature of the game. But the writer on Greek tragedy could not conceivably pass by the religious overtones and moral significance of the plays without being guilty of composing an incomplete and inaccurate treatise.

Tragedy is a mode of thought as well as a form of art: not only will serious poetry naturally be thoughtful, but it is impossible to construct a story on any considerable scale without its reflecting conceptions of the social framework, and speculations as to the principles on which the world is governed.¹²

Kitto¹³ in his book concedes that a dramatist, especially a Greek dramatist, cannot be indifferent to questions of morality, since the matter of his plots will always deal with the thoughts and actions of men. These human acts proceed from the rational nature of man, and thus they fall under the category of moral acts. Kitto too desires to judge the individual plays, "each a work of art and therefore unique, each obeying the laws of its own being."¹⁴ This

12 R. G. Moulton, The Ancient Classical Drama, Clarendon, Oxford, 1898, 93.

13 Kitto, vi.

14 Ibid., vi.

norm would be an excellent one, if there were a question only of judging the dialogue, plot, setting, and language of the plays. These factors differ undoubtedly in each play, and well they ought, if the writer desires to keep the interest of his audience. Still, the uniformity of impression of each of Sophocles' plays, their moral nature, their moral theme, gives them a further unity which demands a unifying conception in the mind of the playwright. This conception will not destroy the artistic diversity of the plays, but it will explain the patent moral nature of Sophoclean drama. It will be a very potent factor in Sophocles' tragic conception; it will provide a means whereby we may determine the dramatic unity of the play we are considering.

CHAPTER V

THE NOTE OF RECONCILIATION

What was the keynote of the moral background of Sophoclean tragedy? What supreme reality did Sophocles wish to impress upon his audience? It was a truth vividly seen and vividly grasped by this Greek dramatist. Various authors have described it in divers ways, and their comments on the subject can be helpful in understanding the keynote of Sophocles' tragedies as we conceive it. I dare say that not one of them treats the question as fully as we intend to treat it; certainly in their comments they do not direct them to the particular difficulty about the dramatic unity of the Ajax. Thus their personal opinions may not be in total agreement with mine, but taken as a whole they do show the general trend of thought on the problem. Their explanations can prove very enlightening.

R. C. Jebb in one of his many essays gives us his opinion on Sophocles' genius:

Sophocles lived in the ancestral legends of Greece otherwise than Aeschylus lived in them. . . . Sophocles dwelt on their details with the intent, calm joy of artistic meditation; believing their divineness, finding in them a typical reconciliation (italics mine) of forces which in real life are never

absolutely reconciled--a concord such as the musical instinct of his nature assured him must be the ultimate law. . . . In the dramas of Sophocles, there is perfect unity of moral government; and the development of human motives, while it heightens the interest of the action, serves to illustrate the power of the gods.¹

At the beginning of a chapter on Sophocles, Hamilton gives us an interesting slant.

Tragic pleasure, Schopenhauer said, is in the last analysis a matter of acceptance. The great philosopher of gloom was defining all tragedy in the terms of one tragedian. His definition applies to Sophocles alone, but it compresses into a single word the spirit of the Sophoclean drama.²

Campbell has written that "concentration is the leading note of Sophoclean art."³ For him Sophocles' plays are pervaded with a sense of over-ruling and relentless Providence; "the action of each drama is set in a rigid framework of fatality."⁴ Heroes and heroines are always under the influence of the gods and Fate.

Haigh seems to catch the underlying spirit of Sophocles very well.

Stated in general terms, the aim of Sophocles was to humanise tragedy, and to bring it down to a more earthly level from the supernatural

1 Jebb, Essays, 11-12.

2 Hamilton, 172.

3 Campbell, 211.

4 Ibid., 212.

region in which it had previously moved. . . .
 The nature of man, and his various passions
 and struggles, become for the first time the
 main object of attention in the tragic drama.⁵

Gilbert Norwood recalls that the Athenian needed no 'local
 color' or exciting technicalities on the stage, but only

serenity, profundity, to blend their own
 scattered experiences into one noble picture
 of life itself, life made beautiful because
 so wonderfully comprehended.⁶

It would seem here that Sophocles had a breadth of vision in his
 plays, an intensive and extensive comprehension which could not but
 leave a definite impression on the alert minds of the Greek audi-
 ence.

In another place, when treating of the Attic drama, Jebb re-
 calls that "Sophocles believed not less in the fixity of the divine
 law; but he dwelt on less simple forms of its operation."⁷ This
 belief led him to build his tragedies around the laws of the gods,
 never, however, losing sight of the human element.

Hence, his human sympathy on the one side and
 his piety on the other conspired to interest
 him in character, in the motives and feelings
 of men, in the influences which they exert
 over each other, and in the effects upon them
 of the divine discipline. Here he saw the
 best hope of resolving the apparent discords.⁸

5 Haigh, 141-142.

6 Norwood, 184.

7 Jebb, Cl. Gk. Poetry, 184.

8 Ibid., 184.

Mackail is impressed too with the expanded outlook of Sophoclean tragedy. For him "Attic drama is Sophocles,"⁹ because that poet was a symbol of the life of fifth century Athens. Sophocles was a supreme artist, a great poet. But behind that poetry there lies "an embodiment and interpretation of life,"¹⁰ which Mackail goes on to explain more in detail.

The envisagement of life which underlies the Sophoclean drama is given most sharply in the morals which Sophocles himself has attached to or incorporated in five out of the seven plays. . . . The endless wonderfulness of life--its splendour and fascination and unfathomable depth of meaning; this is what Sophocles gives us.¹¹

Livingstone has some interesting observations on the notes of sanity and mansidedness of Greek humanism. He is criticizing a modern humanistic view, comparing it with the Greeks.

Their lives and their theory (the modern theory) of human nature are narrow in a way in which Greek life and theory were not. There was in the Greeks a certain 'perfection' which we do not possess; a certain width and completeness in their view of human nature, for want of which our literature is limited and provincial; a certain width and completeness in their conduct of life, for want of which our life is poor and starved.¹²

9 Mackail, 143.

10 Ibid., 154.

11 Ibid., 155.

12 Livingstone, 162.

This width and completeness in their views are exemplified in the tragedies of Sophocles, whose characters and plots had a deep meaning for the Greek audience.

For they remembered that the figures that moved on the stage were reflections of the struggling humanity to which they themselves belonged, in whose weakness and sufferings they saw the image of their own, from whose errors they drew warning, from whose fortitude strength.¹³

A. Croiset and M. Croiset in their comprehensive history of Greek literature do not fail to point out the salient characteristics of Sophocles, the tragedian.

He had a charming vivacity, a wide experience of life, and what is better, a sure and prompt intuition of moral truth, an exquisite appreciation of shades of difference, and a natural delicacy--united to a feeling for grandeur and a liking for the ideal.¹⁴

These marks of Sophoclean tragedy show a serious vein of mind, all in keeping with the moral background of his plays. Bowra calls Sophocles "a poet who continued the work of Aeschylus by portraying on the stage problems suggested by the relation of man with the gods."¹⁵

After a careful analysis of all the preceding comments is made, what lasting impression remains? Authors have been impressed

¹³ Ibid., 171.

¹⁴ A. Croiset and M. Croiset, 198.

¹⁵ Bowra, 92.

by the religious nature of Sophocles' plays. And in these plays, what unifying theme is predominant? It is, without doubt, an ethical theme, the ultimate resolution of a struggle between man and his destiny. The climactic point of this struggle has been variously described in the foregoing quotations; it has been called "serenity or profundity";¹⁶ Hamilton has named it a "matter of acceptance";¹⁷ concord, peace, and tranquillity represent the prevailing tone of Sophoclean drama. The lasting impression seems to be that Sophocles believed in and portrayed an ultimate reconciliation of all the cross-currents that make life a struggle. Sophocles portrayed this idea through the medium of poetry and dramatic presentation on the stage. He was at the same time a supreme artist and a wise teacher. His ideas were clear; though they were pagan, reflecting an undue emphasis on fate and praeternatural forces, still they impressed the Greek audience of their day. Sophocles with consummate intuition, pagan though he was, saw life wholly and completely; he had a deep conviction that all of man's actions were done under the influence of the powers above. For him there was fate, but not an oppressive fatalism; men could choose freely, and often enough their choice meant their doom. These facts, these convictions, these beliefs we see reflected concretely in the plots of his plays.

16 Norwood, 184.

17 Hamilton, 172.

The dramatic action of a play was set in a moral background of ultimate reconciliation. The dramatic struggle leads to a crisis where the hero is faced with a momentous decision. In the Antigone the Grecian maiden is asked to forego her natural duty to her brother and obey the imperious edict of a civil, earthly king. This she refuses to do and goes to her doom, living incarceration in a tomb. Creon, however, sees his error, and he becomes a repentant man. But alas! He acquired 'wisdom' too late in life to aid the dead Antigone. Oedipus the King boldly and courageously goes forward in his search for the cause of the pestilence in Thebes; when he sees the finger of the oracle pointing at himself, he makes what retribution he can for his stubborn pride, gouges out his eyes, and spends the rest of his mortal days in the long shadows of sorrow. Sophocles' characters are human; they must have caused perceptible waves of emotion to rise among the Greek audience. But behind all the action lies the ultimate reconciliation of the opposing forces, pointing always toward an equitable solution. This same theme of reconciliation is necessary to understand the Ajax, its dramatic construction and dramatic unity; from this point of view we shall now attempt to examine the play.

CHAPTER VI

THE DRAMATIC UNITY IN THE PLAY

Sophocles, we believe, was a man who wrote plays and who dreamed great dreams; one day he had the greatest dream of his life. He had an inspiration, a quasi vision, arising from a deep, intellectual conviction that man's life must always be lived in accordance with divine law and order. Man was not self-sufficient unto himself; he had to seek aid from the gods, those 'divine' beings, who controlled and directed man's actions. In the daily living of men's lives there would be conflicts between human will and desires and the will and desires of the deities; yet in the last choice of man, disastrous and dire as it might be, the gods would show their supreme control. Man's shortsighted and stubborn folly would be revealed in the "eternal and immutable laws"; his actions, good and evil, would merit a just and equitable retribution.

Sophocles, the dramatist, had seen his fellow tragedian, Aeschylus, develop this all-powerful and all-pervading theme of retribution. He had inculcated it in a Agamemnon and a Eumenides, compositions which have found a permanent place in the realm of great literature. Sophocles too "had definite ideas and ideals

which he wanted to communicate to the public."¹ Sophocles took the tragic theme of his predecessor, brought the action down from heaven to earth, and produced some powerful dramas whose dominant note is one of ultimate and final reconciliation between the deities who govern the universe and the human beings who inhabit it.

Considering the Ajax as a whole, what can we say is its dominant and unifying theme? What did Sophocles conceive to be the core of this drama? In accordance with the general idea of a final reconciliation, we might state our thesis thus: the preservation of the moral order, the ultimate working out of the rule of the gods in the life of an individual--that is the Ajax! In the construction of the play Sophocles attempts to plumb the depths of human nature, to see to what depths Ajax could go, to what heights he could arise, and yet in the end receive his due reward in the eyes of all. Sophocles is presenting an anomaly of human life, apparent defeat as the prelude to ultimate victory. Sophocles adapted the legend of Ajax to the frame of tragedy, bringing out both the manliness and the degradation of the hero, and yet keeping his ultimate purpose in view. The tragedian presented to his

1 T. B. Webster, An Introduction to Sophocles, Clarendon, Oxford, 1936, 20.

Athenian audience a personality in surroundings where his greatness and his weakness could be seen and understood. "One individual hero becomes his microcosm; into him all his tragic thinking is projected."² With this fundamental notion in mind, the influence of the gods upon Ajax, both in his madness and death, and in the rehabilitation of his character after death, we must, lest we be accused of begging the question, examine the play closely. Can our thesis be justified in the clear and vigorous action of the play itself? Does the Ajax portray a struggle whose incidents show an essential, causal relation, a natural development, and whose theme is an ultimate reconciliation between the rule of the gods and the will of the individual? This is the crucial question.

The scene of the play is laid in the Greek camp at Troy before the tent of Ajax. The play opens with action. Odysseus is seen cautiously examining footprints near the tent of Ajax. The goddess Athena appears to him and addresses him. In this opening monologue Athena tells him that Ajax is in the tent, but asks why he has been trying to find out. Odysseus, though Athena is invisible, answers in the direction of her voice that the cattle

2 Kitto, 142.

belonging to the army have been slain during the night, and that he is trying to find out if Ajax is responsible for the deed, as is the common suspicion. Athena tells him that Ajax is the culprit. Ajax had planned to kill all his enemies in the camp and was on the point of carrying out his intention when she caused him to become violently insane and in that condition to attack the cattle. Some of these he had killed and others he had driven to his tent where he was torturing them, still under the delusion that they were his enemies. She proposes to call Ajax out, but Odysseus in terror begs her not to do so. She promises that Ajax will not see him and summons the madman from his tent. A dialogue ensues between the goddess and the insane hero, in which Ajax is led to say that he had slain Agamemnon and Menelaus, and means to flog Odysseus to death. He then retires into the tent. Odysseus is deeply moved by the pitiful condition of his adversary, and Athena takes the opportunity to read him a lesson which he scarcely needs, always to have due respect for the gods.

Therefore, beholding such things, look that thine own lips never speak a haughty word against the gods, and assume no swelling port, if thou prevailest above another in prowess or by store of ample wealth. For a day can humble all human things, and a day can lift them up; but the wise of heart are loved of the gods, and the evil

are abhorred.³

This is the first inkling of any conflict between Ajax and the gods. Ajax has spoken a "haughty word"; his was a proud spirit. He was never reconciled to the loss of Achilles' armor, which was awarded to Odysseus by a vote of the Greeks. This, at least, seems to be the version of the story upon which Sophocles based the action of the play. Ajax was indignant at the effrontery of Odysseus in venturing to compete against him in the contest for the arms of the dead Achilles. Because of the loss of the arms to Odysseus, Ajax nurtured an undying hatred against him and the sons of Atreus, who, he thought, had influenced the vote of the Greeks in giving the decision to Odysseus. Because of this hatred Ajax determined to kill his enemies, Odysseus and the sons of Atreus in particular, and they were preserved only by the prompt intervention of Athena.

After Athena has pointed her lesson to Odysseus, the chorus of Salaminian sailors, all followers of Ajax, enters the orchestra. They have heard rumors that their master has slain the cattle and have come to ask him to show himself and confute his enemies. Yet, they have lurking dread that some god may have led Ajax astray.

3 Sophocles, The Ajax, vv.127-133. This and all subsequent translations, as noted before, are taken from R. C. Jebb's edition of the play.

Thus we see at the outset of the play the reasons for Ajax' hatred of the Atreidae and the cause of the hero's madness. Can we suspect that the sons of Atreus may retaliate hatred for hatred? Perhaps not, since this is only Ajax' first burst of anger against the leaders of the host; but as the play progresses and his undying hatred is augmented, we can logically be led to expect some counter action by the Atreidae.

Tecmessa, captive and wife of Ajax, enters at this point, and in a lyric dialogue with the chorus she explains that her lord, when he was afflicted with madness, slew the cattle. The chorus are much distressed and know that their own lives, as well as their master's, are in danger. Tecmessa in a vivid speech tells how in the middle of the night Ajax had gone forth and returned with sheep and cattle. Some of these he slaughtered, others he tortured, shouting in his madness that he had inflicted punishment upon Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Odysseus. Then, at length, he recovered his reason and asked what it all meant. When told, he moaned aloud, though in all previous time he had always regarded lamentation as a sign of weakness. And now, she prays, he is sitting in the midst of the slaughtered animals, and she asks the chorus to try to help him.

As the chorus attempts to console Tecmessa, Ajax is heard crying out from within the tent. He calls for his half-brother, Teucer, who is absent at the time on a raid. By means of the eccyclema the interior of the tent is now shown, revealing the hero in the midst of the blood and gore of the slain animals. Ajax has by this time come back to his right mind and is overwhelmed with shame and disgrace at the thought of what he has done. He still curses Odysseus and the sons of Atreus; his hatred is mounting. But now he adds the hope that he too may die. His shipmates attempt to console him. "Why grieve when the deed is past recall? These things can never be but as they are."⁴ They urge him to cease his imprecations: "Speak no proud word; seest thou not to what a plight thou hast come?"⁵ The Salaminian sailors are trying to call Ajax back from the road to doom to an attitude of respect and reverence for the immortal gods. Ajax then begins to soliloquize. He speaks partly to himself, though in reality he is addressing the chorus. The full import of his deed flashed across his mind; he has disgraced himself, his family, his father; he can see nothing ahead but shame, if he lives; yet he longs for a chance to redeem his honor.

4 Ibid., vv. 377-378.

5 Ibid., vv. 386.

And now what shall I do; who plainly am hateful to the gods, abhorred by the Greek host, hated by all Troy and all these plains? Shall I forsake the station of the ships and leave the Atreidae forlorn, and go homeward across the Aegean? And what face shall I show to my father when I come --to Telamon? How will he find heart to look on me, when I stand before him ungraced--without that meed of valour whereby he won a great crown of fame? 'Tis not to be endured.⁶

Here Sophocles has brought his hero face to face with the great theme of the play: Ajax' action has made him an enemy of the gods; how is he to placate them?

Here Tecmessa makes a pathetic plea to him to live for her sake. She asks him to think of the insults which will be heaped upon her if he dies, and the hard life will she have to live. She begs him to think of his father and mother and his little boy, and finally reminds him that her father and mother are dead and that her only safety lies with him. Ajax seems to hearken to her words, promising her his approval and protection, but then calls abruptly for his son. An attendant leads in the little boy, Eurysaces, who draws back at the sight of his father stained with gore. Ajax welcomes his little son, dwelling upon his future greatness as a warrior, and then he commands him to be put under the care of Telamon and Eriboea, his aged parents, at his own home in Greece.

⁶ Ibid., vv. 457-466.

He asks Teucer to be his guardian, and then beseeches Tecmessa to take the child away. She is slow to accede to his request; she is filled with fear for Ajax. He promptly informs her: "Nay, thou vexest me over much; knowest thou not that I no longer owe aught of service to the gods?"⁷ Again Ajax spurns the powers from above, and Tecmessa can only reply: "I am afraid, O prince!"⁸

Tecmessa, after uttering this plaintive cry, retires with Eurysaces; Ajax is drawn back into the tent by means of the eccyclema, and the stage is set for the chorus for their first formal dance, the first stasimon. In their song they recall their long absence from their native land. They express their distress at the mental condition of their master, and they begin to speculate on the sorrow it will cause his father.

Ajax now reenters, holding in his hand the sword which he had once received from Hector in an exchange of gifts. He declares that he will bury it, for the gift of an enemy is bound to bring harm. He says he will be discreet and yield to the sons of Atreus. He has undergone a change of heart.

For even I, erst so wondrous firm--yea, as
iron hardened in the dipping,--felt the keen
edge of my temper softened by yon woman's

7 Ibid., vv. 589-590.

8 Ibid., vs. 593.

words; and I feel the pity of leaving her a widow with my foes, and the boy an orphan.⁹

The tender plea of Tecmessa has taken effect; Ajax apparently is going to relent in his firm resolve. He has been touched by the words of Tecmessa; he does feel pity. One need not suppose that this change has been abrupt. Ajax is a hard, rugged, imperious, and resolute warrior, but not hard of heart; his love for his wife and his son has been clearly hinted at previously in the action of the play. His words now suggest that his pity forbids him to die. Yet, his real design, despite his change of heart, is apparent in the following words:

But I will go to the bathing place and the meadows by the shore, that in purging of my stains I may flee the heavy anger of the goddess. Then I will seek out some untrodden spot, and bury this sword, hatefullest of weapons, in a hole dug where none shall see; . . .

Therefore henceforth I shall know how to yield to the gods and learn to revere the Atreidae.¹⁰

The understanding of Ajax' mood here, according to Professor Jebb, "must affect the interpretation of the play as a whole."¹¹ This may be true, since Jebb in his defense of the dramatic unity of the play, must determine whether Ajax here was attempting to deceive his hearers, Tecmessa and the chorus, or merely feigning deceit. Ultimately, after much learned discussion of the point,

9 Ibid., vv. 650-653.

10 Ibid., vv. 654-659; 666-667.

11 Ibid., introd., xxxiii.

Jebb concludes that Ajax' words were taken literally, and in this way "Ajax deliberately deceives his hearers."¹² In the speech of Ajax a veiled threat of death lurks, and this death of the hero practically in the middle of the play Jebb is at great pains to explain. He is much worried about it, for if Ajax is to survive as a hero among the Greeks, surrounded by the grandeur of heroic ritual--another main argument in Jebb's analysis of the dramatic unity--Ajax must be shown to have had a strong desire to live on in the memory of the Greeks. The audience was not prepared for the death of the hero because of his deceitful speech; thus, how can the heroic cult of Ajax be preserved? Jebb answers the difficulty by explaining that

three distinct threads are subtly interwoven in the texture of the speech: viz., direct expression of his (Ajax') real mind; irony in a form which does not necessarily imply the intention to mislead; and artifice of language so elaborate as necessarily to imply such an intention, at any rate when addressed to simple hearers. While the change of purpose is feigned, the change of mood is real.¹³

Thus, after Ajax utters the last words of this speech, ". . . and ere long, perchance, though now I suffer, ye will hear that I have found peace,"¹⁴ the difficulty according to Jebb is solved.

12 Ibid., introd., xxxiv.

13 Ibid., introd., xxxviii.

14 Ibid., vv. 691-692.

Ajax passes, then, reconciled to the gods; and so in a manner suited to that event which is the real end of the play, his accession to the order of worshipped heroes.¹⁵

Against Jebb's interpretation much must be said. First, we single out Jebb, since he is the only author among those we have cited who has a definite and ordered interpretation of the dramatic unity of the play. Kitto simply attacks the play, denies its basic unity, and then goes on to explain the Ajax as a rather episodic example of tragedy. Most of the other commentators either only present the problem and leave it unsolved, or follow in outline the solution presented by Jebb. Thus, when we consider Jebb's interpretation, I believe we are considering, at least in nucleus, the general opinion of most commentators on the play.

Secondly, we do not wish to deny that Jebb upholds the dramatic unity of the Ajax. We simply ask: why put forward such a subtle and complex argument in defense of the dramatic unity of the Ajax, when a simpler, more coherent explanation is possible? Ajax' words about a coming "purge", about present suffering and future peace, we believe, are not a deliberate deceit of the hero, but rather an unwarranted interpretation on the part of his

15 Ibid., introd., xl.

hearers. The entire speech is a fine example of Sophoclean irony. The speech contains a veiled threat of death; thus the catastrophe is not a complete surprise. Moreover, if we recall the essential note of the play as we have posted it--the reconciliation between the will of the gods and the human will--then we can view the catastrophe, not only in itself, but in its natural relation with what precedes and follows.

Ajax has realized how hateful he has become in the sight of the gods because of his wrathful desires against the Atreidae. Thus he will "purge" his stains and "flee the heavy anger" of Athena. He is going as a pagan freely to meet his fate--recall the veiled threat of death. This fate will be the first stage of his reconciliation, the vindication of justice, the death of a hero who had been disgraced before all. The gods are achieving their purpose with Ajax; he will know how to "yield", according to his own admission. Still, his hatred against the Atreidae is undying; as we shall see, he utters a curse upon them even as he is on the point of dying. Shall the Atreidae permit this imprecation of an enemy go unanswered, to remain unchallenged? Against Ajax alive they will be able to do nothing; yet, what can they not attempt against the hero dead and helpless? Then

they shall have their revenge! Thus, the death of Ajax culminates a sequence of events and in turn sets the stage for what is to follow. It marks a true "middle" point of the tragedy, as understood by Aristotle and quoted in a previous chapter. The death of Ajax marks the natural conclusion of his madness and hatred; the death of Ajax opens up, at least with probability, the future wrangling over the dead body. The corpse of Ajax becomes the testing ground of the revenge of the sons of Atreus; it leads in turn to another intervention of the gods, in the persons of Tecmessa and Teucer, and in this way to the final and ultimate reconciliation of Ajax himself.

The stage presentation of the drama--the death of Ajax at this particular point, even a death somewhat sudden and unexpected--may be impugned and criticized severely; the later wrangling about the burial decree may also be considered poor method. Possibly here is convincing evidence that the Ajax is the earliest of the extant plays; certainly it has its minor faults and peculiarities, and these in considerable number and degree. But the dramatic unity, that natural sequence of events, one flowing from the other, remains intact.

Moreover, why, in defending the dramatic unity, does Professor Jebb have recourse to a heroic cult of Ajax, a fact completely outside the understanding of the play, and, in fact, subsequent and dependent upon the dramatic action portrayed in the play itself? Jebb outlines his position thus:

The cult of a 'hero' meant the worship of the spirit of a dead man, who in life had been pre-eminent for great qualities. The first condition of such worship was that the departed spirit should have been duly admitted to the realm of the nether gods by the rendering of funeral rites.¹⁶

Thus in discussing the subsequent wrangling over the corpse of Ajax--a point we will consider shortly in our summary of the play--Jebb gives his answer. "The question involved much more than that (the burial),--viz., the whole claim of Ajax to the sanctity of a 'hero'--one with which so many traditions of Athens were bound up."¹⁷ The heroic cult of Ajax is outside the realm of the dramatic action! Moreover, even if some should insist that nothing in the play ought lessen the esteem in which Ajax is held among the Greeks, that the heroic cult be as it were a kind of restraining norm--nothing unseemly or disgraceful should be the ultimate result of the play--still, that interpretation is at best very incomplete in determining the intrinsic basis of the dramatic unity

16 Ibid., introd., xxxi.

17 Ibid., introd., xxxii.

of the play. Certainly, our interpretation does not merit condemnation because it is derogatory to Ajax' character or because it imperils the esteem and honor in which the Greek warrior was held among his fellow citizens! Rather, the conflict between the superior forces of the gods and the human will of Ajax, and the consequent resignation of the hero to the will of the gods shows the human character of the Greek leader. Then too, the final resolution of the conflict itself, contained in the intense wrangling over the body, part of the intrinsic action of the play, redounds to the honor and reverence of Ajax. Thus, any recourse to the 'hero' cult of Ajax seems rather superfluous.

When Ajax completes his monologue, his speech of 'deceit', the sailors, completely 'deceived' by his words, break into a joyous song. They believe that Ajax is out of any danger; they think that the quarrel between Ajax and the Atreidae is a thing of the past and that all will be well.

Now, once again, now, O Zeus, can the pure brightness of good days come to the swift sea-cleaving ships; since Ajax again forgets his trouble, and hath turned to perform the law of the gods with all due rites, in perfectness of loyal worship.¹⁸

Again, ironically, Ajax will "perform the law of the gods", but

18 Ibid., vv. 708-712.

what turn that performance will take the chorus does not as yet perceive.

After the moments of joy a messenger appears at the Greek camp, announcing the return of Teucer. The latter, upon his arrival in camp, had been received with abuse by the Greek soldiers, and his life was threatened simply because he was a relation of Ajax. The chorus explains that Ajax is not there, but has gone "to make his peace with the gods."¹⁹ The man laments that he had not come before, for Teucer had given strict orders that Ajax should be kept safely within doors until he arrived. Calchas, the prophet, had predicted death for Ajax unless he could pass that day in safety, for he had repeatedly opposed the gods. When first leaving home, Ajax had answered in scorn the advice of his father:

"Father, with the help of gods, e'en a man
of nought might win the mastery; but I, even
without their aid, trust to bring that glory
within my grasp." So proud was his vaunt.²⁰

On another occasion, when Ajax was about to go into battle, he spurned the help of Athena, from whose hand only recently had come his insane affliction.

19 Ibid., vs. 744.

20 Ibid., vv. 767-771.

Then once again, in answer to divine Athena--
. . . "Queen, stand thou beside the other
Greeks; where Ajax stands, battle will never
break our line."²¹

At the very end of the messenger's announcement Tecmessa enters and hears from the lips of the same messenger that this going forth of Ajax means his death! She orders everyone to go in search of her master, and she herself sets out to find him. The chorus too joins in the search; all leave the stage.

The scene now shifts to a lonely spot on the seashore. Ajax is seen standing at one side. He has fixed Hector's sword, his famous prize of war, in the ground point up, and he begins to speak to it. He prays to Zeus to send a messenger to Teucer that his brother may take charge of his body before it is cast out unburied to the dogs and birds. He calls on Hermes to guide him to the nether world; he prays the Furies for vengeance, an awful vengeance against Agamemnon and Menelaus. Again his hatred for these two is pointing to some further disaster; Ajax has even expressed here his fear of lying unburied on the shore. He entreats the Sun to announce his death to his aged parents, bids farewell to country and friends, and throws himself upon the sword. This is Ajax' submission to the will of the deities, due reparation for his pride and haughtiness!

²¹ Ibid., vv. 774-775.

The chorus then returns to the stage in two groups, searching in vain for Ajax. They call for someone to help them find their master. A sudden cry is heard off to one side; Tecmessa has discovered her husband's body among the bushes. The chorus, now united, rush to her and join in her laments. After her first outcry, she spreads a robe over the body, now represented by an effigy, that none may behold it covered with blood. The chorus moralizes on the fate of Ajax, which they now understand was foreboded by his complaints against the Atreidae. The lament continues in the form of a dialogue between Tecmessa and the chorus. The chorus wails over the power which the Atreidae exerted over Ajax, but Tecmessa simply replies: "Never had these things stood thus, save by the will of the gods."²² She too reminds the chorus that the enemies of Ajax in their folly do not know the greatness of their loss. The death of her lord is bitter to her, but it is a relief to Ajax.

All that he yearned to win hath he made his own,--the death for which he longed. Over this man, then, wherefore should they triumph? His death concerns the gods, not them--no, verily. Then let Odysseus revel in empty taunts. Ajax is for them no more.²³

22 Ibid., vs. 950.

23 Ibid., vv. 967-972.

Tecmessa here sounds the keynote to all the wrangling and dispute that is to follow. Ajax freely submitted to his fate; he made his peace with the gods in death. The gods therefore shall not permit the hero's body to remain unburied! They are the ones who have brought a proud man into submission; they cannot allow Ajax to suffer further degradation. The Atreidae may storm and rave; Menelaus may threaten Teucer with violence; the gods cannot, the gods will not hand over the body of a submissive Ajax to his implacable enemies to be ravaged by birds and dogs! This speech of Tecmessa, closely linked with the fact of Ajax' death, is very important in linking together the two divisions of the dramatic action. It serves as part of the enlarged 'middle' of the tragedy.

It looks back upon the death of Ajax and the troubles which have brought it to pass, and at the same time by necessary implication . . . it looks forward to the next phase of the struggle which must at length be determined in the closing scenes.²⁴

Teucer now enters lamenting his brother's death, and he is informed that the rumor he had heard is true. He seeks Eurysaces that he may protect the boy as Ajax desired, and Tecmessa goes to seek her young son. Teucer, meanwhile, approaches the dead body

24 A. C. Pearson, "Sophocles. Ajax 961-973," The Classical Quarterly, XVI (1922), 125.

and orders the covering raised. In his distress at the sight which meets his eyes, he thinks of his own return home and of the harsh reception he is likely to receive from his father, Telamon, who will think that the death of Ajax was due to cowardice or treachery on his part. He recalls the fact that it was by the belt that Ajax gave him that Hector was fastened to the chariot of Achilles to be dragged to his death; now Ajax lies slain by the sword he received from Hector in return. His comment is significant: "I, at least, would deem that these things and all things ever are planned by gods for men."²⁵

Menelaus now comes upon the scene and in arrogant words forbids the removal of the dead Ajax. He declares that the dead man has shown himself an enemy to the army, and in consequence, his body shall be cast out unburied. The chorus mildly criticizes Menelaus' order; but Teucer boldly defies him, declaring that he has no authority over Ajax, either as a chief who commanded his own soldiers before Troy, or as a man who has rendered just retribution to the gods and is worthy of honorable burial by men. Menelaus sneers, threatens, and in a rage, finally withdraws. The chorus is alarmed and urges Teucer to hasten the burial, but

25 Sophocles, The Ajax, edition of R. C. Jebb, vv. 1036-1037.

that man remains unafraid.

At this point Eurysaces is brought by Tecmessa. Teucer cuts a lock of hair from the boy's head, and with this and with other locks of hair from Teucer and Tecmessa in his hands, the boy is told to cling to the body of his dead father and beg for protection. He must let no one drag it away. As Teucer prepares to leave to arrange the burial, the chorus again breaks out into a short song recalling its past hardships and its present desire, now that its protector is dead, to return home.

At this moment Teucer hastily returns, interrupting, as it were, the choral ode of the chorus. He has seen Agamemnon approaching and senses that there is trouble ahead. The king severely upbraids Teucer, cites his notorious ancestry, and threatens to have him whipped for opposing all the authorities. Teucer defends himself with manly and dispassionate words. He calls to mind the valiant deeds of Ajax before Troy, when the Greeks were losing the battle, and points out the extreme ingratitude of Agamemnon. He defies this leader of the host also and warns him not to revile the dead.

The loud talk has drawn Odysseus to the scene, and now he inquires about the cause for such wrangling. Agamemnon briefly

explains that Teucer has defied his authority and declared that he would bury the dead Ajax. Odysseus advises Agamemnon to permit the burial, for by this act he would be conforming his will to the just law of Heaven.

It were not just, then, that he should suffer dishonor at thy hand; 'tis not he, 'tis the law of Heaven that thou wouldst hurt. When a brave man is dead, 'tis not right to do him scathe--no, not even if thou hate him.²⁶

Again that constantly recurring note of conflict between Ajax, now dead, and "the law of heaven" is apparent. The death of Ajax, as Tecmessa uttered, "concerned the gods," not the selfish and adamant sons of Atreus. It is true that Ajax had reviled Agamemnon and Menelaus, but he had paid his penalty in suffering both insanity and death; the two Greek leaders no longer had any power over him. The wrangling over the burial decree does make sense; it completes the dramatic situation, the dramatic action; it is another phase of the play wherein the gods, acting in the person of human agents, accomplish their designs for Ajax.

Agamemnon finally yields, though sullenly, to the warnings of Odysseus. Teucer is afraid, however, that the presence of Odysseus at the burial might be offensive to the dead, since

²⁶ Ibid., vv. 1342-1345.

Odysseus had been a bitter enemy of Ajax during life. Odysseus is not offended at the suggestion that he not remain at the burial rites, but he acquiesces in Teucer's request and retires from the scene. The bleeding body of Ajax is raised from the ground, and, borne by Teucer and the attendants, followed by Tecmessa, Eurysaces, and the chorus, it is carried off the stage. As the last of the funeral procession passes out of sight of the audience, the leader of the chorus turns toward the spectators and moralizes on the uncertainty of the future: "Many things shall mortals learn by seeing; but before he sees, no man may read the future of his fate."²⁷

From this rather lengthy and detailed summary of the Ajax, we believe that our initial question is answered; our thesis rests proved on the objective facts of the dramatic action of the play. We have followed Ajax in his struggle with the forces from above. We have seen his human will thwarted by 'divine' intervention; for from his noble eminence he has tumbled because of his pride to the depths of insanity and death. He has achieved his initial reconciliation with the gods. But even over his dead body the hatred of Ajax engenders a counter-hatred from the Atreidae. Agamemnon and Menelaus forbid burial. Still, the gods

²⁷ Ibid., vv. 1418-1420.

cannot cease to bring about a complete vindication of Ajax in these circumstances; their care must extend through his misery and degradation to his justification. Ajax has suffered for his fault, Ajax has met his fate; his suffering must not exceed the limit decreed by the gods. His body will not become prey for birds and dogs; rather, it shall receive its just reward, its just retribution, a decent burial.

Thus the action of the play from beginning to end is an organic whole. All the incidents of the play blend together in a coherent unity which carries Ajax through madness, disgrace, hatred, and death to the vengeance, wrangling, and ultimate rescue of the corpse of the hero from dishonor. The complete and ultimate reconciliation of Ajax has been accomplished in a series of connected events which manifest dramatic unity.

Therefore, we cannot agree with modern critics who have proclaimed "the debates between Teucer and the Atreidae as a superfluous anti-climax to the tragic issue which reached its fulfillment in Ajax' death."²⁸ Thus, we cannot second Kitto's complaint, voiced in a previous chapter, that "a disproportionate amount of

²⁸ Pearson, 127.

attention is devoted to the hero's burial."²⁹ Nor need we display the same blind faith that J. T. Sheppard shows in an article of A. C. Pearson, which we have already cited: " 'The drama (Ajax) is not a perfect work of art: Sophocles is so great that we need not labor to prove him impeccable.' "³⁰ The play has presented a definite problem: the dispute over the burial is a problem; evidence must show that the Teucer-Atreidae incident is not a mere episode, an "anti-climax to the tragic issue." We do not claim Sophocles to be impeccable; there are defects in the play, as we have admitted before. Yet, the play shows unity; the last part of the play is rather a completion of the first, not a dangling interlude or anti-climax of the plot. The burial of Ajax represents the final retribution of the gods, the ultimate reconciliation of the conflict; the hero went down to his due punishment and received his due reward. Ajax is once more at peace with the gods!

29 Kitto, 118. (cf. Chap. I, footnote 1.)

30 Pearson, 128.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The Ajax of Sophocles is generally believed to be the earliest of the extant plays.¹ Undoubtedly it is not a perfect play, and never have we made that claim. The method of Ajax' suicide, whether in full view of the audience or not, the number of actors employed in the final scene, the fact that the chorus leaves the stage, a very rare thing in Greek Tragedy--these are only some of the puzzles of the play. Yet, despite these defects in staging and presentation, the dramatic action of the play is a unit. The basic conflict, and therefore the unifying theme of the play, is a conflict between human and divine will. C. M. Bowra in a treatise on Sophocles, while making a comparison between Shakespeare and the ancient Greek writer, introduces a difference which is to the point: "While the conflict in Shakespeare is between men and men, in Sophocles it arises in the last analysis between men and gods."²

With this conception of Sophoclean drama we have endeavored

1 W. N. Bates, Sophocles, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1940, 114; Kitto, 118; Webster, 102.

2 C. M. Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy, Clarendon, Oxford, 1944, 13.

to give an analysis of the play, defending its dramatic unity. The analysis is dependent upon the decided moral element, the ethical background of Sophoclean plays. Again Bowra comes to our assistance with a pertinent consideration.

It may then be said that there is in all Sophocles' plays an element of ethical discussion, of casuistry, which pervades the atmosphere and gives meaning to the tragic events. . . . The protagonists in a struggle no longer stand on opposite sides of right and wrong but seem to present such a struggle in themselves. . . . But in all the plays the dramatic material demands close consideration of right and wrong. They are forced upon us and we cannot neglect them.³

This element of ethical discussion, moral consciousness, as we have called it, gives us a sufficient unifying theme for the action of the Ajax. Bowra calls this theme "a combination of two themes, of heavy wrongdoing and of ultimate nobility."⁴ The two, we believe, can be combined into the one central theme of ultimate union, wherein the two opposing forces by mutual interplay are resolved into a complete and final reconciliation.

We have never meant in the course of our discussion to characterize Sophocles as a didactic poet or mere instructor of

3 Ibid., 15

4 Ibid., 18

the Greek populace, who employs his characters simply to illustrate his sublime moral concepts. He is, as Bowra says of him,

always a dramatist, and the ethical issues are subordinated to human interests. But just as it is impossible to understand human life without considering moral issues and even passing moral judgements, so in Sophoclean tragedy much of the interest turns on such issues. Sophocles is as much concerned with men's souls as with their fortunes.⁵

There is conflict between Ajax and Athena, Ajax and the Atreidae, Teucer and the Atreidae. But the great moral issue behind these individual conflicts gives the meaning, raises the conflict to a more exalted level, and provides the key to the unity of the action involved. So prominent is this moral issue in our estimation that without it the play loses much of its meaning, much of its unity of dramatic action.

Thus, the Ajax is a dramatic unit; from the hero's initial brutality and madness, through his insanity, and up to his final vindication we are following a man "who illustrates important rules which govern men in relation to the gods;"⁶ we see clearly the depth of his fall and final justification.

5 Ibid., 15.

6 Ibid., 19

The Ajax leads us to a deeper understanding of human nature and the tragedy of human life; yet it leaves us, too, with a vague hope and belief in the world's harmony and justice, which is all the wisdom paganism has to offer.⁷

⁷ Norwood, 135.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Edward Eugene Cincoski has been read and approved by three members of the Department of Classics.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Nov. 15, 1946
Date

Mural R. Vogel, Jr.
Signature of Adviser