

FORM AND MEANING IN DRAMA

A Study of Six Greek Plays and of *Hamlet*

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able laws, and in it, only half-hidden, are terrible forces. These we must always respect. The saving virtue is 'understanding', with reverence towards the gods, which implies reverence towards the ultimate claims of humanity. When the chorus thought they saw the hand of god in the burial, Creon asked indignantly:

*How can you think the gods have any care
For this vile corpse? Was it for his high honour,
As one who served them, that they graced him thus?
The dastard! him that came with fire and sword
To blast their columned shrines and treasuries,
And to make havoc of their land and laws?
What? do you think the gods honour the vile?*

The answer is: Yes; for at least he was a man.

CHAPTER SIX

Ajax

THE *Ajax*, as much as any play, demands that we should employ the critical principles which are appropriate to it. Waldock, in his interesting and lively book *Sophocles the Dramatist*, writes about it to this effect: Students of modern literature, when they turn to the study of Greek drama, will be prepared to find that the nature of the Greek theatre and dramatic conventions created special problems for the Greek dramatists,¹ but he will be surprised to find that the most consistent problem was the problem of unity itself. Look at the *Agamemnon*: the Aegisthus-scene is something outside the design of the play, so much so that Mr Kitto, instinctively, ignores it. It is the 'diptych' form beginning to emerge. Look at the *Hippolytus*, the *Antigone*, the *Ajax*. The Greek dramatist (p. 58) uses up his material very fast; the initial charge is too soon spent.² Therefore he has to inject a new one; to turn his play into a diptych. Apologists do not succeed, who say, 'Take the right point of view, and unity appears.'

But why stop at the Greek dramatists? We could equally well say of Pindar: Sometimes a single myth gives Pindar all the material he needs; but sometimes he uses it up too quickly, and has to bring in a second one, which may be quite independent of the first. We could well say that Pindar was forced into the diptych-form before ever Aeschylus gave way to it.

With Pindar the case is perfectly clear. Either we read him in a literal fashion, and enjoy his flashing brilliance but find in an ode little unity, structure, or commonsense; or we realise

¹ This I believe to be a mistake. See the chapter on Greek and Elizabethan Dramatic Form. Waldock's criticism of my own criticism, on the other hand, is perfectly sound, but 'I hope we have reformed that indifferently.'

² Similarly, in the slow movement of the Pianoforte Sonata in A flat, opus 110, Beethoven used up his material so fast that the movement is only seven bars long.—A pity; it was so beautiful while it lasted.

that we have to contribute a good deal ourselves—to bring to his poetry a lively moral and imaginative awareness; in which case the ode ceases to be an assemblage of scattered brilliancies, and becomes a powerful and significant unity. ‘The true drama of the *Hippolytus*’, says Waldock, ‘is bound up with Phaedra. No “inner meaning”, no “thesis” that we may care to extract, changes that.’ But Euripides ‘bound up’ the play with Aphrodite and Artemis. If this fact does not interest us, naturally, for us, the play falls to pieces—or, to put it more politely, becomes a diptych. We may call it that; but if a medieval diptych should portray, in one half, the felicity of Heaven, and in the other half the terrors of Hell, we should hardly say that the painter had failed to achieve a unity because he ran short of ideas about Heaven. In fact, if we treat the play simply as a study of a Tragic Hero, we cannot explain its form—only find excuses for it.

There is a late-ancient, or medieval, criticism of the *Ajax* which, although it is written in Greek, is laughable: ἐκτείναι θελήσας τὸ δράμα ἐψυχεύσατο καὶ ἔλυσε τὸ τραγικὸν πάθος. It is the comment of a Scholiast, and it may be rendered: Because he wanted to prolong the play beyond the suicide of Ajax, Sophocles loses the tragic tension and becomes a bore. This is very like a judgment on *Hamlet* written in 1736 by Sir Thomas Hanmer: ‘There appears to be no reason at all in nature why this young Prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible . . . The case indeed is this: had Hamlet gone naturally to work, there would have been an end to the play. The poet therefore was obliged to delay the hero’s revenge; but then he should have contrived some good reason for it.’¹ According to Waldock, this is the first appearance in critical writing of any sign of uneasiness about Hamlet’s delay.

The resemblance between the two criticisms is close, and admits, I think, of a simple explanation: both plays were written in a ‘religious’ age, and both criticisms were written by men who had lost touch with the spirit of ‘religious’ art. Rationalism, with its increasing individualism, had formed a barrier between Hanmer and Shakespeare; what divided the Scholiast, or his source, from Sophocles was, ultimately, the radical intellectualist revolution of the late fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., Aristotle’s theory, and the Aristotelian tradition,

¹ I owe this to Waldock’s essay on *Hamlet*.

were incapable of making real sense of the *Ajax*; Aristotle did not even try to frame a workable theory for the Aeschylean drama; nor is it easy to imagine that his acute and ‘secular’ mind would have had any great success with the ‘religious’ poetry of Pindar.

In the *Ajax*, the Scholiast tells us, Sophocles becomes a bore because his material ran out. If he had written the play at the age of fifteen or so, we might be disposed to believe it with no more ado. In fact, he was about fifty—and he was Sophocles. It is perhaps more likely that the Scholiast, and those modern critics who follow him,¹ have for some reason taken hold of the wrong end of the stick.

Of the dramatic facts which we have to assimilate before we can offer an interpretation of the *Ajax*, the premature death of the hero is the most important, but there are many others. However, before we state and discuss these, it will be convenient to say something about the two standard explanations of the form of the play: the importance, to the Greek mind, of burial, and the existence in Athens of the hero-cult of Ajax.

That refusal to bury a dead body was a thing shocking to normal Greek sentiment is a fact that needs no argument. That the soul of a dead man could find no peace in Hades until his body was buried is an idea frequently met with in antiquity—though nowhere in the extant works of Sophocles. We have seen already² that Sophocles does not use this belief in the *Antigone*, but concentrates all our thoughts there on the sheer horror of treating a human body like offal. The same, precisely, is true of the *Ajax*, except that Odysseus is made to say to Agamemnon something which implicitly excludes the eschatological doctrine:

οὐ γάρ τι τοῦτον ἀλλὰ τοὺς θεῶν νόμους
φθείρους ἄν.

You would not be hurting Ajax at all; you would be infringing the laws of the Gods.

It is not for us to introduce into the play ideas which are left out by Sophocles, in order to help ourselves over a difficulty. Mr Letters, for example, writes impressively about the fate from which the great Ajax is to be saved, the fate of the wandering,

¹ Masqueray, for instance, in his introduction to the play (Budé series

² See above, p. 148.

sleepless ghost.¹ But Sophocles refuses to mention this. More pertinent is a remark which Mr Letters makes a little earlier, that the problem is not to show that the play maintains its interest, but that it remains organically one.

Whether the body shall be buried is certainly the question at issue in the last third of the play, but without rewriting these scenes, we cannot maintain that they are concerned with the after-life of Ajax. What then?

We are reminded that Ajax was a revered Attic Hero, and that a Hero must have his tomb, since that was the centre of the cult. Therefore his proper burial was of importance to everyone to whom his cult was of importance, that is, to every Athenian citizen. But, in the first place, the Ajax of this play is very much a man, and not at all a cult-hero. We shall be told: 'Never mind; Ajax was in fact a cult-hero, and what he was in fact, that also he must be in the play.' But the assumption is illegitimate. In Comedy, the Athenians could make great fun not only of cult-heroes but also of gods, and the reason is not simply that Comedy gave the Athenians delicious license to be naughty; it is that they were intelligent people, not bound fast by the formulas of their religion. Cult was one thing, epic poetry, tragedy and comedy were other things, and they did not obstruct each other. Surely we are not to imagine that thoughts of a cult interposed themselves between an Athenian audience and a public recitation from the *Iliad*. In the cult, Ajax was a living Hero; when one was listening to Homer, he was a great warrior fighting before Troy. There is no difficulty in this. In a comedy, he might perhaps be a rumbustious and stupid soldier; in a tragedy, a magnificent tragic hero; a Cult-Hero, certainly, if the dramatist chose so to treat him, but not otherwise. The pious observances and traditions of religion did not rule in the theatre unless the dramatist invoked them; Greek Tragedy was religious, but in a deeper sense than this. It is precisely this confusion between cult-religion and religious drama that made the *Prometheus* unintelligible to Farnell: why, he asked, was Aeschylus not prosecuted for such a presentation of the High God?² In the *Coloneus* and the *Trachiniae* heroisation is specifically made part of the play; in the *Ajax* it is not. The critic may find the

¹ F. J. H. Letters, *Sophocles*, p. 134.

² *Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, LIII (1933).

play easier to understand if he sees the tomb of Ajax the cult-hero somewhere in the background, but he should be quite clear that it is not Sophocles who has put it there, but he himself.

As for the idea that the second half of the play is devoted to the 'rehabilitation' of Ajax, we must be careful. It is true that it sets the character of Ajax in a wider perspective. Odysseus asserts what nobody in the play denies, that in the past Ajax has done glorious things for Greece. He makes us contemplate the life of Ajax as a whole; and as we contemplate it, especially with meaner men present against whom we can measure him, we feel that Ajax is incomparably the most magnificent figure of them all. But no one in the play suggests for a moment that he was not guilty of a monstrous and indefensible crime. His murderous treachery remains; and certainly Sophocles was under no compulsion to suggest, as he does, that even in death the resentful spirit of Ajax is incapable of responding to the generosity of Odysseus. In the final scenes we are certainly shown the essential greatness of Ajax, but something more important is afoot than the rehabilitation of Ajax.

The greatness of Ajax is certainly one of the arguments used by Odysseus in urging that he shall be buried, but his ultimate argument is simply that death is the common lot: 'I too shall come to this.' The burial is in no sense the ultimate triumph of Ajax, nor has it anything to do with his cult. It means just what the burial means in the *Antigone*. In each play the dead man has committed a crime which nobody tries to condone; each play represents the tribute of burial as something demanded both by the deepest human instincts and by the laws of Heaven, and its refusal as an outrage upon our common humanity. Let us not forget the background that Sophocles designed for the final scenes: the body of Ajax, and the two suppliants, Tecmessa and the child. It is the ultimate human situation. The burial is the assertion that the claims of humanity override everything.

This brings us to another dramatic fact: the tone of the final debate. One scholar after another has found it deplorable—which of course it is. But why? Masqueray says: Teucer, Menelaus, Agamemnon and Odysseus do not realise that their speeches, clever ('heureux') though they may be, are an anticlimax after the entreaties of Tecmessa and the farewell-speech

of Ajax. That is to say, Sophocles made a bad miscalculation. That is no doubt possible; it is also possible that the dramatist calculated better than the scholar. 'But,' Masqueray continues, 'we must remember how the Greeks loved speeches, provided that they were adroit.' To which we may reply: where else in Sophocles do we find clever speeches which spoil the play?

Jebb too was uneasy. The tone of the debate, he says, is shocking to modern taste, and becomes understandable only when we remember how freely Demosthenes, for instance, allowed himself vulgar abuse of his opponents. But again, where else do we have to invoke Demosthenes in order to explain Sophocles? To judge from the rest of Sophocles, not to mention Aeschylus, the Greek audience had much the same taste as ourselves, except perhaps that theirs was rather more intellectual and austere. The vulgarity of the Atreidae, and to a smaller extent of Teucer, is a fact; but it is one that we should try to explain, not explain away. Since after all we know a good deal about Sophocles' dramatic style, we should first assume that he made these men vulgar for a dramatic reason, and not because he thought that his audience would expect and enjoy it.

There are other facts that we have to contemplate, hoping that they will arrange themselves into a significant pattern or structure, since Sophocles, presumably, invented and disposed them for this purpose. There are—to set them down in the order of their presentation—the agency of Athena; the character and behaviour of Odysseus; Tecmessa, what she is, what she says, how she says it; the celebrated speech of Ajax, whether deceptive and ironical, or sincere; and the typically Sophoclean idea, used no less than three times, that the sword of Hector kills Ajax, as the belt of Ajax killed Hector. Finally, the greatest fact of all: the splendour of Ajax, his crime and madness, and his suicide. In contemplating these things we may remind ourselves, as we have done before, that a combination which is deep and clever is probably wrong, since a play must make its effect at once, even though more intimate knowledge of it may reveal further subtleties. But an interpretation which is deep and simple may well be correct, for this is Religious Drama.

That the play begins and ends with Odysseus is a fact which has been published before; once by me.¹ Friendly critics—Mr

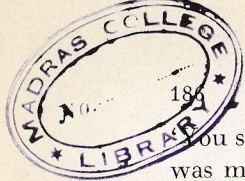
¹ *Greek Tragedy*. p. 121.

Letters, for example—have said that I made too much of this. Perhaps so, but it was a mistake made in the right direction. Needless to say, the appearance of Odysseus at the beginning and at the end is no formal device, designed to give the play a mere external symmetry. Sophocles did not deal in such second-rate contrivances. Without exaggerating the importance of Odysseus in the play, we may legitimately observe what is obvious: he and Ajax are presented as opposites as well as enemies. Odysseus calls Athena 'dearest of gods to me' (v. 14), Ajax is under her severe displeasure; in the trial for the arms, Odysseus is victorious, Ajax defeated; above all, Odysseus shows that large-minded intelligence, that spiritual, mental and moral poise, which the Greeks called *Sophrosyne* and we, in desperation, translate *Wisdom*; Ajax is brave, sagacious and effective in action (vv. 119 f), in every way impressive—except that he is conspicuously lacking in this 'wisdom'. It is perhaps nothing extraordinary, especially in this most Homeric play, that a hero should feel resentment when the judgment of his peers prefers another to himself; but to try to murder the judges is another matter. This is the most outrageous, and critical, instance of his lack of 'wisdom', but Sophocles makes it plain that it does not stand alone. The Messenger informs us that Ajax has spoken arrogantly of the gods, twice; he, in his pride, said he could stand firm without aid from the gods. Further, the messenger-speech uses twice, of Ajax, the phrase *κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονεῖν*, to behave with the modesty that becomes mortal man. This is what Ajax cannot do. 'Already, when he was leaving home, his father found him, and truly called him, foolish; for his father had said, "My son, resolve to win victory with your spear, but always with the aid of the gods"; and he made an arrogant and senseless answer: "Father, with the gods' aid the most puny man may win victory; I am sure I can seize this glory without them." That was the boast he made.'¹ Whereupon Calchas added that it is men of great strength but little wisdom that the gods bring low in disaster.

In the Athena whom we see in the prologue there is little that is kindly or gracious; like the Artemis of whom we have a glimpse in the *Electra*,² she is as hard and stern as life itself.

¹ Literal translation of vv. 762-770.

² In *Electra's* account of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, vv. 565 ff.



You see, Odysseus, how great is the strength of the gods. Who was more sagacious or decisive in action than Ajax?'—'I know of none. Still, I am sorry for him, that he is in the grip of disaster. And I say this, thinking of myself as much as of him, because I can see that no man that lives is more than a phantom or an insubstantial shade.' 'Therefore,' replies Athena, 'never use boastful language towards the gods, or indulge in pride, if you exceed another in the strength of your arm or in wealth. A single day can overthrow or restore anything human, and it is the wise that the gods cherish, but they hate the bad.' Athena is reminding us what a changeful and uncertain thing life is. Odysseus illustrates, now and later, how it must be confronted: with Sophrosyne. This implies intelligence and suppleness, but also modesty and pity; a willingness to forgive, to forget injuries and to remember benefits.

As for Ajax, it is true that we have given ourselves the advantage of looking first at the messenger-speech, but even without this it would be clear that he is very different. He is one who must have things his own way; but this is a thing that Life does not permit for long. When he was not judged first, he—being then in his right mind—turned to murder. The madness sent by Athena saved him from that, and saved the Greek captains from him; but Athena, in no kindly way, urged him on in his torturing of the sheep, so that his intention was made both manifest and hideously ridiculous. This is the *ἄτη*, the infatuate ruin, into which his pride has led him. It will surely be strange if this contrast between the wisdom which the gods cherish and the pride which they punish does not prove to be fundamental to the play.

Now let us consider Tecmessa. She, like the chorus, is loyal to Ajax, utterly dependent on him, and thrown into dire peril by what he has done. Nothing is easier than to write sympathetically about Tecmessa, the only woman in this fierce play; to say that her feminine tenderness and weakness are the perfect foil to the rugged strength of Ajax. Of course they are—but there is more than this. Here is a bald summary of her most moving speech:

Ajax my lord, nothing in life is harder to bear than the blind strokes of fortune. Here am I, free-born, daughter of the wealthiest man in Phrygia, now a slave; so it pleased the gods and your mighty

arm. So, since I have become yours, I am loyal to you. By the love that has united us, do not leave me and your son unprotected. Have compassion (*αἰδέσθαι*) for your father, have compassion for your mother, take pity on your son, on me, for the miseries that will be ours. You are all I have; my country you ruined, my parents are dead. If I have brought you any joy, you owe me something in return; ingratitude brings disgrace to a man.

Sophocles has given to his Tecmessa both dignity and intelligence—and something more. Life has been much harder to her than to Ajax; but she has known how to accommodate herself to it. Unlike him, she has known by instinct how the blows of fortune are to be faced, and Sophocles hints a moment later that she has saved something from the wreck: she has her son, in whom she can take delight (v. 559). She has something of that larger wisdom which Odysseus too has; it is in this respect that she is most notably a foil to Ajax.

But her speech brings before us too other elements of the Sophrosyne in which Ajax is lacking: *αἰδώς* and *χάρις*, a consideration for others, and gratitude. But as she appeals to Ajax in the name of all those who will be left in misery or jeopardy by his death, we can hardly help asking ourselves a question to which Sophocles gives no answer: What can Ajax now do? However much consideration and gratitude he may feel, is it not too late? In fact, he shows very little of either quality. He makes that grand speech to his infant son, with its famous and tragic couplet:

ὦ παῖ, γένοιο πατρὸς εὐτυχέστερος,
τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ὁμοίως· καὶ γένοι' ἂν οὐ κακός —

*My son, be you more fortunate than your father, in all else the same.
So, you would be good enough.*

The couplet is tragic, because he lacks so much more than good fortune. Of pity or consideration for Tecmessa there is at the moment no sign whatsoever. He brusquely tells her to be silent, and shuts himself in his tent to die. We are left with this: Ajax is sure that Teucer will protect the child, but Tecmessa and the Chorus look forward only to death or slavery.

But Ajax does not kill himself; he comes out again, to make that speech which has caused so much discussion. Is it sheer, cruel deception? Or is it that Ajax is now genuinely determined

to live, but somehow suffers a change of mind when he reaches the sea-shore? Or, being still determined to die, does he wish, as Jebb suggested, to die reconciled to the gods?

It is at once apparent that *something* has happened to Ajax: he was going to kill himself in the tent, and he has not done it. There is another point not to be overlooked: the style and tone of the speech. It is great poetry; it is language of a high intensity, and it would carry conviction. Could we perhaps try to imagine ourselves in the audience?

The last words we have heard from Ajax were his harsh words to Tecmessa: 'If you think you can alter my ways at this late hour, you are thinking like a fool.' When we see him again, after the mournful ode, not only are we surprised at seeing him, instead of hearing of his death; we are also surprised, surely, at his language:

*Ἄπανθ' ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος
φύει τ' ἄδηλα καὶ φανέντα κρύπτεται —*

*All things doth long, innumerable time,
Bring forth to light, and hide again in darkness . . .*

This is something much more gravely philosophic than anything we have yet heard, or would have expected, from Ajax.

*Nothing is firm; the strongest oath is broken,
The stubborn purpose fails. For I was hard
As tempered steel; but now Tecmessa's words
Have softened me, and I have lost my edge.
I pity her, to leave her as a widow
Among my foes, to leave my son an orphan.*

The poetry, of which I attempt a rendering, is more weighty, more spacious, than anything we have yet heard; it has an authority which, I think, convinces us at once that Ajax feels and means what he says. But perhaps an earlier question recurs to our minds: what can Ajax do, now?

*Therefore I seek the meadows by the shore;
In holy water I will wash away
My stains, and from Athena's heavy wrath
I will release myself. Then I will go
And find a spot far from the ways of men;
There will I dig the earth, and hide my sword,
My hateful sword, where never mortal eye*

*Shall look on it again; but Night and Hades
Shall keep it in their darkness evermore.*

Indeed his mood has changed. It is no long time since he was calling on Darkness to cover him; and then he shut himself up to die, like an animal, among the animals he had slaughtered. Here he has a new dignity; gone are the self-pity and the self-contempt that he has been feeling until now. But what will he do? The pity for Tecmessa is real—the poetry certifies that; but his words are ominous. Is it that he thinks with compassion of those around him only when it is too late for him to act on it? That all his life he has thought only of himself and of his own glory, and now, for the first time, sees what he has done for others? At least, the ode to which we have just been listening has made our thoughts dwell on the danger into which Ajax has brought his men, and on the misery which is coming to his mother and father.

*For since I had this sword at Hector's hand,
Hector, most hated of my enemies,
Nothing but evil has befallen me
From the Achaeans. No, the proverb's true:
Beware the gifts of foes; they bring no good.
Wherefore henceforward I shall know that I
Must yield to Heaven's will, and I shall learn
Reverence for the Atreidae: they are Kings;
We must obey them.*

Is there not something a little surprising here? What is the point of the word *τοῦγάρ*, 'wherefore'? What is the connexion between Hector's sword and what follows? For Sophocles' audience, no doubt, the connexion was plain; they shared in his habit of thought. For us it is not plain, and we shall have to argue it out, if we can. And why does he use the strong word *σέβειν*, 'reverence', of the Atreidae? It would be more natural had the verbs been reversed: To reverence the gods and yield to the Atreidae. But the latter is just what he cannot do, in any real sense—and if he does the former, it will be something which at least he has not conspicuously been doing heretofore. The choice of the verbs, then, seems to be significant: Wisdom, he says, demands that he yield to the gods—and that he can do, for indeed there is no alternative; but wise conduct towards the

Atreidae he has made very difficult by his own acts, and in any case it is quite beyond his nature; therefore he expresses it in a word of deliberate exaggeration. What he says next makes this clearer to us:

*For the greatest powers
That be, the most invincible, give way
To privilege: see how the snowy winter
Makes room for fruitful summer; how the dread
Circle of night gives place to blazing day;
The groaning sea is given peace at last
By raging winds; and sleep that masters all
Binds fast, yet not for ever, but releases.
Then how should I not find this wisdom too?*

This is magnificent, but it does not sound like humility; and humility—'to think mortal thoughts', to 'know oneself'—is part of Wisdom. Has Ajax, in his newly-learned Wisdom, come to see what Odysseus knows, that Man is but 'a phantom and an insubstantial shade'? Has he learned to accept the disasters that life brings, like Tecmessa? The very splendour of the imagery speaks of his unbroken pride; and we may again note his language, for it is ominous: those mighty opposites Winter and Summer, Night and Day, when the time comes, *ἐκχωροῦσιν, ἐξίσταται*: they 'make room', 'get out of the way'. This is what Ajax will do; he will 'yield to the gods' because he must, but his pride will not allow him to humble himself before the Atreidae. All he can do is to imitate Night and Winter, and 'make room'. His pity for Tecmessa and his son is genuine, but he can do nothing for them now. He continues:

*For I have learned today to hate a foe
So far, that he may yet become a friend,
And so far I resolve to serve a friend
Remembering he may yet become a foe.
Friendship's a haven where we ride at anchor,
But not in safety.*

*With regard to this,
All shall be well.*

So that Ajax, henceforth, will not push hatred to the utmost limit. He has learned Wisdom—and we have divined how barren the lesson is to him.

*Tecmessa, go within;
Pray to the gods, and pray again, that I
May win from them all that my heart desires.
And you, my friends, pay me this tribute too.
Tell Teucer, when he comes, to care for me
And to be kind to you, for I must make
A certain journey. Do this that I ask,
And though my fortunes now are very low,
Soon you may hear that I am come to safety.*

All this the chorus receives with joy. We may think it simple-minded of them, but we should observe how Sophocles has drawn them: they are, if not simple-minded, at least single-minded; to them, Ajax is of the faction that is wronged; to them, all is well, now that Ajax is recovered from his frenzy:

"Ἐλυσεν αἰὸν ἄχος ἀπ' ὀμμάτων" Ἀρης —

The god of Frenzy has lifted the dark cloud from his eyes.

The Atreidae had been ungrateful and cruel to him (v. 616); now his wrath has left him (716 f); all is well. This chorus at least is no 'ideal spectator'.

We are not so confident, and our forebodings are at once confirmed by the Messenger: Athena's wrath still rests on Ajax, and since he has gone out alone it cannot be for anything good. Why Athena is angry we are told most explicitly: the cause is the irreligious arrogance which Ajax has habitually shown. The attack on his commanders and colleagues was only a crowning instance of it. The frenzy, as Athena clearly said, was a special visitation sent by her when Ajax was already seeking the lives of his fellow-captains. That has passed, but—for one day—Athena's anger remains. And what does this mean?

What would happen, if Ajax were for this one day under Teucer's control, is a question which Sophocles perhaps suggests, but does not exactly raise. If it is legitimate to ask it, the answer would be, I suppose, that he might be brought to see what true Wisdom is, in his present case: to make his submission, and to accept what the Greek commanders would do to him. As it is, he has followed his own bent, and gone, broken but still proud, to his death. Tecmessa's appeal did move him; the irony in his speech—a very bitter irony—is that without Wisdom his pity could only be barren. His pride has put it beyond his power to respond to Tecmessa's cry, even when he would.

In Ajax's last speech Sophocles is again at his most magnificent. First, a theme is announced that we have heard before, and shall hear again:

Here stands the slayer, ready for its sharp work; the gift of Hector, my bitterest enemy, whom I hated above any other Trojan; and it is firmly planted in the enemy soil of Troy, newly whetted, well disposed to give me a swift death.

What this means, what part it has in the structure of the play, is a question which we will try to answer when Teucer has given ampler expression to the idea.

Then Ajax prays: first that it may be Teucer who shall find his body, and save it from being 'flung out, a prey for dogs and birds'. This prayer is answered, though it is not the strength of Teucer that preserves the body from outrage, but the humanity of Odysseus. When we are able to set side by side this prayer and its fulfilment, we may well ask ourselves the question which the chorus asked when Polyneices' body was buried: 'Do we not see in this the hand of God?' Surely we do; and it operates, here, in the Wisdom of Odysseus.

His second prayer is not answered, that the Erinyes may destroy the Atreidae and the whole army for destroying him. (The Erinyes did destroy Agamemnon, but that has nothing to do with this play. All that Agamemnon has done here is to participate in a quite reasonable decision about the arms of Achilles.) From this we see how very far Ajax is from having learned Wisdom. Finally, he shows the same frustrated compassion for his parents that he has already shown for Tecmessa and his son. He is certainly not unfeeling; merely helpless:

ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ἔργον ταῦτα θρηνηῖσθαι μάτην —

It is no use to shed idle tears over this.

Ajax has tried to mould life to his own pattern, and he has failed. 'Seek victory', his father had said, 'but always *σὺν θεῷ*, subject to the guidance of Heaven.' Since he could not accept life on its own terms he has now only one thing to do—to fall on his sword.

Now we must consider Teucer. In his long speech he says two things of especial significance. The first is that by the death of Ajax he himself is ruined; Telamon, fierce father of a fierce son, will drive him into exile. This, it may be, helps us to

understand Ajax, but this is not the main point. We have been told already how Teucer barely escaped being stoned to death by the infuriated army, merely because he was Ajax's brother; now he faces the vengeance of Telamon. We may add to this—in fact, we should—the misery which Tecmessa fears for herself and for Eurysaces, and the terror of the chorus (vv. 251 ff) that they too will be stoned to death. All these things would be monstrously unjust. If Sophocles had any reason for bringing them in, what was it, except that they show what happens when the behaviour of men is not governed by Wisdom?

The second point is the full development of the theme of Hector's sword:

How can I part your body from the deadly sword that has killed you? Now you see how Hector, even from his grave, was to slay you. Think on the fate of these two men! By the belt that Ajax gave to him, Hector was bound to the chariot and dragged behind it until he died. Ajax, who had this sword as a gift from Hector, has fallen upon it and is killed—by Hector. Was it not the Erinyes who forged this sword, and the grim artificer Death who made the belt? I say that the gods contrived this, as everything else that befalls men.

One thing is evident: Sophocles meant something serious by this, or he would not have said it three times. Another thing is evident: it is yet one more instance of his conception of a pattern or a rhythm that runs through human affairs.¹ In this particular form, the dead reaching out to kill the living, it is to be found in no less than five of the seven plays. In the *Electra* (vv. 1419 ff) 'The dead live; those slain of old drain the blood from their slayers'; and the blood is 'refluent', 'flowing in the reverse direction' (*παλίρρυτον*). It is the dead hand of Polyneices that is destroying Antigone (*Antigone* v. 871). Oedipus begs Creon (*O.T.* 1451 ff) that he may be driven out upon Cithaeron 'which my parents while they lived designed to be my tomb, that I may die at their hands who sought to kill me'. In the *Trachiniae* Heracles is destroyed through the agency of Nessus, whom he had killed, by the venom of the Hydra, whom also he had killed. As we have seen before, it is one aspect of Dikē; that is made unmistakable here by the mention of the Erinyes, the servant of Dikē. What Dikē is we know: not necessarily our moral

¹ See above, p. 175.

conception Justice, but in any case the eternal law of the Universe, physical and human.

It is critical sin to import into a play something that its author has not put there, but we shall not be doing that, I think, if at this point we remember the great scene in *Iliad VII*, since Sophocles virtually tells us to do it: the single combat between Hector and Ajax which was terminated by the fall of night and ended in the exchange of these gifts. Twice in the play we are told how much Ajax hated Hector. They fought their duel; neither could prevail. Now each has killed the other; the interrupted pattern is complete.

But what does it mean, here? We may go back to a little puzzle noticed above but not resolved. 'The proverb is true,' Ajax said; 'the gifts of an enemy never bring good. Therefore, *τοίγαρ*, I shall know that I must yield to the gods and reverence the Atreidae.' Why, we asked, does he say 'therefore'? Because he sees what we have called the pattern; he sees that it is Dikê that is wielding Hector's sword, which will kill him. One minor aspect of Dikê is commemorated in the proverb; in a moment Ajax is contemplating more majestic aspects, Night yielding to day and Winter to Summer. From these, superbly, he returns to himself:

Then how should I not find this wisdom too?

What he says next has not been universally admired, at least so far as half of it is concerned. That one should not hate an enemy without remembering that some day he may become a friend, that is admirable. The obverse is not so good; it is a cold and calculating way to think of friendship. Perhaps it is, but let us consider it in its context, and let us reflect on the particular application of it that we find in the play. What Sophocles is saying is that the circumstances of life are baffling and unpredictable, so that it behoves us to be wary and well poised, ready to meet what comes. This is a part, perhaps a minor one, of Wisdom. Yet not a very minor part; for see how Odysseus bears himself towards Ajax at the end: 'I hated him when it was decent (*καλόν*) to hate him.' But now he is dead. 'He was my worst enemy, but still, I would not scorn him so far as to deny that he was the bravest of us all, after Achilles.' 'But men like him', says Agamemnon, 'are frantic (*εμπληκτοι*).' 'Yes,' replies

Odysseus, 'but many a man is an enemy one day and a friend the next. It is not good to be too rigid in one's judgment.' Presently he says: 'Teucer, I have been your enemy; from now on I offer you my friendship in like measure.'

This illustrates the other half of Ajax's maxim, and it is not cold or ignoble—and it is this half that Sophocles chooses to present. Here is poise and wisdom, in the face of life's uncertainties—the readiness to take the good with the bad, to forget and to forgive. No man is perfect; we should not resent the bad too fiercely when there is good to set in the balance against it.

Now, all this was implicit in what Athena said to Odysseus in the first scene, and in his reply: 'You see how great is the power of the gods? A single day can overturn or restore anything human.'—'I do see it; therefore I pity him, enemy though he is. Man is nothing but a phantom, an insubstantial shade'—'Therefore avoid pride, if you are stronger or richer than another. It is the wise whom the gods cherish.' In this is announced, if not the theme of the play, at least its general scope; and that is not very different from the Socratic question *πῶς δεῖ ζῆν*;—how are we to live our lives? The demands that life makes of us are imperious; the strength of the gods is great. The way in which the gods order the universe—their Dikê—is something that we can understand, but only partially. We can see, if we will, the moral laws which are part of Dikê; we can see the majestic alternation of Night and Day, Summer and Winter. Sometimes, in a flash, more is revealed to us, as when we see that the belt of Ajax and Hector's sword fulfilled at last the enmity which was left unslaked on the field of battle. What is the meaning of such things as these? Sophocles does not pretend to answer this question; but he does say that it was an Erinyes that forged the sword, and that the gods contrived it. At least it is not meaningless, for it is a manifestation of Dikê.

Since we are so weak and vulnerable, in comparison with the gods, we must have Wisdom. It may save us, or it may not. It could not save Tecmessa from the overwhelming disaster, the *ἀναγκαία τύχη*, which came upon her: yet this is not quite true, because Tecmessa, having Wisdom, was *not* overwhelmed. It could have saved Ajax. It is, in any case, the only guide through the uncertainties of life.

This, I think, is the connexion—and it is a very intimate one

—between Ajax's reflections about the sword and the proverb, about Night, Winter and Sleep, about the necessity of yielding to the gods and to the Atreidae, and about Friendship and Enmity. As was said above, it is a connexion that we have to argue about, for it is based on a religion which is not our own. This process of arguing out brings with it one grave inconvenience: it gives the impression that the play, to this critic at least, is something of a philosophical treatise. It is of course nothing of the kind, and something had better be said to restore the balance. Let us then, before we go on with the play, contemplate for a moment what Sophocles is putting before us: this magnificent Ajax, surely as splendid a tragic hero as any poet ever created, brought to shame and death by his own blazing pride and his lack of Wisdom. Moreover, when at last his pity is aroused, and he sees what his death will mean to others, he can do nothing for them; only disengage himself from them with words which seem to say one thing but mean another. And again—perhaps the most tragic thing of all—when, on the edge of death, he says that at last he has learned the lesson of Wisdom, we find that he is as far from it as ever: all that he has learned is that it is time for him to go; and he goes, calling down imprecations on his leaders, his old friends, and the army.

Now he lies dead. He has attempted the impossible: to impose his own pattern on life. But the play continues, and we have to discover why, and whether it is a bore to us, as it was to the Scholiast.

The scenes of wrangling that follow are, as Jebb said, 'repugnant to modern taste'; what Jebb did not see is that they are repugnant to Greek taste too. That is the whole point. And they are certainly not a loose addition; they develop naturally out of the conception of Wisdom which we have been considering, and they lead to a climax which is something more profound than a vindication of Ajax.

First Menelaus and then Agamemnon show that they too lack this same Wisdom. They have some excuse indeed for their behaviour; like Creon in the *Antigone* they can adduce respectable principles of statecraft to support their case—but what does it mean? It means what it means in the other play too, that the body of a fellow human being would be eaten by dogs and birds—a degradation of our common humanity and an

outrage to the laws of the gods. What is common to this play and the *Antigone* is the passionate assertion that humanity comes first; it must prevail over all our political and even moral calculations.

Menelaus, a small and narrow man, argues thus. Ajax was always insubordinate; but for Athena, we should all have been murdered by him. Insubordination is ruinous to any society. There must be δέος, the fear inspired by authority; where this prevails there is security. Hybris is ruinous; even a strong man may fall from a slight cause. Things go by turns: ἔρπει παραλλάξ ταῦτα. So they do; it is a thought which the play has already impressed on us. But what conclusion are we to draw? Menelaus draws this one: 'Ajax was a man of intolerable insolence. Now it is my turn to be disdainful (μέγα φρονεῖν); he shall not be buried.' In fairness to Menelaus we must not forget the provocation; but as we look at the body of a great man, reckless and criminal though he was, with his wife and child sitting by it as suppliants, we feel that humanity, to say nothing of heroism, deserves more than this; and as we contemplate, as we have been made to do, the insecurity of everything human, we see that Menelaus has not argued far enough. 'These things go by turns,' and (as the chorus remarks at the end of the play) you never know what will happen next. The time might come when a Menelaus would need mercy and forgiveness.

Agamemnon is little better than his brother. He has one good argument: it is intolerable if men like Ajax will not accept the verdict of a court, but resort to violence. This is true—just as it is true that the crime of Polyneices was intolerable; but the claims of humanity are absolute. For the rest, Agamemnon is nothing but foolish arrogance—except when he is so insensate as to ask Teucer: 'Why be so insolently arrogant over something which is a man no longer, only a shadow?' This question has been answered in advance by Odysseus: 'We are all insubstantial shadows.' Things go by turns.

The vulgarity of their manner is the counterpart of the meanness of their thought. Ajax had little Wisdom in the handling of his life, and his lack of Wisdom destroyed him; but nevertheless Ajax was magnificent. In the lack of Wisdom that these men show there is something that dishonours humanity. The question at issue is the burial of Ajax, but behind it looms a

bigger one which gives urgency and amplitude to this one: $\pi\omega\varsigma$ $\delta\epsilon\iota$ $\zeta\eta\nu$; How are we to live? The answer to both is brought by Odysseus. He knows that life is uncertain, that today's foe is tomorrow's friend, that no man is great or good all the time, that we should remember good deeds rather than bad, that we must respect the laws of the gods—and if for this we substitute the modern phrase 'the laws of humanity' we do no violence to the sense. No excuse is offered for what Ajax had done; there is on the other hand generous remembrance of his past services, a recognition that both in his greatness and in his crime he was human; and above all there is respect for the fact of death, to which we all come.

The last scenes, then, are not 'a bore'. The play has a splendid unity; it is both very moving and very profound. It has been called 'a picture-gallery', and the description may pass, provided that we realise that the pictures are so disposed as to call forth emotions and thoughts of very great depth. In creating Ajax, Sophocles has given a picture, seldom equalled, of Man in his splendour and in his folly; and, 'wishing to extend his drama', he made it a profound study of the conditions of human life, and of the spirit in which we should confront them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Greek and Elizabethan Tragedy

Scene: A Street in Thebes. *Enter* two mechanicals.

FIRST M.: *Godden, Sir. 'Tis a fair day.*

SECOND M.: *A fair day and a foul day, and a fair day for the fowl.*

FIRST M.: *How so, Sir?*

SECOND M.: *'Tis a day when the fowl may go a-fairing. Ergo, 'tis a fair day and a foul.*

FIRST M.: *Foul enough with thee, for it hath befouled thy wits.*

SECOND M.: *Wits, Sirrah? Hark 'ee: if a hungry crow peck a man's eye out, is not that a fair thing for the crow? And is not the crow a fowl?*

FIRST M.: *Truly, 'tis a foul thing that a fowl should eat such fare as a man's eye.*

SECOND M.: *But if that man be a double-dyed traitor? Doth not that make the foul fair?*

Why is it inconceivable that Sophocles should have begun the *Antigone* in this eminently early-Shakespearian manner? That is one question which it seems reasonable to ask and to try to answer. Why do the Greek and the Elizabethan drama differ so widely in form, style and texture?

Another question concerns the illogicalities, or distortions, which we have been examining. We have seen what they are, and why they were contrived; but the question remains why Sophocles *could* contrive them, without irritating or baffling his audience. Unless the explanations given above are quite mistaken, it is plain that he counted on receiving from his audience a response very different from the one which he has received from some of his modern admirers; for these, time after time, ask and try to answer questions which, from Sophocles' point of view, do not exist at all.

The essence of the distortions is that there are certain inconvenient questions which Sophocles does not expect his audience to ask. Why does Neoptolemus know all these things?