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Ajax in the Trugrede

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AJAX IN THE *TRUGREDE*

A leading character in a play, at any rate in a major speech, is normally doing several things: he is saying what the development of the plot requires, and sometimes also expressing the dramatist's own tragic vision; he is also expressing his own thoughts and emotions, or saying what from his point of view the rhetoric of the situation requires. There are thus at least two questions to ask about the *Trugrede*: What is its function in the economy of the plot? Why does Sophocles give this speech to Ajax, and what light does it throw on his character as presented by Sophocles? The first question is easy enough to answer. There can be no doubt that this is a deception speech in the sense that Tecmessa and the Chorus are misled about what is going to happen, and at any rate part of Sophocles' purpose was evidently to achieve an effect of relaxation of tension or 'retardation'. At first all is gloom and despair; then when the suicide of Ajax seems to be imminent, this speech leads Tecmessa and the sailors to think that he means to live on after all, and they express their relief in a joyful hyporchema. Then follows a messenger speech with warnings that dispel their joy but still offer a gleam of hope, until that hope is extinguished when they find the dead body of Ajax. Sophocles has thus contrived an arresting dramatic sequence to fill the interval between the opening scene and the discovery of Ajax' death. The main effect could have been produced by direct, unambiguous falsehood in the speech we are considering, but (still looking at it from the dramaturgical point of view) Sophocles presumably wished the spectators to be aware that the joy and relief were illusory, so that they could at once appreciate the tragic irony of the sailors' rejoicing. There was probably no way of informing the audience directly that the speech was meant to be deceptive, and Sophocles therefore included in it numerous ambiguous expressions which the Chorus and Tecmessa, eager to believe good news, interpret as indicating a change of purpose, whereas for the spectators, who are more detached and probably aware of the traditional version of the story according to which Ajax killed himself,¹ they have ominous overtones and arouse suspicion, in the last lines verging on certainty, that in this play too he still means to take his own life.

Some have maintained that we need look no further. Thus Ernst Howald:² 'Diese Lugenszene ist rein um der Spannung willen da; sie schafft Retardation, Scheinentspannung. Dies ist ihre ganze, aber auch ihre grosse Bedeutung.' Most scholars, however, stress the importance of the second question, and there is a general line of interpretation which is accepted by many scholars, of course with numerous variations, partly perhaps arising from a conviction that, in a speech that contains splendid poetry and occupies a whole episode at the centre of the play, we must look for some profound significance for our conception of Ajax. In some respects it goes back to Reinhardt's treatment in 1933,³ which has since been developed and modified by other

¹ A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1951), 79, surprisingly insists that the spectators have no advantage over the friends of Ajax, and is led to the conclusion that in hoodwinking Tecmessa and the sailors Sophocles could not avoid hoodwinking the audience as well, and was thus faced with a veritable technical impasse.

² E. Howald, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Munich, 1930), 98. See also T. von Wilamowitz, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin, 1917), 63ff.

³ Karl Reinhardt, *Sophokles* (Frankfurt, 1933). See H. Friis Johansen, 'Sophocles 1939–1959', *Lustrum* (1963), 177–8: 'A healthy tendency may be discerned for preferring an interpretation which is not far from that of Reinhardt.'

scholars, notably by Knox⁴ in 1965 and Sicherl⁵ in 1977, and it is of this view that I wish to offer some criticisms. The essence of it is that Ajax' purpose has not changed but that his outlook has been transformed; he still intends to kill himself but for new reasons that stem from a newly acquired understanding of the world. The reason for his death is his perception that his own *ἦθος* is fundamentally incompatible with the nature of reality and its laws. Thus, for instance, Reinhardt:⁶ 'Dem Aias öffnen sich plötzlich die Augen: er erkennt die Welt, doch nicht um als Erkennender sich in sie einzufügen, nicht um ihre Ordnung sich zu beugen, sondern in ihr das Fremde, Gegenteilige zu sehen woran er nur teilhaben könnte, wenn er nicht Aias wäre.' So too Sicherl:⁷ 'Now he is fully conscious of his place in the world, of his conflict with the cosmic order.' Sicherl also maintains that when he speaks of purification and submission there is a sense in which he really means what he says, since he is aware of 'the tragic paradox that to fit himself into the world he must yield and leave it; only by dying can he be reconciled with his enemies'.

In the first place it is necessary to decide on the dramatic form of the speech. Is it, as Knox and Sicherl hold, a soliloquy in the sense that though Tecmessa and the Chorus are present Ajax is oblivious of their presence, or at any rate is not talking to them but communing with his own spirit? If so, he is not of course seeking to deceive anyone in this part of the speech. There are some formal grounds for this view. There is no vocative or other form of address, whereas normally a character who appears at the beginning of an epeisodion indicates without delay to whom he is speaking, and the use of *τῆσδε τῆς γυναικός* and *νιν* referring to Tecmessa implies that he is not speaking to her. However, though there may be no parallel for this absence of a form of address, the limited amount of material somewhat reduces the validity of such negative arguments, and it may be said to be in keeping with the brusqueness of Ajax that though he assumes Tecmessa and the Chorus to be listening he uses no vocative of address until he has some commands to give. The deictic *τῆσδε* certainly indicates that he is not directly addressing Tecmessa, but, so far from precluding, actually implies awareness of a stage audience.

Apart from such considerations, Knox⁸ argues that the speech must be a soliloquy since deception is 'contrary to Ajax' character and insufficiently motivated'. No doubt if we judge by general impressions derived from the Homeric poems and elsewhere we think of Ajax as a fighter rather than a schemer, and we should associate deception with Odysseus rather than Ajax, but in this play there is no such contrast between them; it is Ajax, not Odysseus, of whom the adjective *δόλιος* is used (47), and in any case I cannot see that we are justified in assuming that Sophocles would never represent Ajax as misleading his friends about his intentions, when there is nothing treacherous or harmful about the deception.⁹ As regards motivation, Perrotta¹⁰ roundly declares: 'Allo spettatore basta sapere soltanto che Aiace vuol ingannare Tecmessa e il Coro; non importa che sappia perché vuol ingannarli.' This is perhaps rather extreme, since there is the possibility that some members of an audience may be disconcerted by an action for which *no* reason can be imagined, though in drama

⁴ B. M. W. Knox, 'The *Ajax* of Sophocles', *HSCP* 65 (1961).

⁵ M. Sicherl, 'The tragic issue in Sophocles' *Ajax*', *YCS* 25 (1977).

⁶ Op. cit. 34.

⁷ Op. cit. 91.

⁸ Op. cit. 12.

⁹ So Jebb, *Introd.* xxxv: 'It would be a mistake to suppose that ancient Greeks would have seen anything unworthy or unheroic in the use of such deception.'

¹⁰ G. Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Florence, 1934), 157.

we should be prepared to settle for something less than an absolutely compelling motive. Here the commonly suggested reason that Ajax wishes to bid farewell to his friends, but also to ensure that his departure, sword in hand, to the sea shore will be undisturbed by protest or lamentation, seems to me adequate. Sophocles could safely assume that the audience would be unlikely to probe very deeply; careful scrutiny and appraisal of motives is a characteristic activity of the scholar in his study rather than of a spectator in the theatre.¹¹

However that may be, I regard it as decisive that in the last nine lines, which are undoubtedly addressed to Tecmessa and the sailors, Ajax' careful avoidance of any explicit statement of his purpose must be intentional. His words may serve to confirm the spectators' suspicions about his true intention, and, for instance, *εἰμ' ἐκεῖσ' ὅποι πορευτέον* might in another context be unmistakably a euphemism for dying, but I cannot agree with Knox that there is no ambiguity here and that 'the harsh frankness of the closing lines surely rules out the possibility of an intention to deceive in the earlier part of the speech'.¹² On the contrary, these lines seem clearly intended to deceive through ambiguity of expression, and if so it is likely that the ambiguities in the rest of the speech have the same purpose. In fact if in the first thirty-eight lines Ajax is oblivious of the presence of others, it is not easy to account for those ambiguities, and Knox and Sicherl have recourse to explanations which seem to me too subtle and involved for drama. Knox suggests¹³ that at the conscious level Ajax is seriously considering a change of purpose, but 'the very terms in which he expresses his new emotions betray the fact that they are rejected by his deepest instincts'; the ambiguities are thus not intentional. Sicherl objects that they must be intentional, and argues that they are really a condensed expression by Ajax of the tragic paradox that he can only accommodate himself to the world by withdrawing from it. It is better, since the tone of the speech is certainly reflective, to take it as, so to speak, a soliloquy that is meant to be overheard, and meant to deceive. If it is true that the last nine lines provide clear evidence of Ajax' intention to deceive, it is really superfluous to speculate about whether Sophocles would be likely so to represent him, or about the adequacy of any suggested motive.

If it is accepted that Ajax means to mislead, there are important consequences. Before he shut himself in his tent it is repeatedly made clear that Tecmessa and the Chorus were convinced that he meant to take his own life; see 227–30, 396–7, 399, 415–16, 473–8, 561ff., 583ff., 695. Now he seeks to persuade them that he does not so intend, and however glad they may be to think so, it will not be all that easy to convince them of this astonishing volte-face; as the Chorus virtually say in 715–16, if we can believe this we can believe anything. They would not have been convinced by any brief, perfunctory assertion of a change of purpose. Thus even if the sole purpose of the speech were to enable the dramatist to achieve an effect of retardation and dramatic irony, it would be necessary to compose an impressive speech and deploy the persuasive power of Sophoclean poetry. In *Electra* Sophocles composed another deception speech (680–763) by which Clytemnestra is to be convinced of the death

¹¹ Another question: why does Ajax not kill himself in his tent? The *Trugrede* of course purports to answer this question, but if it is deceptive, what is his real reason? If this question is taken seriously it would provide an argument for the view that Tecmessa goes into the tent with Ajax. If, as I believe, this is unlikely, there is no obvious reason; but to assume that there must be one, other than the fact that this is how the dramatist chose to shape his plot, seems to border on the documentary fallacy.

¹² Op. cit. 14.

¹³ Op. cit. 15.

of Orestes, and in both plays the speech is the most effective for the occasion: to convince Clytemnestra we have the vivid and exciting account of a chariot race that never was; in the *Trugrede* we have a calm, eloquent and speciously argued account of Ajax' alleged change of purpose.

It is, however, *a priori* likely enough that the speech will also serve other purposes, and we must consider what evidence there is for the interpretation to which I have referred. On the opening lines Kitto¹⁴ observed 'It is apparent that *something* has happened to Ajax', and probably everyone would agree that he seems to be a different man; but of course he must *seem* so if the deception is to work. If we bear in mind the purpose of the speech and take into account his final monologue in the death scene, it may not be so obvious that he is really different. Kitto also observes on the opening that 'there is something more gravely philosophic than anything we have yet heard, or would have expected from Ajax'. It suits his purpose to sound more calm and reflective, though there is nothing deeply philosophic about his reflexions; there is in fact rather a noticeable tendency to employ proverbial or semi-proverbial expressions.¹⁵ He begins with a variant of the commonplace¹⁶ that time changes everything and anything can happen. He thus prepares the way, as well he might, for the barely credible¹⁷ and actually false assertion that he, of all men, has been made womanish. There is, however, some ambiguity in *στόμα*, which is generally taken in the sense 'edge' of a weapon, here used metaphorically, e.g. Jebb: 'I felt the keen edge of my temper softened.' This sense is actually very rare; *στόμα* generally means 'mouth' especially as the organ of speech, so that the audience may suspect Ajax' real meaning to be that his words have become weak and womanish, but not his thoughts. There is ambiguity again in *οἰκτίρω... λιπεῖν*, since it is not certain whether, as with *αἰσχύνομαι*, the infinitive implies that he will not leave them,¹⁸ but presumably this is how Tecmessa and the sailors understand him. That is certainly not what he means, though it is possible that on reflexion he has come to feel some pity for Tecmessa. Then with the lines beginning *ἀλλ' εἶμι...* his chief concern is to offer a plausible reason for going, sword in hand, to the sea shore. By this time his friends are beginning to hope, and do not catch the overtones of words which to the spectators are, as Knox says, 'heavy with the sound of death'.¹⁹ So far I see no indication of sudden insight or change of outlook. We may have a general impression of Ajax as a man of action, not a thinker,²⁰ but even so can we believe that he had regarded the world as static

¹⁴ H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London, 1956), 188.

¹⁵ In addition to the opening lines see 664, 668, 679–82, and cf. E. Wolf, *Sentenz und Reflexion bei Sophokles* (Leipzig, 1910), 89–90.

¹⁶ E.g. Hdt. 5.9 *γένετο δ' ἄν πᾶν ἐν τῷ μακρῷ χρόνῳ*; Archil. 122 (West); S. Ph. 305; E. Fr. 761. In S. OC 609ff. a similar reference to changes brought about by long lapse of time is more appropriate, since spectators will think of the centuries between the time of Oedipus and the fifth century, whereas in our play very little time has elapsed since Ajax' harsh words in 579–95.

¹⁷ A. M. Dale, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, 1969), 223 observes that 'When Ajax says that pity has unmanned him and made him change his mind, the falseness of this pretence should be so strikingly apparent as to warn us against believing the rest of the speech'.

¹⁸ This is the sense according to K.-G. 2, 484 21 Anm. 3 'aus Mitleid scheue ich mich sie zu lassen', as in Hom. Od. 20.202–3. *LSJ* translates 'I am sorry to leave you', and Jebb thinks either meaning possible. There is probably deliberate ambiguity.

¹⁹ E.g. *κάτω* (660) in Sophocles always refers to the underworld, as for instance at the end of the death speech, and *λουτρά* is often used of ceremonial washing of a corpse before burial, as in *Ajax* 1405, *Ant.* 1201, or washing one marked for death, as in *OC* 1602.

²⁰ Or an orator; but to say, with M. Simpson, *Arethusa* 2 (1969), 88, that Ajax 'transforms himself from a doer of deeds into a speaker of words' is to discount the conventions of poetic drama. Sophocles is not seeking to correct Pindar's description of Ajax as *ἄγλωσσος μὲν, ἦτορ δ' ἄλλκιμος* (*N.* 8.24).

and immutable, and has only now realised that time can bring changes? That the gifts of enemies are liable to prove disastrous is, as he says, a piece of proverbial wisdom.

In the next three lines Ajax makes the crucial statement that henceforward he will yield to the gods and revere (σέβειν) the Atridae. A statement on these lines was essential for the deception, since Ajax' friends might well assume that some form of submission would be a necessary condition if he intended to live on.²¹ On the face of it his assertion is unambiguous. There is, however, a certain hyperbole in using σέβειν in relation to mortals, especially when in the same sentence the weaker εἴκειν is used in relation to gods, and this may be a hint to spectators, already warned by ambiguities in the preceding lines, that Ajax does not really mean what he says.²² In the third line, which perhaps echoes a proverbial saying,²³ they might detect in these words, coming from Ajax, a note of bitter sarcasm, as modern scholars have done.²⁴ At any rate I take these three lines to be part of the strategy of deception, and see no reason to suppose that Ajax envisages his approaching death as in any sense a form of yielding to or becoming reconciled with his enemies. Any such view seems to be ruled out by his final monologue, in which there is no question of dissimulation, and in which before he dies he invokes a terrible curse upon the Atridae and the whole Achaean army. It is natural to suppose that he does not change, and that his outlook is still the same as when he lamented his failure 'to slay those accursed men' (373–4).

His attitude to the gods is not made so clear. Jebb argues that 'if his profession of yielding to the gods were ironical, his real meaning must be that he defies them: he would be a Capaneus, a Mezentius'. But this antithesis is too absolute. On his return to sanity he seems to be aware that Athena was responsible for his madness (401–2, 450–2); he assumes the general hostility of the gods (457–8 ἐμφανῶς θεοῖς ἐχθαίρομαι) and declares that he owes them no service (589–90); but bitter railings against the gods are common enough in those grievously afflicted, and do not make him a θεομάχος. On the other hand the fact that he links the gods with the Atridae in the same short sentence suggests that his reference to them is ironical, and makes it unlikely that he thinks of himself as having, so to speak, come into a state of grace. His petitions to various superhuman powers in his last speech have been given too much weight as an indication of some sort of religious conversion. Thus O. Taplin²⁵ writes: 'Ajax has made his peace with the gods, and that is why he is able to spend much of his death speech in prayer.' To modern ears 'prayer' may suggest communing with God in a spirit of devout humility, but this is not characteristically Greek. As G. H. Gellie²⁶ put it: 'Ajax is not an irreligious man turned religious, but a Greek man who hopes that certain things will happen that are beyond his personal control, and prays that appropriate sponsors will act for him.' The Olympians to whom he prays are Zeus, to whom, as Jebb says, he may be appealing as an ancestor of the Aeacidae, and

²¹ What would happen if Ajax did not commit suicide is never debated or formally considered. In several passages the Chorus (227–30, 253–4) and Ajax himself (408) seem to expect the death penalty, but in 460ff. Ajax assumes that if he chooses he can sail away homewards, and the *Trugrede* is based on the assumption that to live on is an option still open.

²² R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles, An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), 49 puts it rather more strongly: 'if there is anything in the speech which betrays its "insincerity", it is this choice of words.'

²³ Jebb, on *S. Ant.* 666, refers to Leutsch, *Paroem.* App. I.100 κρεισσόνων γὰρ καὶ δίκαια κἀδικ' ἔστ' ἀκούειν.

²⁴ E.g. M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Leipzig, 1930), 177 'So ist das zweifellos bitterster Sarkasmus'; Perrotta, op. cit. 153 speaks of 'ferissima amarezza'.

²⁵ Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London, 1975), 131.

²⁶ G. H. Gellie, *Sophocles, A Reading* (Melbourne, 1972), 22.

Hermes in his routine capacity as *πομπαῖος*. There may be a *prima facie* inconsistency between these petitions and his earlier assertions about the gods, but I doubt whether a Greek audience would regard this as evidence of conversion to a new outlook.

The deity most concerned is of course Athena, to whom the only reference is in 656, where Ajax declares his intention of ‘escaping from the heavy wrath of the goddess’ by the symbolic purification of washing off in the sea the stains of blood. It has been suggested that the underlying meaning is that he will appease the goddess not by purification but by his death, but the wording implies rather that he is really thinking that in death he will be beyond the reach of her anger. These lines provide no valid evidence that, as Jebb put it, ‘he has now come to view it (his death) also as an atonement due to Athena’. If we were meant to think so, we might have expected some reference to her in his last speech. Sicherl²⁷ supposes that the suicide of Ajax would at once be understood as a propitiatory sacrifice to Athena, and that no other indication of a changed relationship would be necessary. He notes quite rightly that *σφάζειν* is a technical term for slaughtering a victim, but the verb and its cognates, e.g. *νεοσφαγής* in *S. Tr.* 1130, often have no connotation of sacrifice, so that the occurrence of *σφαγεύς* in 815 would hardly suffice to convey the idea of a propitiatory sacrifice. So far as the suicide was felt to recall any ritual act, it would be more likely to suggest the vengeance suicide,²⁸ of which it exhibits some characteristic features.

Perhaps it is mainly in the following lines (669–83) that Ajax is supposed to reveal his new insight into reality and new reasons for killing himself and for regarding this as a form of yielding to authority. He first offers an analogy between himself and the powers of nature, since even they yield to authority (*τιμαῖς ὑπέικει*), and cites as examples winter giving way to summer, night to day, storm to calm and sleep to waking. Critics have rightly praised the splendid imagery of this passage, but does it really indicate a new and profound insight on the part of Ajax, or new reasons for suicide? Sicherl claims²⁹ that ‘as in *Oedipus Tyrannus* so in *Ajax* the tragedy reaches its peak with the hero’s insight into reality. Ajax, like Oedipus, changes from a blind man to a seeing one’. Oedipus does indeed suddenly come to realise who and what he is, but what exactly does Ajax discover? We can hardly suppose that he now suddenly perceives that the seasons change and men wake from sleep. Is it that, as Sicherl argues, he is now fully conscious of the inevitability of his fate, since his nature is incompatible with the world he describes? In his first great speech (430–80) he has clearly seen that because of his disgrace for him only one course is open:

ἀλλ’ ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι
τὸν εὐγενῆ χρῆ. πάντ’ ἀκήκοας λόγον.

and has already seen that death will in some sense restore his honour. To say that he is now describing a world of change that he cannot accept and so must die is tantamount to saying that he is so unique a person that he cannot continue to exist in a world where day regularly follows night and so on. Of course if we reflect on the character of Ajax as presented in the play as a whole, we may well conclude that a man as proud, stubborn and uncompromising as Ajax is ill fitted for life in a world where some form of compromise may be essential; but we are considering the mind of Ajax, and are not entitled to attribute such reflexions to him in this speech. He might have described such a world, but he has not done so; for what he describes in the world

²⁷ Op. cit. 96–7.

²⁸ See M. Delcourt, ‘Le Suicide par vengeance dans la Grèce ancienne’, *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 119 (1939), 154–71, esp. 158–61.

²⁹ Op. cit. 94.

of nature is essentially alternation, not submission or compromise, and there seems to be no indication in the *Trugrede* or elsewhere that he is aware of any such fundamental incompatibility as has been postulated.

From this majestic picture of the regular rhythm in the world of nature Ajax draws the conclusion:

ἡμεῖς δὲ πῶς οὐ γνωσόμεσθα σωφρονεῖν;

σωφρονεῖν in this context ostensibly means submission to the Atreidae and acquiescence in what he believes to be an act of injustice,³⁰ and it is not clear why the alternation of night and day, sleep and waking, and the rest should be a reason for such submission. The analogy is perhaps made more plausible by the Greek conception of *δίκη* as including both laws of nature and moral order in the world of men,³¹ the point then being that as natural phenomena are subject to law, so must Ajax accept the moral order in the world; but since Ajax has never shown the slightest indication that he is conscious of guilt, the inference drawn from the analogy still seems unjustified. Some interpretations seek to take account of the fact that, as we have noted, what Ajax describes is a process of alternation. M. Simpson³² suggests that as the natural phenomena when they make way for each other do not change but disappear and cease to exist, so Ajax will never change but remove himself and cease to exist. He agrees with Sicherl about the tragic paradox that Ajax comes into harmony with the world (*σωφρονεῖν*) by leaving it – a difficult concept for an audience to grasp, and too much to extract from these lines. According to Hans Diller,³³ the point is that these natural phenomena are mutually exclusive: where summer or day is, there is no place for winter or night; so for Ajax there is no place in the brightness and warmth of life; for him the way is to cold, darkness and death. This may be true, but it is not what Ajax says, and both these interpretations seem to me forced and unconvincing. On the assumption that Ajax is in effect talking to and aiming to mislead Tecmessa and the Chorus, I find it simpler and better to suppose that the analogy is meant to contribute to the deception. In strict logic it does not justify Ajax' pretended submission to his enemies, but he may reckon that by dint of calling the rhythm observable in natural phenomena 'yielding to authority' he has drawn a comparison which will suffice to impress and help to convince simple sailors.³⁴ To the alert spectator the weakness of the analogy may possibly be another hint that Ajax has not really changed his outlook or his intentions.

In the last passage before Ajax directly addresses Tecmessa he continues to dwell on the notion of change, this time in the sphere of human relationships, where the relevance to his own situation is clearer. He asserts that he has newly realised that hatred for an enemy should be tempered by awareness that he may thereafter become a friend, and conversely that his help for a friend will be tempered by the thought that

³⁰ Menelaus and Agamemnon do not of course agree with Ajax and Teucer on this, and Sophocles does not take sides. That Ajax bitterly resented the award is already implied in Homer's account of the encounter between Odysseus and the shade of Ajax in *Od.* 11.543–64, but it may have been Pindar (*N.* 8.24ff.) who first explicitly represented Ajax as the victim of injustice, which perhaps became traditional; cf. *Pl. Ap.* 41b, where Palamedes and Ajax are linked together by Socrates as heroes who perished *διὰ κρίσιν ἄδικον*.

³¹ Cf. Heraclitus, Fr. 94 D.–K. *Ἥλιος γὰρ οὐχ ὑπερβήσεται μέτρα· εἰ δὲ μή, Ἐρινύες μιν Δίκης ἐπικούροι ἐξευρήσουσιν* and *Pl. R.* 500c.

³² M. Simpson, *op. cit.* 98–9.

³³ Hans Diller, 'Gottliches u. menschliches Wissen bei Sophokles', *Kleine Schriften* (Munich, 1971), 258.

³⁴ Knox makes the connexion seem closer by translating *καρτερώτατα* in 669 as 'headstrong'; this suits Ajax, but why should night or day be so described?

he will not always remain so.³⁵ These lines too serve the purpose of deception. In Greek the converse of a proposition tends to be included, even if it is less relevant,³⁶ and Tecmessa will take the first half of the antithesis to be the main point, and will apply it to his relationship to the Atridae, whereas for Ajax himself, and for the spectators, it is the converse that expresses his true feelings:³⁷ what he has 'lately learnt' is surely that a man may be betrayed by those whom he thought to be his friends; 'for most men the haven of friendship is false'. Here he is indeed describing a world that he might well find distasteful, where there is no stability in friendship and enmity, and the simple heroic code of helping friends and harming enemies may prove unworkable. All the same, it seems more likely that what made his suicide inevitable was not any such general reflexion,³⁸ but the specific act of betrayal by those who had been his comrades and friends, with all its consequences.

In the play as a whole it is clear enough that Ajax' downfall stems from his own nature – proud, obstinate, implacable; but as with other Sophoclean heroes³⁹ it seems to be the interaction of these qualities with particular events that is disastrous. For him, as the Chorus rightly judge (934ff.), it was the adverse decision about the arms of Achilles that proved fatal and led to the actions that made his suicide inevitable. Admittedly we have it on the authority of Calchas that long before that event Ajax had twice displayed excessive pride and self-esteem in disdainful divine aid, in contrast to the normal attitude of Homeric heroes, and of Ajax himself as portrayed by Homer. Heroic pride is in him carried to extremes,⁴⁰ and it is arguable that even if the decision about the arms had been different, in such a man something else *might* have triggered off a disastrous reaction. It may indeed have been part of Sophocles' purpose to bring out the danger which was inherent in the heroic conception of honour, and which made such characters eminently suitable as central figures in a tragedy. This is not, however, to say that 'his death is ordained by the world order because he is Ajax' or that such a thought was in his mind during the *Trugrede*. It is important that the spectators have already heard in the prologue Athena's description of him, to which Odysseus assents, as he was before the divinely inflicted madness:

τούτου τίς ἄν σοι τᾶνδρὸς ἢ προνούστερος
ἢ δρᾶν ἀμείνων ἠύρεθῃ τὰ καίρια;

This does not sound like a man who could not possibly live in the world as it is, a world that has not changed since the days of his glory and renown.

To conclude, I take it that the *Trugrede* has been rightly so called, since deception of Tecmessa and the Chorus is its principal *raison d'être* both on dramaturgical grounds and for Ajax' own reasons, and almost everything in the speech contributes

³⁵ This variant of a maxim attributed to Bias of Priene was probably known to many of Sophocles' audience. See Arist. *Rhet.* 1389b and 1395a, where it is mentioned among *τεθρυλημένα γνώμαι*.

³⁶ Cf. S. *OT* 614–15, where only the first line is strictly relevant to Creon's argument and the second supplies the converse.

³⁷ The change from the impersonal *ἐχθαρτέος* to the personal *ἰσχυροῦ* *βουλήσομαι* may be significant in this respect.

³⁸ G. Méautis, *Sophocle* (Paris, 1957), 39 writes: 'Tout change autour de moi, rien n'est stable, durable, solide'. This 'Transcription en clair' goes rather beyond what Ajax says, and when Méautis adds 'Continuer à vivre dans ce monde? Je ne le puis, ni ne le veux', he attributes to Ajax a line of thought which he has not expressed and can hardly be assumed to have adopted.

³⁹ On their common characteristics see B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley, 1964), chaps. one and two.

⁴⁰ This point is brought out by Winnington-Ingram, *op. cit.* 18–19.

in some way to this purpose. Ajax' intention has remained constant, to end his life for the reason he had already given, i.e. the intolerable wound to his pride and the damage to his reputation, which while he lived was irretrievable. From the time when he recovers his sanity until his death his outlook remains essentially the same – proud, uncompromising, obstinate, implacable. There is no conversion, no sense of guilt,⁴¹ no adaptation or reconciliation. That is not to say that the speech serves no purpose other than that of deception. In one sense the *Trugrede* certainly stands apart; as Sicherl observes, 'It seems hardly to fit in the otherwise straightforward development'; naturally enough, since here and here alone Ajax is dissembling. Yet in some ways it forms part of a series, and deepens impressions made in previous speeches. Ajax' first reaction to the realisation of his disgrace was a mere instinctive longing for death (361, 391, 396, 415–16). Then in his first formal speech he considers more calmly the possible courses of action, and decides that the only one worthy of him is to take his own life; this will be *καλῶς τεθνηκέναι*, and will at least show his father that his son is no coward.⁴² In his next speech he bids farewell to his son. It may be that, as has been suggested,⁴³ he sees his son as a kind of extension of himself, but even so he shows himself as no longer entirely self-centred; he thinks of how when he is gone the boy will be his mother's joy and the comfort of his grandparents (559, 568–70). In the third speech, the *Trugrede*, the tone is still more calm and reflective, and its sustained eloquence and imaginative sweep do much (perhaps illogically) to enhance the aura of greatness with which Sophocles has invested this awesome and forbidding figure. It is possible, too, that the fact that he envisages, if only for purposes of deception, a different course of action serves to emphasise by contrast his real determination,⁴⁴ and in retrospect confirms the impression that his suicide is no act of impulse, but the outcome of due deliberation and firm resolve.

I end with a brief comment on an interesting attempt by O. Taplin⁴⁵ to break entirely new ground in the interpretation of the *Trugrede*. Taplin is one of those who urge that, as he puts it, 'To regard the speech as wholly or even primarily a dramatic device does a philistine injustice to the magnificent poetry'. He thinks that the poetic quality guarantees the sincerity of all that Ajax says, and yet he appears to be dissembling. His solution is to question the universal assumption that in this speech the point at issue is the immediate intention of Ajax. He maintains that Ajax is not talking about whether he intends to commit suicide, but about the time after his death and all the years to come,⁴⁶ when 'his fortunes, at present at a low ebb, may rise on the see-saw of human affairs'. Without actual foreknowledge he is in a sense anticipating a process which actually begins in the last part of the play and continues into the future. The last word *σεσωμένον* will thus refer neither to living on nor to the peace of the grave, but to his ultimate rehabilitation after his death.

⁴¹ As Jebb, *Introd.* xxxvi, and others have supposed.

⁴² K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality* (Oxford, 1974), 168, points out that in *Dem.* 60.31 the speaker, when citing Ajax as an example of heroism, chooses to refer to his suicide, when he could have chosen instead to speak of occasions when he distinguished himself in the fighting at Troy.

⁴³ Winnington-Ingram, *op. cit.* 31.

⁴⁴ Cf. Hans Diller, 'Menschen- und Handlungsführung' in *Sophokles, Wege der Forschung* (Darmstadt, 1967), 195: 'der Trugrede, in der *e contrario* klar wird, wie Aias keinesfalls handeln kann.' For a similar line of thought see H. Weinstock, *Sophokles* (Berlin, 1937), 52–5, and Winnington-Ingram, *op. cit.* 47 n. 109.

⁴⁵ See O. Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London, 1978), 127–31, and 'Yielding to forethought: Sophocles' *Ajax*' in *Arktouros* (Berlin–New York, 1979), 122–9.

⁴⁶ This interpretation has the advantage of making the opening reference to 'long and countless years' more appropriate.

Apart from some minor difficulties,⁴⁷ to which Taplin himself draws attention, the main objection is, in my view, that the audience could not be expected to understand the speech in this way. Taplin writes: 'When Ajax tells us about pity and change and yielding, we, the audience, know that he is not talking about his intention to kill himself. Tecmessa and the Chorus, in their blindness, think that he is, since that is in the circumstances their chief preoccupation.' But surely the spectators, as they listen to the speech, must also be preoccupied with Ajax' immediate intentions. Taplin concedes that 'it will not be until the end of the play that they (the audience) see the full scope of Ajax' vision', and it is true that full understanding of a play may not be possible until it is ended; but normally each scene makes its own intelligible contribution to the total effect,⁴⁸ and it seems to me unlikely that a dramatist would compose a scene the purport of which the audience would be liable totally to misunderstand.

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⁴⁷ Since he maintains that Ajax speaks throughout without any deceit or sarcasm, he is obliged to argue that *σέβειν* (667) can be taken at its face value.

⁴⁸ *Prima facie* the death speech contradicts the *Trugrede*, but, as we have seen, the former actually confirms what the audience already suspected as they listened to the *Trugrede*.