Ajax: Introduction

I
Outline

The parts of a play: A Greek tragedy is divided into distinct sung (STASIMA, "formations" or ODES, "songs") and spoken parts (EPISODES parts "between the songs"), with the occasional mixing of the two in a KOMMOS ("beating" [of the breast] or "lament" between actors and chorus).

Like most Greek plays, the *Ajax* begins with a PROLOGUE. Sophoclean Prologues are usually in dialogue form.[1] The prologue of *Ajax* adds a third character, but there is no triangular scene of the three characters interacting. The prologue tells us or shows us where we are in the story, but it is also part of the play. All parts of the plays are in verse: the most common meter for the dialogue portions is iambic trimeter (considered the meter most like ordinary speech) in dipodic units (groups of two feet): that is six iambs (˘ ¯ and their variations, called resolutions). The prologue characters leave and the chorus enters usually chanting in anapests (˘ ˘ ¯), suitable for making an entrance. Their entrance song is called the PARODOS (the entrances on the sides of the stage area are also called PARODOI "side-walks" or EISODOI "entrances"). After the anapestic entrance the chorus forms into a group to sing and dance in various lyric meters. Their song is in strophic form, that is, matched sets of STROPHE/ANTISTROPHE ("turning", "opposite turning") in the same meter and generally thought to be accompanied by the same choral movements; sometimes an ode ends with an astrophic (unmatched) EPODE. The scene after the last choral ode (or STASIMON) is called the EXODOS ("exit"). The *Ajax* has an unusual construction. One scene (or episode) consists of a single speech. In all but a few plays the chorus, once situated in the ORCHESTRA ("dancing place": the round dancing floor used by chorus and actors), stays there until the end, but in *Ajax*, the chorus leaves to go looking for their commander and makes a second entrance (called an EPIPARODOS). The third episode involves a scene change.

Prologue (1-133): Athena, Odysseus; Ajax (enters at line 91, leaves at 117) Odysseus and Athena begin and end the scene

Parodos (134–200): Chorus

First episode, Part 1 (201–347): Tecmessa, Chorus (Ajax is heard from inside the *skēnē* beginning at 331)

---

[1]Some plays, Aeschylus' *Persians*, for example, begin with the entrance song of the chorus. Many of Euripides' plays begin with a monologue by one of the actors followed by a dialogue (for example, *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Trojan Women*, *Hippolytus*). Sometimes, as in *Ajax*, *Trojan Women*, *Alcestis*, *Hippolytus*, one (or both) of the actors in the prologue is a god who does not reappear in the drama.

Kommos 1 (348–429): Ajax, Chorus, Tecmessa

First Episode, Part 2 (430–595): Ajax, Tecmessa, Chorus

First Stasimon (596–645): Chorus

Second Episode (646–92): Ajax (time speech also called "the deception speech")

Second Stasimon (693–718): Chorus

Third Episode, Part 1(719–814): Messenger, Chorus, Tecmessa

Third Episode, Part 2 (815–65): Ajax (apart): Suicide

Epiparodos (Second Parodos) and Kommos 2 (866–973): Chorus, Tecmessa

Fourth Episode (974–1184): Teucer, Chorus, Menelaus

Third Stasimon (1185–1222): Chorus

Exodos (1223–1420): Teucer, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Chorus (silent: Tecmessa, Eurysaces, attendants)

Each tragedy has a chorus of fifteen men and three speaking actors (also male).[2] These actors are referred to as PROTAGONIST ("first actor/contestant"), DEUTERAGONIST ("second actor"), TRITAGONIST ("third actor"). There are also non-speaking attendants who are not considered part of the cast. Each of the three actors may take several roles. Because of the use of masks (covering the actor's head) and distinctive costumes this multiplying of roles was less difficult than it might be today. We have no way of knowing for sure how the playwright/producer assigned the parts. The only rule is that the same actor cannot play two characters in the same scene or departing/arriving too close together. There are many possibilities for the division of roles: for aesthetic reasons I prefer this one:

1 Ajax, Teucer
2 Tecmessa, Odysseus
3 Athena, Messenger; Menelaus, Agamemnon (the latter two, sons of Atreus or Atreidae)

1. As half-brothers Ajax and Teucer are very much alike and represent the same point of view. Teucer's love for his brother is part of the "hero's" rehabilitation after his disgrace (and, one might add, treason and animal abuse). They have similar stories to tell of their curmudgeonly father.

[2]In the earliest tragedies (Aeschylus' *Persians*, *Seven against Thebes*, *Suppliants* for example) only two actors were employed. Sophocles, according to Aristotle, "invented" the third actor.

Teucer claims to have shared in his brother's epic exploits. He thinks of the boy Eurysaces first, without being asked, before even looking as his brother's body. Teucer is too concerned with the family, with someone other than himself to reach the tragic height or depth of Ajax, the play's unique hero.
2. Tecmessa and Odysseus fill the part of empathetic witness in scenes where the other is absent. Both are shown to be brave and outspoken. Though Odysseus feels no love for Ajax, he shares in universal mortal fellow-feeling.
3. These all share a loud voice. The Messenger like Athena is reporting the news. Menelaus and Agamemnon as brothers are also very much alike in their brutality. And with Athena they are not on Ajax' side.

ii
Staging

Theatre, Stage devices, Levels of the acting area: The early theatre (though not the earliest) consisted of a round, smooth area, called the *orchestra* in which the chorus sang and danced. There was an altar somewhere in this area, but unless it was large enough for Ajax to hide behind in the death scene, it is not used in our play, as little praying goes on (until the suicide scene where Ajax' prayers are brief and modest). That may have been all that was needed by way of stage furnishings before Aeschylus (the first Athenian tragedian whose works have survived) and in his early plays. But as tragedy became more dramatic and complex some kind of building was necessary. At the back of the orchestra, facing across the playing area to the audience was a building, called the *skēnē* ("military lodging", "hut", or "tent", hence our words *scene*, *scenario*, and *proscenium*). Usually it represents a palace or temple, but may also be a private house, military lodging (as in *Ajax*), or even a cave (in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*). To and from this the actors made exits and entrances. Here the actors dressed and changed their masks and costumes to become other characters.

It is possible that there was also a slightly raised stage in front of the stage-building separating the actors from the chorus, but not raised so high that it would prevent easy interaction between the two. I would suggest no more than a shallow step or two.

The top of the scene building was a third level of action (besides stage and orchestra). The rooftop is called THEOLOGEION ("god-dais"), because divinities sometimes used it for making proclamations or playing their parts. It is emphasized in *Ajax* that Odysseus could hear but not see his patron Athena. This may mean that she appears on the rooftop. There was a device for lifting actors playing gods from the roof to the stage. This was the famous MĒCHANĒ or flying "machine" (as in the expression *deus ex machina*, which is a Latin translation of Greek *theos apo mēchanēs*, "the god from the machine"). This was, very likely, a crane with counterweights that could be used to fly in gods (or the odd mortal[3]) at the ends of the plays. It is not needed in many of the extant tragedies and the *Ajax* would have no use for it since at no point does Athena descend to human level.

There was another device, of even greater usefulness, the *ECCYCLĒMA*, or "thing rolled out."

---

[3]Medea flies away at the end of the play that bears her name, probably using the *mēchanē*.

This was used primarily for showing the results of actions that had taken place in the *skēnē* and could simply have been a platform on wheels rolled out through the double central doors or possibly a revolve. This is a major feature in the staging of *Ajax*.

The prominence of the skēnē.
Focus is on the *skēnē* from the very first scene when Odysseus is seen stalking it. Athena from its rooftop tells what is going on inside and calls Ajax outside. He returns to it to continue the atrocities, the result of which is revealed along with the perpetrator when the *eccyclēma* is rolled out at the beginning of the first *kommos*. This almost claustrophobic concentration continues until the end of the second episode when Ajax leaves the scene. The messenger's speech takes us farther afield, but its gist is that if Ajax is not inside his lodging, he is doomed.

For the death scene (I believe) Ajax appears on the *eccyclēma* standing near his buried sword. At the end of his speech he throws himself on it in such a way that his body is not visible to the chorus when they enter from either side (nor to the outer audience once he has fallen). Tecmessa is heard crying out and we see her on the *eccyclēma* standing over where Ajax fell. She covers his body with a sheet. And the *eccyclēma* is rolled all the way out. Concentration is now on the body of Ajax and its burial and less on the space. This staging is partly supposition. Many readers believe that Ajax does not in fact go to a deserted place but returns to his lodgings and in the second parodos the chorus returns home, having failed in their search. In either case the *eccyclēma* would have been used, but we would still be confined to that reeking military lodging and Ajax would have been caught in a factual rather than rhetorical lie in his great speech.

Other than the two entrances of the chorus and the use of the *skēnē* and *eccyclēma* to represent two different places and actions, the play has the typical entrances and exits from and into the *skēnē* (in the first half) and along the *parodoi* from or to the offstage elsewhere (mostly the Greek central camp in the second half).

iii
Ajax and his audiences

Turning away from technicalities, let us look at how the play works aesthetically, ethically, pathetically, and epistemologically. It is a play in which the main (male) character dies midway through and his counterpart, the main female character, Tecmessa, equally heroic in the quiet mundane world of family life, of both love and strife, shortly after Ajax' death becomes a *muta persona*, a supernumerary without a voice. The latter is to an audience that includes women the most sympathetic character in that she shows her love for her partner, her esteem for his valor, and yet can speak for herself and her son, knowing it will displease him, and plead their cause with no shame or timidity, earnestly enough to cause him shame, if not second thoughts. The hero, on the other hand, shows no remorse for what he intended to do and thought he was doing. His regret is that he has failed to kill his enemies in the Greek army and wipe out large numbers of the other soldiers and officers, his comrades in arms. He regrets killing the herds: because 1) it is disgraceful and he

is disgraced; 2) he failed to kill the men; 3) (to us, if not so much to him) the beasts were defenseless and did not deserve to be slaughtered and tortured. Ajax never waivers from this position. When we meet his chief adversaries, we can feel disgust with two, but admit, with Teucer, that we were wrong about the third. And we know from Homer or come to realize from the play that Ajax had always been a team player. We have to see him reject that communal spirit (a second time, after his nocturnal foray) when he realizes that if he were to make a single assault on the Trojans, Achilles-fashion, it would only please the Atreidae. He can no longer help his fellow warriors and the men (like his sailors) who depend on him and add their numbers to the strength of the army, because he is poisoned by this one defeat and (to him) betrayal. How do the audiences to this tragedy learn to love or esteem Ajax, the hero? Who are the audiences? We can begin with us, the outer audience, the people in the seats from the fifth century until today and tomorrow. How can we, a twenty-first century audience, sickened by slaughter of people or animals, accept him as a hero and this play as a tragedy? I admit it is hard and may not happen. For a literary study equally important are the audiences Sophocles has created to fill his stage and orchestra from Odysseus in the prologue to Odysseus in the *exodos*.

Prologue (1–133)

The spotlight is on Odysseus. But in fact he is searching for Ajax. He tells what has happened without firmly attributing it to Ajax. Then Athena goes through the details of the cruel slaughter, including what was going on in Ajax' mind, as if she were giving a divided messenger's speech, uniquely also *showing* the culprit and cross-examining him. Ajax comes out and plays his scene with Athena in front of the unseen (by him) audience of a reluctant Odysseus. He returns to his tent to continue what he has been reported to be doing, without an outer audience. He has an audience of one inside the *skēnē* (as we learn in the First Episode).

Tecmessa overhears Ajax' part in the prologue but does not see or hear either of the other characters (301–4). Ajax has burst through the door of his lodging and seems to her to be talking to phantoms, laughing, insulting the three officers who appear in the play, and bragging about his mistreatment of them. And so there is one more member of the inner audience, but we do not think of her at this time.

Athena is revealing to Odysseus a short version of the play that is Ajax/*Ajax*. Odysseus, trusting his senses and instincts and another eye-witness he encountered in his search, is already on the right track. Athena takes credit, but she really is not much use. Her special gift is casting delusion over the eyes: Odysseus cannot see her. Ajax sees the herds and flocks as men. She makes Odysseus invisible to Ajax.

Athena asks:

> Has anyone in your experience been found more prudent
> or better at doing what the occasion demanded than this man? 120

and Odysseus agrees that there is no one. That was the hero's past, but not all of it. Ajax has a

history of scorning the gods as comes out in the formal messenger's speech. But right here and now before our eyes Ajax refuses to obey Athena when she tells him not to torture Odysseus. In spite of this, at the end of this scene and at the end of the play Odysseus expresses his pity for the fallen hero. Athena from on high, disengaged from the mortal condition, ignores him. Her insensitivity causes the death of Ajax. Her point of view, to mock the fallen, is shared by the two sons of Atreus, but we do not admire them for it. Still, it was she who prevented the slaughter of the Achaeans.

Athena ends with a cliché. As if "don't get too big for your britches" explained this profound tragedy. Maybe it does for the gods. But tragedy is for and about humans who have depths gods can never approach. Odysseus' reaction of fellow-feeling is what makes the play interesting in the face of condemnation by the god, the generals, and the common soldiers, and maybe by the audience seated on the benches, horrified by the slaughter.

Parodos (134–200)

Ajax, the killer, the slaughterer is also a hero: he was the guardian (or tutelary) hero of Salamis and became the eponymous hero of the Athenian tribe *Aiantis* and had a statue in the agora. The arrival of the chorus, his sailors from Salamis, loyal to him, begins his rehabilitation, reminding us of his connection to Salamis. The sailors are not ignorant of the rumors and indeed seem to both resent the lesser men who spread them, and, even so, to believe them, as their speculations on what caused him to act as he did betray. They call on him to come out and fight for his good name. These men, his common soldiers who admire him and trust him, as well as depend on him, humanize Ajax as a particular character (rather than the generic fellow mortal of Odysseus) more than anything in the prologue. Furthermore, they attribute the action to divine intervention, knowing Ajax would never have attacked the herds on his own.

First episode, Part 1 (201–347)

The chorus calls Ajax to come out. Instead, we are surprised to see Ajax' captive bride, Tecmessa, enter from of the *skēnē* to address the chorus. She was there, in that abattoir all night long, an audience unseen and unknown to all but the man himself, of everything that Ajax did and said last night. Later he says he has been made a woman in his speech, that is, made to pity (651): this unexpected entrance is the beginning of that incomplete conversion. The episode begins with mutual acceptance. Tecmessa speaks with "intimate knowledge of the man."

She describes Ajax' state inside the tent. Though not on stage he is the center, so close to being present, just behind the door. She summarizes, for a third time in the play, the events of last night. She includes his feelings and hers and the progress of his sickness. She discusses with them the intricacies of human feelings and empathy. His friends were in torment for his condition while he was mad. Now they are in torment in company with him. After her musical duet with the chorus, whom she recognizes as involved in the story and worthy of hearing it so they can as friends help

Ajax, Tecmessa describes the nighttime raid in detail and then says that she had already described it to Ajax at his insistence. She has set up a behind the scenes play or series of plays 1) before he sets out; 2) after the slaughter. Tecmessa goes back to the beginning and tells the story already told. She tells the same story told by Odysseus and Athena, but with love for Ajax and more details. By including herself at every step she becomes a fuller person. By beginning at the beginning we find it is she, not Athena, who tried to stop Ajax from going on a nighttime raid at all, reminding him that he has not been summoned, a fact which has made her suspicious. At this he stifles her with a sexist proverb that she has obviously heard before. For his time away there is a hiatus (it could have been filled by the choral ode just performed, if her report were the play itself). This would be the calm before the horror of blood, bone, and guts. Ajax returns and we hear once more of the slaughter and torture; of Ajax' confrontation with Athena as seen from inside; and finally of what only she has seen: his coming to his senses and coercing her to tell what she knows. And this monstrous man is still waiting inside. At last we begin to hear his cries of anguish.

Kommos (348–429)

The interior scene is revealed on the *eccyclēma* with Ajax in the midst of the carnage. This is his lowest point: Ajax asks the help of the chorus to end it all. In this scene the hero sings while the others speak their lines. Despite Tecmessa's pleas, he sees no way out but death. This is not about her or anyone else: this is his day. The only way to assert control and to show his valor is by taking his life. He must deprive the Atreidae of his life and valor even if it means deserting his family, his men, and himself. We must bear in mind that it is not often that a unique hero in the Sophoclean mold is remembered for his or her selflessness. Still Tecmessa's love for him after seeing the shocking horror of his deeds must count for something. The chorus acknowledges her as an accurate eyewitness (353–4). The subjects of this emotional song, so full of tragic cries of anguish are, repeated in the episode to follow.

First Episode, Part 2 (430–595)

In the *kommos* Ajax had cried *aiai*, *aiai* and now he cries it a third time. He notices this common Greek cry of anguish because he has never before uttered it and now sees for the first time that it sounds like his name, *Aias*. In his first long speech he pictures himself facing his father Telamon as if in another play: he is the audience to the whole scene and sees his father as audience to his disgrace. But in that tragedy he also appears naked (of the arms) and without honor. The Chorus comments on Ajax' truthfulness, that he has never spoken a false speech setting us up for his next speech. Tecmessa begins her reply by trying to get him to see her fate as a parallel to his, something impossible for him because a woman's valor is not recognized and this tragedy is unique to him. And then she tries to get him back into the human community: he has a family, a wife and son; he still has his father, however uncompromising, and his mother whose constant prayer is that he come home alive. But he ignores her pleading. And then takes up his son. Though he seemed not to listen to his wife, he assigns Teucer the duty of protecting Eurysaces and taking him home to Salamis

(presumably with Tecmessa; see Roisman in Studdard). His son will be another Ajax, the boy named after his father's signature shield, which the son will one day bear.

First Stasimon (596–645)

In a melancholy reminiscence of home the Chorus meditates on death and the loneliness of Ajax. Fleetingly they suggest he is no longer himself (639–40).

Second Episode (646–92)

A single speech makes up the second episode. In it Ajax reveals that he has pondered time and change and sees that he has changed. Through pity he has become a woman (just as the actor playing Odysseus becomes Tecmessa and changes back again at the end). The cycles of nature he uses as eternal examples do not really match the human changes he claims here to accept, but really rejects: obeying the sons of Atreus, recognizing that friendship is not permanent. He leaves Tecmessa and the chorus believing that he will come back after all. His examples are thoughtful and might be convincing to the inner audience, but the outer audience knows the story. On the other hand we may well be surprised at his reappearance: we did not know we would actually see him do it. This speech is delivered to two separate audiences: Ajax' wife and friends hear one thing, we, the audiences through the ages, hear another.

Second Stasimon (693–718)

The Chorus, believing Ajax has relented, spreads the joy. Ajax has given up his feud with the sons of Atreus. To them he is for a moment a second Achilles. But Ajax has already rejected both sailing for home (460–1; as Achilles had threatened, but never carried out in the *Iliad*) and going on an epic killing spree (466–70) as Achilles does after Patroclus dies in his stead. With this brief ode, the chorus begins turning our attention away from the lodgings of Ajax and the scene of butchery.

Third Episode, Part 1 (719–814)

But there is no turning away from Ajax. A Messenger from Teucer comes from the Greek camp. He is the first character from outside the encampment of Ajax since the prologue. With the Messenger's arrival, time, an eternal abstract, becomes confined and pressing. The single day in which most Greek tragedies take place metatheatrically is the time span of the prediction and Athena's wrath. All the focus is on Ajax: the speech was intended for his ears. The messenger delivers it to all the audiences except him.

The Messenger reports about Ajax; though he is absent, this is another act to his story. His brother is attacked by the army as he would have been. The heart of the speech is Calchas' prophecy. Just the name Calchas takes us back to the beginning of the *Iliad* and perhaps to the beginning of the

Trojan War, for it was he who interpreted the wrath of Artemis and its cure (the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia) as well as the wrath of Apollo in *Iliad* 1 which meant Agamemnon's giving up his prize, the woman, Chryseis and selfishly taking Achilles', Briseis. The seer seems to have mellowed since that time, though still no friend to Agamemnon: Calchas speaks with kindness to Teucer. In revealing the cause of Athena's displeasure, Calchas, through the messenger, reveals more about Ajax. When he was leaving home, setting off to war he tells his father he does not need the gods' help. When Athena is urging him on to do what he was already doing, holding the Greek line, he tells her to get lost. He was right. He did not need the gods' help. What he needed was to evade their petty hatreds. At the end of the scene, everybody leaves the *skēnē* behind to search for Ajax, to see where else he isn't. His lodgings are deserted. As often happens in a Greek tragedy, at the end of a hero's life, the words take us back to his or her beginnings. Leaving his island home is the beginning of Ajax' story. War is all he has known and all we know of him. The "we" here is both the inner and outer audience. Was he a good son, a good father, a good husband? We can't know. He was a good brother. His brother fought with him. He was a good captain: his men remember him as sitting beside them, as their comrade. Tecmessa arranges the search party because she loves him.

Third Episode, Part 2 (815–65)

The Chorus has left. And the scene changes: Ajax alone, himself, the unique hero. What is most striking and poignant is the precision of his words, of the placement of the sword, of his prayers and farewells. And the fact that he thinks/speaks of no one but himself. He is concerned about the disposal of his remains and his story, not about the mourning of his bother and parents. There is not a word about his wife or son. They have been disposed of in a previous scene in which he leaves his shield and valor to his son and his wife and son to Teucer and his parents. When he is gone, there will not be another. That is the value and majesty of the Sophoclean hero.

Second Entrance of the Chorus through Third Stasimon (866–1222)

In the second half of the play, though Ajax is missing from the cast, his body (the dummy substituted for the actor) remains central. The sailors search for the man. Tecmessa finds his body. They mourn for themselves and for him. Without him they are lost. With the arrival of Teucer, Ajax' prayers are answered. Like his brother he foresees how he will be welcomed by their father, not an affable man in the best of circumstances. Menelaus begins the debate over the burial, over who was Ajax, a lesser warrior under the command of the sons of Atreus who turned out to be their enemy, or his own man. The debate (or AGŌN, "contest, struggle") ends, as often, in a shouting match of balanced insults, Teucer and Menelaus both implying that the other is worthless. Menelaus stalks off. Tecmessa (now represented by a non-speaking actor) and the boy Eurysaces form a tableau around the body with Teucer on the *eccyclēma*, the site, and not the site of Ajax' disgrace. The flashing sword that butchered the animals in the nighttime now impaling the body of its wielder: Teucer wonders how he will remove his brother's body from it.

While Teucer is away digging a grave, the chorus sings of the evils that war has done to them, the good it has deprived them of. Is anything about Ajax outside of war?

Exodos (1223–1420)

Teucer returns to rejoin the tableau at the body of his brother. At his heels is another outsider come to belittle Ajax through insults to the hero and his brother. Teucer, claims Agamemnon, has no right to speak, let alone bury his brother. He doesn't even speak Greek! But Teucer reminds Agamemnon of Ajax' heroic feats when he saved the day for the Greeks, with Teucer's help. The insults are prevented from becoming a second shouting match by the entrance of Odysseus, the new man of the hour, whose world view replaces that of Ajax (and Teucer, who also arrived in the nick of time . . . and just too late). Odysseus pleads with the authority not granted to Teucer for the burial of the fallen warrior, whom he acknowledges as the most valiant of the Achaeans after Achilles, meaning that he was the most valiant from Achilles' death until this afternoon and for most of the *Iliad*. There is indeed no warrior left to match him and never will be. The war is almost over. But the discussion between Odysseus and Agamemnon is mostly about friendship and not competition for being the best. In the second episode Ajax had said:

> For just now I have come to understand
> that my enemy must be hated only to such an extent
> that later he will be a friend, and toward my friend
> I will want to help him only in so far that I know
> he will not always remain my friend. For most of
> humankind friendship is a faithless harbor.

In the third episode Ajax had rejected this philosophy for a much less expedient view. Odysseus argues for this flexibility of values. His basic principle at this moment is that we all will die. We all will need burial, including me. Agamemnon also rejects this and equates what most of us would see as Odysseus' empathy or fellow feeling or recognition of the mortal condition with selfishness. Sophocles knew what evolutionary biology proves: we need empathy to thrive, even to survive. Odysseus' adaptability makes him the enemy to the inflexible hero. Teucer is, thus, justified in not inviting him to his brother's funeral. Agamemnon yields, not because he forgives Ajax, but because Odysseus is his friend. In a later play, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Odysseus' expediency takes on a harder edge, but here it is feminized (in that sympathy has been seen as a woman's trait) by his desire to honor a brave man and his sympathy for a fellow mortal. The gods care nothing for this point of view. Athena ignores it in the prologue. Teucer ends the play with setting the program for Ajax' burial. The hero's story began with his setting out for war and ends with this pitifully small funeral procession, nothing to match those of Hector or Achilles. For his valor Ajax should have won the arms of Achilles. But valor was not the only criterion. As a favorite former student pointed out to me, the *Odyssey* is book 2.

iv
Ajax in Troy

a. Telamon's generation: Telamon is named seven times in the *Ajax*, more than Laertes (Odysseus' father), fewer than Atreus (father of Menelaus and Agamemnon, but they are called by their patronymic in all but one of these). Telamon accompanied Heracles on his victorious expedition against Troy and its king Laomedon (father of Priam) in the previous generation. He was the first to breach the wall at Troy. He was given Laomedon's daughter Hesione as his war prize and married her. She became the mother of Teucer. (Periboia, the official wife, was Ajax' mother.) Telamon exiled Teucer when he returned home without Ajax.

b. Ajax in the* Iliad*, selections:

Book 2

> Ajax from Salamis led twelve ships and stationed
> them where the battalions of Athenians were berthed. (557–8)
>
> Of men by far the best was Ajax Telamon's son
> while Achilles was still feeding his wrath. (768–9)

Book 7: Hand to hand with Hector

Hector is inspired by his brother Helenus (through Athena's intervention) to challenge "whoever is best of the Achaeans to fight opposing might to might in dire battle" (7.50). Nine Greeks (following a harangue from Nestor) rose up to volunteer, among them Ajax (161–9). In a speech uncharacteristically short, Nestor proposes the casting of lots (171–4) and the soldiers standing around pray:

> Father Zeus, let Ajax be chosen, or Tydeus' son [Diomedes]
> or the ruler himself of Mycene rich in gold [Agamemnon]. (179–80)

Ajax' lot springs out. Ajax going into battle is likened to Ares. His size is stressed:

> Even so massive Ajax sprang up, bulwark of the Achaeans. (211)

The two champions fight almost equally, blow for blow, until Ajax knocks Hector out with a huge stone. Hector is rescued by Apollo, but finally, since night is falling the heralds from both sides call a halt to the battle. At that Hector addresses Ajax:

> "Ajax, since god has given you great size and might
> and intelligence, and you are the greatest of the Achaeans
> at spear fighting, let us now cease from war and battle
> for this day; we will fight again later, until the god
> decides between us and grants one or the other victory.
> Already it is night and it's best to obey the night
> so you may brighten the hearts of all the Achaeans by the ships
> and most of all your kin and the comrades that you have.

And I, all through the city of king Priam, will bring joy
to the Trojan men and Trojan women with trailing robes
who will enter the divine gathering place in prayer.
Let us both give each other gifts that will be famous
so that anyone of the Achaeans or Trojans will say:
"These two contended in heart-eating strife,
but parted and joined together in friendship."
So he spoke and offered a silver-studded sword
that he carried with its scabbard and well-cut belt.
And Ajax gave a belt made bright with blood red dye. (287–305)

Book 9

Agamemnon sends an embassy to Achilles' lodging (consisting of his old retainer Phoenix, Odysseus, and Achilles' cousin Ajax) to try to persuade him with arguments and a catalogue of gifts to return to the battle. After long speeches by Odysseus and Phoenix, Ajax gives a short, blunt speech that comes closest to reaching Achilles' heart. Ajax begins by addressing Odysseus, but abruptly turns to speak directly to Achilles.

"Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus full of schemes,
let's go: for it does not seem to me that the purpose
of our mission will be accomplished by this visit, but we
must bring the news to the Danaans though it isn't good,
since they now sit waiting for it. But Achilles has made
savage his great-hearted spirit in his breast, hard-hearted,
and he does not care for the friendship of his companions
with which we honored him beside the ships beyond all others,
man without pity. And yet from a brother's murderer, a person
accepts payment of a blood-price or for a child killed.
And after paying a large amount, the one remains among his people
and the heart and proud spirit of the other are held back
when he has taken the payment. But to *you* the gods have put
in your chest a relentless evil spirit for the sake of a girl,
one girl. And now we are offering you *seven* of the finest kind
and many other things besides these, but make your heart merciful;
respect these lodgings, we are here, guests under your roof
from the multitude of Danaans, and we are eager to be above
all others, the nearest and dearest to you of all the Achaeans." (624–42)

Book 11

In the day's fierce fighting, Agamemnon, Diomedes, Odysseus are all wounded. Odysseus is surrounded by attacking Trojans when:

Ajax came near, bearing his shield that is like a city tower
and stood beside him: the Trojans scattered this way and that. (485–6)

After this Ajax slaughtered Trojan after Trojan until Zeus turned him to flight

He stopped in a daze and threw the shield of seven oxhides over his back. (545)

He retreated like a lion among the herds of cattle (548–57), but still managed to keep the Trojans from the ships of the Achaeans (569).

Book 17: Ajax and Menelaus defend the body of the slain Patroclus. Here Ajax shows his greatest steadfastness, bravery, and martial prowess. Homer's assessment of Ajax' relationship with Menelaus is a far cry from that of Sophocles' character, Menelaus. Hector has taken the armor of Achilles from the body of Patroclus and is now wearing it. But Achilles knows nothing of the death of his friend.

Menelaus speaks to the two *Aiantes* (Ajaxes, son of Telemon and son of Oileus):

> "I have sent that man to the swift ships
> to go to Achilles, the swift of foot; I do not think
> that he will come, however angry he is at godlike Hector;
> for no way would he fight against the Trojans, naked [unarmed].
> But we ourselves, let us think up the best plan,
> how we will drag off the body and ourselves
> escape death and fate from the Trojans' war-cry."
> And then great Telamonian Ajax answered him:
> "You have said all things aptly, far-famed Menelaus:
> but you and Meriones, reach down and pick up
> the body and quick as you can carry it from the toils of war.
> We two will fight on against the Trojans and godlike Hector:
> besides the same name we share the same spirit and in the past
> standing our ground side by side we have endured angry war." (708–721)

The two hold back the Trojans, though Achaeans are dying and fleeing all around them.

> But there was no respite from war. (761)

Ajax in the *Odyssey*

Book 11

Odysseus is telling the saga of his wanderings. Here he is a tourist in the underworld, all agog at meeting the spirits of the dead:

> The other spirits of those who had gone down in death
> stopped in their grief, and one by one asked about their dear ones.
> Only the spirit of Ajax, the son of Telamon,
> stayed apart, angry because of the victory
> which I won, beside the ships, in the judgment
> for Achilles' arms which his goddess mother had set up.
> The sons of the Trojans and Pallas Athena judged.
> How I wish I had not won such a prize:
> because of it, earth covered over such a man,
> Ajax, who in good looks and deeds excelled
> the other Danaans after the perfect Achilles.
> I spoke to him with soothing words of comfort:
> "Ajax, son of faultless Telamon, were you not,

even dead, going to let go of your anger over the arms,
those damned arms? The gods made them a curse to the Argives,
losing you their bulwark of strength; for your death, we Achaeans
are as grieved as we are for the life of Achilles, son of Peleus,
without surcease of sorrow, and no one else is to blame
but Zeus who hated the army of Danaan warriors
with a hatred beyond all reason and caused your doom.
But come here, my kingly friend, and hear my words and
my story; subdue your wrath and headstrong heart."
That is what I said, but he gave no answer, and went to Erebos
with the other spirits of those who had gone down in death. (541—64)

v.
Select Bibliography

Greek Text and Commentary: P. J. Finglass, *Sophocles*, Ajax: *Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries*. Cambridge, 2011. (Full scholarly bibliography. Metrical analysis.)

Recent work on *Ajax*: David Stuttard, *Looking at Ajax*, London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Twelve essays on aspects of *Ajax*. (Good recent bibliography.)

Introduction to the play, its interpretation, and reception. Jon Hesk, *Sophocles*: Ajax: *Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy*. London: Duckworth, 2003. (Contains a guide to further reading.)

A Classic about the traumas of war: Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, New York: Scribner, 1994.

A twenty-first century mash-up of *Ajax* and the War in Iraq: Ellen McLaughlin, *Ajax in Iraq*, New York: Playscripts, 2011.

— Cecelia Luschnig — Moscow, Idaho — March, 2021—