

Ajax the Hero

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The figure of Ajax, his temperament, decisions, and relationships, dominates Sophocles' play. Although Ajax himself dies a little over halfway through the play, even in death he remains the central figure, with the other characters preoccupied with how to treat his body. This chapter will discuss Ajax as a hero in relation to the broader concept of heroism illustrated and debated in the play. I will investigate how Sophocles draws on traditional and especially Homeric models of male heroism in his portrayal of Ajax, and how he adapts them for a fifth-century Athenian audience. Ajax's central dilemma, of whether he can bear to live having lost honour in the eyes of his peers, reflects the tensions faced by Homeric heroes between personal status and their duties to a wider group. I will also explore the different approaches to heroism presented by Ajax and Odysseus, and the broader principles that underpin these. The final part of the chapter will look at a different aspect of heroism that helps make sense of the last part of the play: Ajax's role in Athenian hero cult.

Calling Ajax a 'hero' appears at first glance self-evident. But when we start to approach the nature of Ajax's heroism, and Greek heroism more generally, this apparent simplicity quickly begins to fracture. The English word 'hero' derives from the Greek *hērōs*, a term used to describe the mythological warriors, such as Ajax, who were believed to have lived in an earlier age, and who surpassed contemporary men in their power and their great deeds. However, the connotations of the two are quite different. In English, the word 'hero' can be used of a central literary character: thus Ajax can be called the 'hero' of his play simply by dint of being the character whose story it follows. But the English term 'hero' also has a strong positive connotation: it usually refers to someone who accomplishes something extraordinary, and usually altruistic. To us, a 'hero' might be someone who risks his or her life to save others, or who endures suffering for the sake of a moral cause. People who are simply powerful or influential do not necessarily strike us as heroes, especially when their actions seem morally questionable. Indeed the superheroes of modern films or comic books are distinguished not only by their exceptional powers, but by their choice to use them to protect others weaker than themselves. Conversely, even a superficial study of Greek literature reveals that this sense of altruism is lacking among ancient heroes. Rather, the heroes of the Greek world are heroic because they are capable of greater things than ordinary mortals, but greater need not necessarily mean kinder or more ethical. The heroes' greatness, which is rooted in excess, can often lead to problems, both for themselves and for others around them. This is particularly apparent in the case of Ajax.

The concept of heroism in Greek literature must be situated against the background of the Homeric epics. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* act as foundational texts for the nature of heroism, and since *Ajax* is set during the Trojan War and deals with the aftermath of the death of Achilles, the *Iliad* is a continuous backdrop to Sophocles' play. Ajax himself features in the *Iliad* where he is already a blunt man of action and a great warrior, and Sophocles evokes the hero's Homeric portrayal from the first words of the play, where Athena describes Ajax's hut as 'far out on the army's wing' (4). In the *Iliad*, we are told that Achilles and Ajax placed their huts at each end of the Achaean camp, because they were the most powerful warriors and therefore could occupy the most vulnerable position (*Il.* 11.7-9). By starting out with this detail, Sophocles makes it clear that the *Iliad* will be an important intertext. Towards the end

of the play, the Iliadic Ajax makes an appearance once more, when Teucer reminds Agamemnon of how he single-handedly defended the Achaean ships against Hector (1276-9):

‘He stood his ground, one man alone, and saved you, when the flames were licking the ships’ decks, and Hector was leaping high over the trench and would have boarded us’

This scene comes at the high point of Hector’s advance against the Achaean camp (*Il.* 15.674-745), and the vivid image of Ajax alone on the deck of the ships trying to ward off the Trojan advances would have been a memorable scene for audiences of Homer. Teucer also recalls another of Ajax’s great feats detailed in the *Iliad*: his duel with Hector (1283-7). Teucer praises Ajax for freely volunteering to face Hector in single combat and describes how Ajax was selected because the token he placed in the helmet ‘was sure to be the first one picked’ (1286-7). This echoes the Iliadic scene where the warriors willing to fight Hector throw their lots into a helmet, and Ajax’s is the first to leap out, to the joy of the other Achaeans (*Il.* 7.182-3).

However, these echoes of the *Iliad* are also infused with irony, since an audience familiar with Homer’s poem would also be attuned to the ways in which these interludes are not fully representative of their Homeric counterparts. For example, when Teucer speaks of Hector’s attack on the Achaean ships, he asks Agamemnon: ‘Who stopped him then? Wasn’t it Ajax?’ (1280). In fact, though Ajax’s defence of the ships is presented as a great act of courage in the *Iliad*, he is ultimately unable to withstand Hector’s divinely-supported onslaught: Hector destroys Ajax’s spear, leaving him armed with only a pole, and Ajax then gives way before the Trojan missiles, allowing Hector to throw fire over the ships (*Il.* 16.114-123). It is this that prompts Achilles to send Patroclus into battle, and it is Patroclus’ arrival that forces Hector and the Trojans away from the ships. Similarly, though it is true that Ajax volunteers to face Hector in single combat, he is one of nine warriors to do so (*Il.* 7.161) Nor is it clear that he is universally considered the best combatant, since the Achaeans pray that the lot selected might be that of Ajax, Diomedes, or Agamemnon (*Il.* 7.179-80). Agamemnon is of course Teucer’s addressee at this point, and so there is an irony to how Teucer effaces Agamemnon’s involvement in the scene. Moreover, Ajax’s duel with Hector ends in a draw, and although it is clear that Ajax has the upper hand, it is hardly a triumph. It is because of the inconclusive outcome of this duel that Hector and Ajax exchange gifts, so that Ajax comes to have Hector’s sword, which he uses as his suicide weapon (816): in a sense, Ajax’s failure to defeat Hector is embedded into the central moment of Sophocles’ play. An alert audience-member would therefore be able to see how Teucer’s narrative fails to recognise the hero’s limitations, and the contributions made to events by his fellow-warriors on the Greek side. This sense that Ajax (and his ally Teucer) oversell his importance is clear in Ajax’s lyric lament after recovering his sanity, when he describes himself as (423-6):

a man who
it’s no empty boast
to say
was once unequalled
in the army
of the greeks
who sailed to troy

Yet any reader of the *Iliad* would know that it is Achilles, not Ajax, who was the ‘best of the Achaeans’, and his superiority to all the other warriors is confirmed throughout the poem. Ajax’s boast is subtly corrected by Odysseus towards the end of the play: ‘So I’m not going to deny that – with the exception of Achilles – Ajax was the best of all Greeks who came to Troy’ (1341). Thus the echoes of the *Iliad* do not necessarily cast Ajax in a positive light, and highlight his boastfulness as well as his heroic past.

Comparing Ajax to his Homeric counterpart also highlights the individualistic tendencies that Sophocles has given his hero. Another of Ajax’s most important moments in the *Iliad* is his participation in the embassy to Achilles in Book 9, where along with Odysseus and Achilles’ old tutor Phoenix, he tries to persuade Achilles to renounce his anger with Agamemnon and return to combat to save the Achaeans. Ajax speaks last, and his speech focuses on Achilles’ duty as a soldier to his comrades. He criticises Achilles to the others (*Il.* 9.628-32):

‘Achilles

has turned the great-hearted spirit in his breast to cruelty,
hard man, and he has no regard for his companions’ love,
we who used to honour him above all others beside the ships.
He is without pity.’ (Trans. Verity)

It is therefore ironic that Sophocles gives his Ajax exactly the qualities that the Homeric Ajax criticises in Achilles: excessive pride, inability to move on from a slight, and putting his own honour above the wellbeing of the wider group. Indeed, the Homeric Achilles is in many ways more of a model for Sophocles’ Ajax than is the Ajax of the *Iliad*, since the Sophoclean Ajax, like Achilles, cannot overlook losing honour in the eyes of the community, and ends up bringing about his own ruin through his inability to be persuaded by his friends. Yet here too, Sophocles’ portrayal of Ajax pushes these qualities more to the extreme even than Achilles does, and he lacks the elements of compassion and self-awareness that balance Achilles’ quickness to anger. While Achilles is willing to let the Achaeans suffer at the hands of the Trojans rather than accept Agamemnon’s offer of compensation, Ajax goes further, since he actively seeks to harm his former comrades himself, and does so deceitfully, by attempting to kill and torture them while they sleep. Achilles acknowledges in his reply to Ajax that his criticisms are fair even if he cannot bring himself to act differently (*Il.* 9.644-8) and over the course of the embassy scene shifts his position from wishing to leave Troy immediately to saying that he will not enter battle before the ships are endangered (*Il.* 9.650-3). Conversely, Ajax in his madness gloats over the suffering he has caused the other Greeks, for example responding to Athena’s question ‘You’ve soaked your sword nicely in Greek blood?’ with the boast ‘Indeed I have! I won’t deny it’ (96-7). When he realises what he has done, he expresses no remorse for having attempted to murder his fellow-Greeks, and instead laments that his plan was unsuccessful (372-5):

such cruel fate
to let
those enemies
those demons
whose one wish is
to crush me

get away
while all the time
instead
i was attacking
goats and
wide-horned cattle

Ajax's lack of respect for his community thus exceeds Achilles', and so too does his disrespect for the gods. Achilles first becomes enraged in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, where he contemplates killing Agamemnon, but when Athena intervenes he is quickly persuaded not to do this, telling her 'Goddess, a man must respect the words of you both [i.e. Athena and Hera], however great the anger in his heart' (*Il.* 1.216-17). This scene too is mirrored by Athena's request that Ajax should stop torturing Odysseus, an order which Ajax refuses to obey (112-13). Thus while Ajax and Achilles share certain basic qualities, both positive (excellence in combat, courage on the battlefield) and negative (anger and pride), the portrayal of Ajax focuses more on these negative qualities, and also makes little attempt to mitigate their full effects on those around him. While we are told of Ajax's prowess in battle, it is only as background to the events of the play, and thus these facets of his personality are given less weight than his behaviour to his family and comrades.

Ajax's basic dilemma is whether he can live on and accept the shame he has incurred by his actions in attacking the Greek flocks. In a culture where personal honour is of paramount importance, any attack on a man's honour is a serious matter. Repellent as Ajax's decision to attack his comrades in the night seems to us, to Ajax it is an act of vengeance against a community which has (he feels) devalued him by failing to reward his military prowess. When he still believes that he has killed Agamemnon and Menelaus, he justifies this to Athena as necessary to preserve his honour: 'They'll not dishonour me again' (98). The desire for vengeance, especially to avenge personal slights, was widely accepted in Greek ethics, as summarised by Aristotle, who writes 'To take vengeance on one's enemies is nobler than to come to terms with them; for to retaliate is just, and what is just is noble; and a real man does not allow himself to be beaten' (*Rhetoric* 1367a24). While most Greeks would probably not have condoned the manner in which Ajax sought his vengeance, they might well sympathise with his basic desire to seek redress for a perceived wrong. The failure of Ajax's plan, and the humiliating realisation that he has attacked the Greek herds, means that he has been further shamed. Suicide therefore seems to him to offer the only remaining chance to recover his honour, as he explains after rejecting all other options: 'But a hero has two options: to live in glory or die in glory' (479-80).

Ajax's suicide is a further example of how Sophocles takes a Homeric precedent and pushes it to the extreme. Ajax's death will endanger his family, as made apparent by Tecmessa's speech in which she imagines her fate, and that of her son Eurysaces, after his death (485-524). Tecmessa's speech strongly evokes the scene between Hector and Andromache in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, in which Andromache anticipates how her husband's death will mean her enslavement and risk the safety of their son (*Il.* 6.407-65, see Roisman in this volume). Yet in Hector's case, the audience of the *Iliad* can appreciate that as the strongest fighter in a city at war, he has little option but to risk his life on the battlefield, and his duties to his family must be balanced against those to the soldiers he leads. While Hector couches his desire to fight in

terms of personal honour and shame, it is also apparent that he has conflicting duties to different groups. In the case of Ajax, his decision to kill himself is purely driven by his sense of shame and anger: as he acknowledges, his grudge against the Atreids prevents him from reclaiming his honour by an act of daring on the battlefield, as this would benefit the Greek army (467-70). Thus Hector's complicated situation is resolved into a simple dichotomy, as Ajax must choose between personal status and the safety of his loved ones.

The model of the hero as touchy, proud, and self-obsessed is often spoken of as though it was the only or truest concept of what it means to be a hero in Greek literature. Yet already in the *Iliad*, the poet presents a range of heroes, so that the form of heroism represented by Achilles is balanced by, for example, Odysseus, who excels in his command of language and persuasive skills, or Agamemnon, who possesses in wealth and kingly status what he lacks in martial ability. Other heroes such as Diomedes are moderate characters and good all-rounders, and so demonstrate that it is possible to be a brave warrior and skilled fighter without excessive pride or lack of respect for the wider social good. The potential tension between these different approaches to what it means to be a hero is apparent in Achilles' terse response to Odysseus' lengthy speech 'that man is as hateful to me as the gates of Hades who has one thing in his mind but says another' (*Il.* 9.312-13, trans. Verity). In Sophocles' *Ajax* the tension between the Achillean and Odyssean form of heroism is one of the play's major themes. Ajax, as the blunt man of action, stands in opposition to the more flexible Odysseus. The background to the play is that the Greeks have voted to award the arms of Achilles to Odysseus rather than to Ajax. The choice between the two heroes takes on broader symbolic connotations, as expressed by Ajax himself (441-6):

'One thing I think I know: if Achilles had been still alive to judge the contest for the armour and award it as a prize for bravery, no-one would have taken it but me. But as it was, my bravery meant nothing to the sons of Atreus, so they gave my armour to a shameless cheat.

Thus Ajax sees himself as the natural heir to Achilles, and believes that the arms should have been awarded on the basis of bravery on the battlefield, a quality in which he excels. His description of Odysseus as a 'shameless cheat' is partly a response to the fact that Ajax perceives the victory as intrinsically unfair, but also evokes Odysseus' own traditional qualities of slipperiness and cunning. In fact, the Odysseus we see in this play is presented not so much devious as moderate, and though Ajax presents the contrast between them as courage versus duplicity, from the audience's perspective the clearer distinction is between Ajax's individualism and Odysseus' ability to consider others, or Ajax's stubbornness and Odysseus' open-mindedness.

Sophocles confounds the audience's expectations by presenting an Odysseus who is surprisingly straightforward in his language, in contrast to the great deceiver of the *Odyssey*, or the manipulative rhetorician we find in other plays such as Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. The quality that sets Odysseus apart in *Ajax* is his empathy and his sense of belonging to a greater human community, and these qualities are presented as alien to the values of the world in which he lives. At the start of the play Athena says to Odysseus 'And isn't it the loveliest of things to mock our enemies?' (79). This is an ethical system familiar from the Homeric world and from elsewhere in Greek literature, whereby an honourable man's duty is not only to help his friends but actively to cause harm to his enemies. In Plato's *Republic*, this is one of the first definitions given of justice (1.332d),

suggesting that it is thought to be a commonsense approach, and we regularly find references to the delight that an enemy's downfall is thought to cause. This morality is accepted by other characters in the play. When Ajax recovers his sanity, he perceives himself as a 'laughing stock' (367), and assumes that his enemy Odysseus in particular takes pleasure at his misfortunes (381):

how
 he'll be laughing
now
and
 gloating
 at my ruin

Similarly, the chorus initially believe that the stories circulating in the Achaean camp about Ajax's attack on the flocks are malicious lies spread by Odysseus to dishonour and mock his enemy (148-53):

odysseus
is whispering
this story
 moulding it
 adorning it
 implanting it
 into the ears
 of all he meets
and they
 so readily
believe him

he is so easy
 to believe
and anyone
 who hears him
 smiles
 and laughs
 and mocks
 your misery

The chorus draws on the mythological tradition of Odysseus as a manipulative speaker who uses his rhetorical powers to advance his own agenda. Yet the audience already know that the story is a true one, and not invented or embellished by Odysseus. Far from mocking Ajax, Odysseus in fact expressed deep discomfort at the prospect of seeing him in his madness, and when forced to do so by Athena, feels pity for Ajax's plight, recognising that his fall from greatness is illustrative of the fragility of human fortune (120-6):

'And although we're enemies, I pity him. Poor man! Deranged. Demented. But I can see

myself in him. Yes, I can see us all, all human beings. We're nothing but delusions, empty shadows.'

After Ajax has killed himself, his friends continue to assume that Odysseus will rejoice in his downfall and mock their grief. The chorus and Tecmessa's immediate response to discovering Ajax's corpse is to imagine Odysseus' mocking laughter directed at their expense (955-73). Yet Odysseus in fact acts supportively towards his former enemy, arguing that Agamemnon must allow Ajax to receive honourable burial on the basis that this basic ethical requirement supersedes personal enmities: 'it's the gods' laws you'd be desecrating, not Ajax' (1343-4). A consequence of Odysseus' commitment to this depersonalised moral framework is that he must put personal friendship and enmity aside in favour of broader concerns. Thus he acknowledges the hatred between himself and Ajax, but argues that Ajax's standing as a great hero must supersede these private concerns: 'He was my enemy. But more than that, he was a noble man' (1355). Agamemnon is suspicious of this willingness to put aside old enmities and criticises Odysseus as 'inconstant' (1358). Like Ajax and Athena, he adheres to the traditional ethic of helping friends and harming enemies, and so perceives Odysseus' flexibility as showing a lack of moral fibre. This exchange engages with one of the play's central questions: whether changeability should be viewed as a positive or negative quality. When Agamemnon presses Odysseus on why he is now willing to help Ajax, Odysseus admits that at the core of his empathy lies self-interest: 'one day I'll need to be buried, too' (1365), a comment which Agamemnon sees as showing Odysseus' ultimate selfishness (1366). Thus Odysseus' view of heroism is pragmatic, and his principles are underpinned by his assessment of what will best serve his own interests. This exchange evokes contemporary fifth-century concerns about the opportunistic speaker who will advocate any cause he believes to be beneficial to his own interests. Yet the audience can also see the great social benefits of this flexibility, which enables Odysseus to break the stalemate over Ajax's burial and to put an end to the grudges that have caused rifts within the Achaean army. Ironically, it is this flexibility which secures Ajax's honour.

This tension between principle and flexibility is also brought out in Ajax's deception speech, where after his previous implacability he appears to have had a change of heart. Ajax speaks of how change is itself an irresistible process, comparing his new mindset with the natural alternation of the seasons (669-77). A careful reading of Ajax's words may reveal that they are not quite as they seem: for example his statement that he will 'bury this sword of mine, my nemesis, deep in the earth' (658-9) may foreshadow how he first buries the hilt of the sword to fix it in place, and then buries the blade in his own body. Nevertheless, even if Ajax does not outright lie, his speech is intentionally deceptive, and leads Tecmessa and the chorus to believe that he no longer intends to kill himself. It is therefore ironic that it is he, rather than Odysseus, who turns out to be the most manipulative speaker of this play. At the end of his speech, Ajax claims to have adopted a more flexible approach to friendship and enmities, saying 'I've learned just recently that an enemy should be treated as an enemy only in the knowledge that one day he might become a friend' (678-9). These words foreshadow Odysseus' argument with Agamemnon at the end of the play, and his words to Teucer 'I was your staunchest enemy; I'm now prepared to be your staunchest friend' (1377). Yet this mindset of adaptability is ultimately not compatible with Ajax's personality, and far from becoming reconciled to his enemies, he dies with a curse that the Furies should 'spare no-one

from all the army' (844). Here too, Ajax reflects the stubbornness of the Homeric Achilles, yet pushes it further, with destructive consequences. Achilles is ultimately able to give up his destructive anger when he accepts his enemy Hector's right to an honourable burial, and, like Odysseus in Sophocles' play, recognises the claims of a shared humanity which surpasses individual grudges, in his case with his enemy's father Priam (*Il.* 24.485-551). Conversely, Ajax is never able to become reconciled with Odysseus, even in death, and Teucer rejects Odysseus' request to attend Ajax's funeral 'in case I offend the dead' (1395).

Sophocles, then, takes a longstanding concern with the role of the great individual and how he should behave in his community, and explores it through a character who pushes his desire to maintain personal honour to the extreme. As we have seen, Ajax's characteristics are inspired by the Homeric Achilles, yet the negative aspects of this type of heroism are foregrounded even more clearly. In order to understand this, it is vital to read *Ajax* in its cultural context, the democratic society of fifth-century Athens. Athenian ideology placed great emphasis on the idea that one should act for the common good, and that a good leader put the group interest above personal concerns. Nevertheless, aristocratic families remained powerful in the democracy. Their leisure and education gave them the ability to dominate institutions such as the assembly, while their wealth enabled them to succeed in public life through funding public benefits, or 'liturgies', including tragedy itself. The position of aristocrats was therefore a source of tension, since they were both essential to the operation of Athenian society and a threat to its democratic ethos. Heroes such as Ajax therefore provide an opportunity for an Athenian audience to reflect upon these tensions from the safe distance provided by the mythological setting.

In the play, we see how Ajax's brand of heroism is fundamentally incompatible with communal values. The mutually beneficial relationship that ought to exist between leaders and the people is expressed by the chorus in the *parodos* (157-61):

petty envies
 cling
to great men

and yet
 without them
how could we
 average men
protect
 our cities

the best thing's
to work in harmony
 the weak
 depending on
 the strong
the strong
 relying on
 the weak

However, Ajax's excessive nature means that this sense of balance is never evidenced in the relationships we see on-stage. Rather, Ajax expresses little concern for the impact that his decisions will have on those around him, though the audience can see that the potential consequences are severe. Thus Tecmessa fears that his death will mean that both she and Ajax's son will be passed as slaves to another of the Greeks and maltreated (496-9, see Roisman in this volume), while the chorus fear for their own safety if they are associated with Ajax (254-6: see McCallum-Barry in this volume), and Teucer imagines that Ajax's death will lead to his own disgrace and exile when he reports the news to their father (1019-20). Despite being adult males (who in an Athenian context would be citizens), the chorus seem to have little agency, and are dependent on Ajax for their wellbeing and status. From an Athenian perspective, Ajax's lack of regard for others in his community reinforces the dangers of an oligarchic or autocratic system. Admirable as Ajax may be for his strength, courage, and single-mindedness, as a member of a *polis*, he is a liability.

The other side of Ajax's anti-social behaviour in life is his reconciliation with the wider community in death, since the play ends with the Greek camp united once more around the task of his burial. The focus on Ajax's burial site and tomb evokes a final aspect of Greek heroes, their role in cult as civic protectors. Greeks believed that the heroes of myth really did live once upon a time, and that they continued to have power after their death. This power was centered on the site of their tomb, or relics associated with their physical remains, and possession of a hero's cult site or his bones could offer protection or success in war. In myth, heroes are frequently given these powers in compensation for the suffering that they have had to endure in life, and this is a common pattern in tragedy. Ajax held a particularly important status for Athenians because he was one of the ten heroes who gave their names to the tribes of Athens, meaning that a tenth of the audience could believe themselves to have a special connection with him. He was honoured with a statue in the *agora*, the centre of Athenian public life, and received a festival at his shrine on the island of Salamis, which had been part of Athens' power-base since the sixth century. Thus the second part of the play, with its focus on Ajax's corpse and its burial, allows Ajax to transition from being a Homeric style hero to a cultic one, and explores how his negative qualities in life can be compensated for in death by his new powers. Teucer imagines that Ajax continues to have abiding power even as a corpse, and so advises Eurysaces to kneel and take his hand in supplication (1172-5). By suggesting this action, Teucer imagines Ajax's body as though it is already the hero-tomb that it will later occupy, and so a suitable location for suppliants to offer their prayers. The body offers shelter and protection to Tecmessa and Eurysaces, and Teucer envisages that a supernatural curse will befall anyone who tries to remove them from it (1175-9):

'If any man at all in all the army tries to drag you off his body, may he die in shame, may he lie unburied on the earth, and may he and all his family shrivel to their roots, cut down as I cut off this lock of hair from my own head.'

Teucer's curse contains its own religious power, as does his ritual cutting of a lock of hair, an action which is both associated with funerary ritual (for example, Sophocles' *Electra* 52) and with religious dedication (as in *Iliad* 23.142-7, where Achilles had promised to dedicate a lock of his hair to the river-god Spercheios). Ajax's body effectively becomes a religious sanctuary which offers protection to the weak and needy, and Teucer's advice to Tecmessa

and Eurysaces evokes the tradition that those persecuted could seek shelter at a shrine, and could not be forcibly removed without incurring divine punishment. In death Ajax is able to protect his family in a way that he was not capable of in life (when he rejected Tecmessa's appeals), just as he is able to become a force for reconciliation rather than division among the Greeks.

In conclusion, *Ajax* offers a fine example of tragedy's creative use of epic and the heroic tradition. In taking Iliadic characters and setting his play in the Greek camp at Troy, Sophocles makes a deliberate choice to engage with the *Iliad*, which by his day was established as the foundational text of Greek poetry and of the values and ethos of the heroic world. His portrayal of Ajax as a proud and stubborn hero reflects the central conflict of the *Iliad*, which also revolves around the question of what it will take to make a hero who has been slighted give up his anger. Yet by making Ajax outstrip even the Homeric Achilles in his stubbornness, and by focusing on the negative aspects of his pride, Sophocles invites his audience to question the role that powerful individuals play in society, and to consider how their greatness can be accommodated without social damage. Ajax is a troubling figure to a democratic Athenian audience, yet he is also admirable for his brilliance and his uncompromising adherence to his principles, and the play would not be successful if the audience did not regret his death, and empathise with the grief felt by Teucer, Tecmessa, and the chorus. The final part of the play suggests a partial solution to the difficult question of how a community can incorporate excessively powerful individuals, and after his death, Ajax's admirable qualities become more apparent, with even his enemy Odysseus offering warm words about his greatness. By hinting at Ajax's ongoing role in hero-cult, Sophocles not only anticipates his transformation into a protector of Athens, but also looks to cult as a mechanism for reconciling the power and the anger of the heroes, who in death can finally become socially beneficent figures.