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Sophocles' *Ajax* and its Double *Agon* in Light of Intertextual Relations[1]

ABSTRACT: It has been said that Sophocles' *Ajax* lacks unity, and that its conclusion loses part of its tragic effect. This paper examines the tragedy's structure and the associated innovations introduced by Sophocles, focusing primarily on the double *agon*. The paper attempts to explain the *agon*'s dual nature by comparing *Ajax* with three other works, namely the *Iliad*, *Ichneutai* and, especially, the *Hymn to Hermes*.

Keywords: Sophocles, *Ajax*, agon, Iliad, Ichneutai, Hymn to Hermes.

Ajax, traditionally considered the oldest extant Sophoclean tragedy[2], is peculiar, among other things, because its main character and hero, Ajax, dies in the central part of the drama, in line 865. Although it is true that this is not the only main character to die in a Greek tragedy, it is the only one to do so at such an early point in the narrative[3], with 555 verses, approximately two fifths of the total length of the play, still remaining[4].

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2   The exact date of the tragedy's first performance is unknown, but the *communis opinio*, based largely on stylistic and technical arguments, considers it to be the earliest one by this author. RONNET, 1969, 324–329, based on the relationships between elements of the play and various historical events, places it at 456–455 BC. However, the first performance of *Ajax* is more frequently estimated to have occurred between 450 and 440 BC; cf. STANFORD, 1981 (1963¹), 294–296, FINGLASS, 2011, 1–11.

3   The closest example is that of *Antigone*, but her death occurs off-stage in v. 928, 425 verses away from the end, and the remaining text focuses on the direct consequences of her demise. In other words, *Antigone* contains no anticlimax, whereas *Ajax* does; cf. JEBB, 1869, xii–xiii.

4   The death of Ajax is also exceptional because it is a suicide that takes place in full view of the audience, and on a completely empty stage. In addition, the actor who plays Ajax must also play the role of Teucer from v. 774 on, and the body of Ajax must be found by Tecmessa and remain on stage for the rest of the play. Different theories have been put forward regarding the scene's technical elements. For example, BREMER, 1976, 37–39, suggests that Ajax would have been removed from view to fall on his sword, in order to replace the actor with a sack representing his body. Later, when Tecmessa finds the corpse, the sack would be dragged to the center of the stage (cf. GOLDER, 1990, 26–27, GARVIE, 1998, 203–204). However, other authors claim that the death could be seen by the audience. Particularly, LIAPIS, 2015, 130–149, proposes that the suicide took place on one side of the stage, and that afterwards, when Tecmessa covered the body with a cloak (vv. 915–916), the actor left the stage and was replaced by a dummy or by an extra. On the suicide of Ajax and the problems caused by its representation, cf. MOST, OZBEK, 2015.

The death of the hero occurring at such an early point represents an important break in the play[5], and clearly divides the drama into two parts. This dual structure has often been remarked upon[6], and, since it is also present to a lesser extent in *Antigone* and *Trachiniae*[7], it has even been considered a characteristic feature of Sophocles' early tragedies[8]. Nevertheless, the dual character of *Ajax* is much more pronounced, and it has been considered indicative of a lack of unity[9].

On the other hand, several critics have defended the play's structure by highlighting the common elements within both its first and second parts[10], most importantly that of character, particularly the central figure of Ajax[11], but also the framing characters of Athena and Odysseus[12]. Other elements which help grant unity to the tragedy have also been pointed out; for example, JEBB[13] considers that, since a tribe in Athens had been named after Ajax (Herodotus 5.66; cf. Pausanias 1.35.3) and several distinguished Athenians claimed to be descendants of the hero, the burial at the end of the tragedy is essential to provide the play with a sense of unity, and represents the true climax of the story[14].

Another tactic used to defend the unity of the tragedy is the comparison of perceived similarities between its structure and that of the *Iliad*, as well as between their main characters, Ajax and Achilles, respectively[15]. In fact, the main scenes in *Ajax* are structured precisely along the same lines as some of the most significant scenes in the Homeric work[16].

Special emphasis, however, has been given to the peculiar nature of the internal structure of *Ajax*, which from the Chorus' exit from the stage in v. 814 maintains a certain symmetry with the beginning of the story; after that point, each section of the trag-

5   The death of Ajax in v. 865 is the main break in the play, but there are also other minor ones; cf. FINGLASS, 2012, 64.

6   Cf. WALDOCK, 1966, 49–67, TYLER, 1974, 31–36, KIRKWOOD, 1994 (1958[1]), 42–54.

7   KANE, 1988, on the other hand, argues that *Trachiniae* is divided into three parts rather than two.

8   Cf. EUCKEN, 1991, 119. For his part, WALDOCK, 1966, 54–55, suggests that perhaps one in every ten tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides had a diptych structure.

9   "It is a modern fashion to call the play a 'diptych'. This does not help us; it only says, in different words, that we do not find it a unity"; cf. KITTO, 1961[3] (1939[1]), 121.

10   On the different unifying elements in *Ajax*, cf. FINGLASS, 2012.

11   Cf. REINHARDT, 1991, 51.

12   Cf. ADAMS, 1957, 23–26.

13   Cf. JEBB, 1869, xii–xiv; cf. JEBB, 1896, xxviii–xxxii.

14   TYRRELL, 1985, connects the events in *Ajax* with those associated to the ritual of sacrifice (θυσία), and considers that this is the fact which gives unity to the play.

15   In the *Iliad*, Ajax is Achilles's *alter ego*, each character occupying one end of the camp, while Odysseus occupies the center (*Il.* 8.222–226, 11.5–9); cf. FUCARINO, 1986–1987, 158–163.

16   "The play starts with the hero's wrath, ends with a burial and has a turning point, Ajax's resolution to die and his suicide. This resembles the overall structure of the *Iliad*: it begins with Achilles' wrath, ends with Hector's burial and has a turning point: Patroclos' death and Achilles' decision to return to the battlefield to kill Hector, which will ultimately bring his own death. Thus, the *Ajax* can be viewed as a creative reworking of the *Iliad*"; cf. VERGADOS, 2009, 160. Particularly, there are some remarkable similarities between *Aj.* 485–595 and *Il.* 6.407–493 (both Ajax and Hector say farewell to their wives and sons) (*ibid.*, 158–159), or between *Aj.* 1331–1373 and *Il.* 24.486–506 (Odysseus and Priam intercede so that Ajax and Hector, respectively, may be buried) (*ibid.*, 159–160). In general, on the relation between Homer and Sophocles, cf. DAVIDSON, 2012.

edy's second part is parallel to the comparable section of its first part, as if the play began anew[17].

Within the structure of the play, the two debates between Teucer and the Atreidae stand out. Both of these debates are long and revolve around the same topic, leading some scholars to question the composition of the tragedy; they argue that the last agonal section is an extra passage added simply for length, and causes a loss of tragic effect after the death of the hero[18]. These ideas can be seen in the famous scholion on verse 1123:

> τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφίσματα οὐκ οἰκεῖα τραγῳδίας· μετὰ γὰρ τὴν ἀναίρεσιν ἐπεκτεῖναι τὸ δρᾶμα θελήσας ἐψυχρεύσατο καὶ ἔλυσε τὸ τραγικὸν πάθος [19]

> These sophisms are not typical of tragedy. After the death [of Ajax], in an attempt to stretch the drama, [Sophocles] wrote in bad taste and lost the tragic spirit.

This paper analyses the composition of *Ajax*, pays attention to these *agon* scenes and their possible functions in the tragedy, and suggests the relationships between *Ajax* and the *Iliad*, *Ichneutai* and especially the *Hymn to Hermes* as reasons for the duplication of the *agon*.

The composition of *Ajax*

The element in *Ajax* which has ultimately motivated the debate regarding lack of unity and loss of tragic effect is, as has already been pointed out, the early death of the hero in v. 865. However, the specific placement of Ajax's death is not dictated by myth, but rather was a deliberate, and innovative, choice by Sophocles.

Ajax, first performed in the decades between 460 and 440 BC[20], and in spite of being the earliest extant Sophoclean tragedy, was written by a mature author. Sophocles had won his first prize years before in 468 BC, defeating Aeschylus when he was almost thirty years old[21]. In fact, according to what we know, he had such skill that he won the first prize on twenty occasions and never came in last (*TrGF* 4 test. A 1.33–34).

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17   For more detail cf. HUBBARD, 2003. According to this scholar (*ibid.*, 170–171), this way of structuring the play into passages with symmetrical correspondence may be a reflection of the way trilogies were composed in the late stages of Aeschylus, where a pattern of thesis – antithesis – synthesis can be observed, in which the first two plays show a largely symmetrical correspondence and the third one provides a reconciliation between the opposed opinions. On this structure in Aeschylean trilogies, cf. HERINGTON, 1983, particularly 126–130.

18   Cf., for example, WALDOCK, 1966, 66, DAVIDSON, 1985, 24–25, HUBBARD, 2003, 165.

19   Cf. PAPAGEORGIUS, 1888, 85.

20   See note 2.

21   Cf. *TrGF* 4 test. Hc 33, Plutarch, *Cimon* 8.7–8 (*TrGF* 4 test. Hc 36). Also, according to Eusebius, Sophocles had his first play performed c. 470 BC (cf. *TrGF* 4 test. Hc 32ab). This date is plausible, although subject to debate; cf. FINGLASS, 2011, 1–2.

On the other hand, the last events in Ajax's life were not a new theme to the tragic stage, and even less novel in the context of literary tradition[22]. The Award of the Arms is not featured in the *Iliad*, but it does appear in the *Odyssey* (11.543–51), in which the decision to hand the arms to Odysseus is made by Athena and the Trojans (*Od.* 11.547)[23]. This episode was later reproduced in the *Aethiopis*, attributed to Arctinus of Miletus[24], and in the *Little Iliad*, ascribed to Lesches of Pyrrha, or of Mytilene, in which spies are sent to the foot of the Trojan wall, where they overhear two girls debating which warrior is more worthy of the arms of Achilles (scholion on Aristophanes, *Knights* 1056)[25]. At least in the *Little Iliad*, and with less certainty in the *Aethiopis*, the Trojans are the ones who decide to grant the arms to Odysseus, after which Ajax retreats to his tent and takes his own life at dawn, although, according to Proclus, not before attacking the cattle of the Achaeans[26].

Aeschylus also wrote a trilogy about Ajax[27] that included the Award of the Arms, in which the Trojan captives awarded them to Odysseus, leading in turn to the suicide of the Telamonian.

The portrayal of this mythical passage starts to vary substantially in Pindar, who alludes to the Award of the Arms in *Nemean* 7.23–30 and 8.23–34, but who introduces the idea that Ajax was deceived by a manipulative Odysseus and his cunning use of words[28].

Of course, Sophocles could have created a tragedy more in line with tradition, beginning with the Award of the Arms, continuing through its related decisions and narrative developments, climaxing with the hero's suicide, and ending, if desired, with the funeral. That structure was readily available to the playwright, was perhaps the most obvious one, given its previous use, and would have prevented accusations that an artificially extended end caused lack of unity or loss of dramatic tension. However, Sophocles does not follow that structure. Instead, he omits direct portrayal of the Award of the Arms, although does include some references to it (vv. 445–446, 1135–1137, 1239–1249) to allow its presence to be felt throughout the tragedy. He also makes it clear that the decision to give the arms to Odysseus was made not by Trojan agents, as in previous versions, but

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22 On the myth of Ajax and the Award of the Arms in literary tradition, cf. JEBB, 1869, vi–x, 1896, xii–xxiii, xlvii–xlix, FUCARINO, 1986–1987, FINGLASS, 2011, 26–36.

23 Cf. FUCARINO, 1986–1987, 163–166.

24 A summary of the play is offered by Proclus, although it does not explain precisely how the Award of the Arms developed.

25 In the scholion on Aristophanes, *Knights* 1056, Odysseus is considered to be more deserving of the arms because he remained in the fight while Ajax removed the body of Achilles from the battlefield. Proclus' summary of the *Aethiopis* also contains this role distribution. However, there is a papyrus (P. Oxy. 2510) in which Odysseus offers to carry the body of Achilles while Ajax fights the Trojans. In this regard, cf. BERNABÉ PAJARES, 1979 (repr. 1999), 148–149, 153–154.

26 The summary of Proclus in the *Chrestomathy* first mentions a raid on the Achaeans' cattle, but does not refer to an attack against the army's leaders.

27 The works which made up the trilogy were Ὅπλων κρίσις (*TrGF* 3 F 174–178), Θρῇσσαι (*TrGF* 3 F 83–85) and Σαλαμίνιαι (TrGF 3 F 216–220). In this regard, cf. JEBB, 1896, xix–xxiii, FUCARINO, 1986–1987, 170–172.

28 The epic genre's positive characterization of Odysseus based on his facile use of *logos* turned negative in the 5th century BC when that skill became associated with the sophists and the dangers related to verbal persuasion. On the figure of Odysseus, cf. STANFORD, 1954, WORMAN, 1999.

by the Greeks, although whether through a vote by the entire assembly or a decision by the main Greek leaders is not specified. This shift in responsibility is precisely what motivates Ajax to attack his comrades. It is not known whether this attack was present in the previous versions of the myth[29], but oddly enough, it is also left out of the tragedy. The version by Sophocles focuses on the aftermath of the decision when the death of the hero is the only matter of consequence remaining. Sophocles actively chooses to restrict his tragedy to this limited area, decides to move the central event from the climactic end to the center of the play, as a pivot point around which everything else revolves, and develops it visibly before the audience[30]. There is no doubt that this structure was intentional[31]. Our efforts, therefore, must be devoted to understanding it.

The essential question is that, as one of the most prominent members of the Greek army, second only to Achilles[32], and one of the anchors at the end of the Greek camp, paired with Achilles at the other end[33], Ajax had a legitimate expectation to receive the armor of Peleus' son. However, this expectation is dashed and at the Award of the Arms another hero, Odysseus, succeeds. He is inferior to Ajax on the battlefield, but he is superior in the control of *logos* and, what is more, in the use of *dolos*. The award is not included in the tragedy, but its omission can be easily explained: by leaving it out Sophocles sows doubt regarding the reliability of events. In other words, the author could have included the award and explicitly stated whether a deception took place, as Pindar suggests, or if there were no deception. Instead, he decides not to include it, providing us with a key regarding his intentions.

As has been stated before, the Award of the Arms first appears in the *Odyssey*, but is missing in the *Iliad*, in which the main confrontation between Ajax and Odysseus ends without favoring either of them. Indeed, in *Il.* 23.700–737 Ajax and Odysseus clash during the funeral games held in honor of Patroclus. During the fight, Ajax displays his strength and Odysseus his astuteness, but neither manages to defeat the other, and ultimately Achilles declares the match a tie and divides the prize equally between them[34].

This tie is broken in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus mentions that he defeated Ajax in the contest for the arms of Achilles (11.543–551). His account, however, includes two peculiarities which are of great interest. On the one hand, it is not an objective report of the facts, but rather originates with Odysseus himself, one of the parties involved, the winner of the dispute and reknowned for his deceitful use of *logos*. On the other hand,

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29 Cf. note 26.

30 In Θρῆσσαι, by Aeschylus, the suicide of Ajax was narrated by a messenger (*TrGF* 3 F 83).

31 On the different explanations about the structure of *Ajax*, see the summary by DAVIDSON, 1985, 16–19, who concludes that "for whatever reason or reasons Sophocles consciously chose to construct the *Ajax* as he did. In other words, he went into the process of composition with his eyes open and it is therefore unlikely that the play became a monster which outgrew its original structure cage" (*ibid.*, 19).

32 Ajax is introduced as second to Achilles in several passages, for example, *Il.* 2.768–769, 17.279–280, *Od.* 11.550–551, 24.17–18, Alcaeus 387 Lobel-Page, Ibycus 282.34–35 Page *PMG*, Pindar, *N.* 7.27, Horace, *S.* 2.3.193. On the literary mentions to Ajax as second to Achilles and also to the Award of the Arms, cf. ROIG LANZILLOTA, 2006, 90 n. 7.

33 Cf. note 15.

34 On the Ajax of the *Iliad*, cf. FUCARINO, 1986–1987, 158–163, BURIAN, 2012, 70–71.

Odysseus ends his story precisely by admitting that Ajax was the best man after Achilles (*Od.* 11.550–551), which ironically involves admitting that Ajax should have been the winner. The *Odyssey* declares Odysseus the winner of the contest of arms, but at the same time raises doubts about its outcome.

Sophocles decides to maintain those doubts by leaving the Award of the Arms out of the tragic action, and by including some partial references to it from both parties involved. The first one to question the final decision is Ajax himself, particularly in the *agon* scene he shares with Tecmessa (νῦν δ᾽ αὖτ᾽ Ἀτρεῖδαι φωτὶ παντουργῷ φρένας / ἔπραξαν, ἀνδρὸς τοῦδ᾽ ἀπώσαντες κράτη, "But now the Atreidae have conveyed them to a villain, and thrust away the high deeds of Ajax", vv. 445–446)[35], an accusation which is later taken up and expanded upon by Teucer in his *agon* with Menelaus (vv. 1135–1137). These two passages show that Ajax and his followers considered that the Award was rigged. In contrast, the supporters of Odysseus defend its legitimacy and criticize Ajax for not accepting the result (vv. 1239–1249). Of course, each of the parties involved explains what happened from their own perspective, but the audience does not have any objective data to inform them what really happened.

What Sophocles does specify is that the decision, fair or otherwise, was made by the Greeks themselves. By doing so, Sophocles turns the comrades of Ajax into his enemies, and provides the hero cause to attack his own people[36], which in turn intensifies and radicalizes the conflicting views. Ajax' attack on his comrades, transformed into an attack against a flock of sheep by Athena, motivates Odysseus and the rest of the Greeks to consider Ajax an enemy.

The tragedy thus begins at an impasse, though avoids a direct confrontation between Ajax and Odysseus, and focuses mainly on the reactions of both parties. Given the events, Ajax needs to die, but his death does not mark the end of the tragedy. The play continues in a long debate, an innovation by Sophocles[37], in which Odysseus achieves something that seemed impossible, convincing Agamemnon to let Ajax be buried[38]. Thus, Ajax retains his exalted position and the path to worshipping him is clear, but at the same time Odysseus is victorious, justifying the outcome of the Award of the Arms. Ironically, Odysseus persuades Agamemnon by appealing to, among other things, the many virtues of Ajax, stating that "in all our Greek host which came to Troy, I have seen none who was his peer, save Achilles" (ἕν᾽ ἄνδρ᾽ ἰδεῖν ἄριστον Ἀργείων, ὅσοι / Τροίαν

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35 I use for Sophocles the Greek text by LLOYD-JONES, WILSON, 1990, and the translation by JEBB, 1896.
36 On the heroic code which instructs men to help friends and harm enemies, cf. BLUNDELL, 1989, 26–59.
37 As HUBBARD, 2003, 159, points out, there is no evidence in Aeschylus of a similar debate about the burial of Ajax.
38 The refusal to bury Ajax is not recorded in the previous versions of the myth. However, in the *Little Iliad* Agamemnon seems to refuse to let the hero be cremated and has him buried, against the epic tradition. In both cases, the expected treatment is denied to the hero's corpse as a sign of dishonor; cf. FINGLASS, 2011, 40–41. On the other hand, the struggle to receive proper exequies is a recurrent theme in Greek tragedy. It can be found not only in *Ajax*, but also in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides's *Suppliants*, Chaeremon's *Achilles Thersitoctonus* (*Achilles Slayer of Thersites*), and Moschion's *Pheraioi*. In this regard, cf. XANTHAKI-KARA-MANOU (forthcoming).

ἀφικόμεσθα, πλὴν Ἀχιλλέως, vv. 1340–1341); his very defense legitimizes Ajax's complaints about the award.

Sophocles' tragedy thus maintains the ambiguity surrounding the Award of the Arms and underscores the fact that both heroes had motives to win. It has often been said that the end of this tragedy, in which Teucer asks Odysseus not to attend the funeral of Ajax, maintains the distance between the two heroes which can be perceived during Odysseus' visit to the Hades in book XI of the *Odyssey*[39]. However, it might also be said that this play reproduces the tie dictated by Achilles between Ajax and Odysseus in book XXIII of the *Iliad*.

The double *agon* and its function

Ajax includes three *agon* scenes which add up to almost 400 verses, representing approximately one fourth of the entire length of the play[40]. The first of those scenes concentrates on Ajax and Tecmessa (vv. 430–595). The other two debate scenes create a double *agon* in which Teucer is faced with first Menelaus and then Agamemnon[41].

This group of *agon* scenes is very elaborate; it includes a crossed relationship between the *rheseis* in one scene and in the other. That is, all four *rheseis* involved, those of Menelaus (vv. 1052–1090) and Teucer (vv. 1093–1117) on one hand and of Agamemnon (vv. 1226–1263) and Teucer (vv. 1266–1315) on the other, maintain a formal correspondence with a chiastic structure (A-B-B'-A'), in which A and A' have a double composition and end with a final threat, and B and B' are shaped with a ring structure and end with an attack on their opponent[42].

However, this group of *agon* scenes has been accused of being unnecessarily long and of undermining the tragic effect. Some responses to this criticism have highlighted the functions of the double *agon* in tragedy, mainly that they are used to characterize both parts, emphasizing the rehabilitation of Ajax; to reveal the differences between the Atreidae; and to increase the tension of the confrontation[43]. Clearly, the *agon* scenes fulfil these functions, but they seem insufficient to justify, by themselves, the inclusion of two *agones*.

It is true that through the creation of a group of *agon* scenes around Ajax, the figure of the hero is elaborated anew, as in the case of Aeschylus's *Eumenides* and the actions of

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39 Cf. BURIAN, 2012, 70.
40 On the *agon* scenes in *Ajax*, cf. HOLT, 1981, DAVIDSON, 1985, 21–25. On the *agon* scene in Greek tragedy, cf. DUCHEMIN, 1968².
41 HAWTHORNE, 2012, 388–389, refers to a triple *agon* instead of a double one; he considers the arrival of Odysseus marks a new, incomplete *agon* between him and Agamemnon.
42 On the details of argumentation in this *agon* sequence, cf., among others, BLAISE, 1999, ENCINAS REGUERO, 2008, 484–487.
43 The main functions attributed to the double *agon* and used to justify its presence have been summarized by HOLT, 1981, 282–284. See also DAVIDSON, 1985, 22–23, who adds that the Athenians liked debates, and so the second part compensated for the monologue in the first part.

Orestes[44]. However, that new elaboration starts even before the death of the hero with
the references to his sword[45] and to Hector, and it reaches its climax after his death, but
before the *agon*, when Teucer links the fate of Ajax to that of Hector by presenting the
death of both heroes as a consequence of their past gift exchange (vv. 1024–1037). As
related in Teucer's laments, not only is Ajax's death a consequence of Hector's sword,
transforming his suicide into a death at the hands of the enemy, but Hector's death is
also the consequence of the belt which Ajax gave him. Prior to Hector's death, Achilles
tied him to the chariot with this belt; thus Ajax, not Achilles, becomes the hero who
released the Greeks from their biggest enemy[46]. Consequently, although this rehabilita-
tion of the hero continues in the double *agon*, it has already been largely developed and
cannot be used to explain the *agon*.

   It also appears that the two *agones* make it possible to observe the differences be-
tween Menelaus and Agamemnon, but these two characters are not of sufficient rel-
evance to justify needing this comparison, nor do the differences appear significant
enough in the interpretation of the tragedy[47].

   It is also true that the double *agon* makes it possible to appreciate the large gap exist-
ing between the greatness of Ajax and the pettiness of his adversaries[48]. But we cannot
forget that, just as those scenes let Teucer highlight the virtues of Ajax, they also make it
possible for Odysseus to intervene and exhibit his own merits. That is, through the two
agones, Teucer underlines Ajax's military feats, feats which made him the strongest can-
didate to succeed Achilles, but the intensity of the conflict – exacerbated through repe-
tition, becoming increasingly hostile, and seemingly impossible to reconcile – provides
an opportunity for Odysseus to intervene. His achievement, convincing the Atreidae to
allow Ajax a funeral, justifies his victory in the Award of Arms and likens him to Achilles,
who in the *Iliad* returned Hector's corpse to his father, Priam, for burial[49].

   This double *agon*, therefore, is not simply used to rehabilitate the hero, to differen-
tiate between the different Atreidae or to create a contrast between the figures of Ajax
and his adversaries. This large scene which replaces the direct confrontation between

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44   MURNAGHAN, 1989, 173–174, establishes this connection between *Ajax* and Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, in
     which, during Clytemnestra's murder trial, the figure of Clytemnestra is rehabilitated and her relation with
     Orestes is reinterpreted, which in turn helps to reduce the severity of the committed crime.

45   The symbol of the sword, both as a gift from his enemy and as the instrument of Ajax's death, is essential
     for the rehabilitation of the hero: it suggests a heroic death within a military context and as a consequence
     of enemy action; cf. COHEN, 1978. On the other hand, references to the sword, and through it to Hector, are
     also used to highlight the similarities between both heroes. As STANFORD, 1981 (1963¹), lx, suggests, they
     are both deceived by a god, and that deceit ultimately leads to their death; they both are forced to leave
     their wives and sons in pursuit of their heroic honor; and they both die in defeat, in spite of being great
     warriors.

46   Sophocles is either inventing a new version of Hector's death, or basing it on a version different from
     what can be found in *Il.* 22.361, in which Hector is already dead when Achilles ties his body to the chariot,
     and which does not mention Ajax's belt (*Il.* 22.395); cf. STANFORD, 1981 (1963¹), 190, KAMERBEEK, 1963,
     201–202. In the opinion of GARVIE, 1998, 221, this version may have been known to Homer, who, however,
     tends to erase the harsher elements of the tradition.

47   Cf. HOLT, 1981, 283.

48   Cf. REINHARDT, 1991, 51.

49   Cf. MINADEO, 1992, 49.

Ajax and Odysseus apparently included in other versions is ultimately used to highlight the merits of each possible successor to Achilles and, therefore, it underlines again the tie between them in the *Iliad*.

However, could that same effect not have been achieved in a single *agon* scene? Why are there two of them? Is the scholiast right to consider that Sophocles included two *agon* scenes simply to pad out the length of the play? Of course, the existence of two debates invites the audience to contrast them[50], but, perhaps more appropriately, duplication could be utilized for intertextual reasons.

The double *agon* in *Ajax* and its intertextual references

The fact that Sophocles decided to include a double *agon* may be better interpreted in light of the intertextual relations which *Ajax* maintains with other works, particularly Homer's *Iliad*, *Ichneutai* by Sophocles himself, and the *Hymn to Hermes*[51].

The fact that *Ajax* largely mimics the pattern of the *Iliad* has already been pointed out[52]. We have also mentioned the specific scene in the Homeric poem in which Ajax and Odysseus fight during Patroclus' funeral games, a fight ultimately ending in a tie (*Il.* 23.700–737). In that clash, since neither hero is able to knock down his opponent, the Telamonian suggests that he who is able to lift the other shall be declared victorious. After two failed attempts, Achilles intervenes and declares a tie (*Il.* 23.733–734). The structure, therefore, is double, as in *Ajax*'s *agon*.

A less obvious, but more significant, possible explanation for *Ajax*'s double *agon* can be found in Sophocles' satyr play *Ichneutai*, in which the newly-born Hermes steals his brother Apollo's cattle, and of which approximately 450 verses published at the beginning of the 20th century have been preserved (P. Oxy. 1174 y 2081a)[53]. The similarities between both plays, which were first pointed out in 1971[54], can especially be seen in the prologue, in the division of the Chorus at a specific moment of the search and, allegedly, in the end. These similarities in both theme and the structure led some authors to propose that both plays "were probably written together"[55]. That is, perhaps *Ichneutai* was represented as a satirical drama in the same year in which *Ajax* was performed as a tragedy, thus becoming part of the same tetralogy.

More specifically, both *Ajax* and *Ichneutai* have a diptych structure and start with a character attacking his own people through an animal herd: Ajax kills the cattle of

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50 Cf. HOLT, 1981, 284.

51 Some of the features in *Ajax* have also been associated with comedy. More specifically, LIAPIS, 2015, after focusing on these comedic elements, suggests the possibility that *Ajax* was performed at the Lenaia. On the comic features of the final double *agon*, see also POE, 1987, 23–27.

52 Cf. note 16 and VERGADOS, 2009.

53 For the edition of *Ichneutai*, cf. MALTESE, 1982, O'SULLIVAN, COLLARD, 2013, 336–377.

54 Cf. SUTTON, 1971, 60–67. On the relation between *Ajax* and *Ichneutai*, see also ENCINAS REGUERO, 2018 (forthcoming), which not only highlights the parallels between both works, but also the significant inversion existing between them.

55 Cf. SUTTON, 1971, 67.

his comrades and Hermes steals the cattle of his brother, Apollo[56]. In both cases, the crime is committed at night, highlights antagonism with another character (Odysseus and Apollo, respectively), and represents a response to a perceived injustice: Ajax seeks revenge for the Award of the Arms being judged in Odysseus' favour; Hermes, for his part, blames his lack of recognition befitting his station as a son of Zeus on Apollo.

After committing their crimes, both Ajax and Hermes become the target of searches by Odysseus and Apollo, respectively. The search in *Ajax* ends abruptly thanks to Athena, although it becomes active again in the middle of the play; the search in *Ichneutai* is maintained throughout the entire first part of the drama. However, the most important factor here is the similarity which supposedly existed between both plays' conclusions: each was dominated by debate over the committed crime. This similarity cannot be proven, because the end of *Ichneutai* remains lost. However, since the hypotext in *Ichneutai* is the *Hymn to Hermes*[57], the longest and, apparently, most recent long Homeric hymn[58], it has been used to extrapolate the ending of *Ichneutai*. Nevertheless, this article has opted to establish a direct comparison between *Ajax* and the *Hymn to Hermes* to reveal a very interesting connection between both plays.

The structure of the *Hymn to Hermes*, whose unity, incidentally, has also been called into question[59], has a proem (vv. 1–19)[60] and a short final conclusion (vv. 579–580)[61], but the main body of the hymn is a narrative section, referred to as *pars epica*, which is structured *grosso modo* as a chiasmus, with references to the lyre at both start and finish (at the beginning, in reference to its invention[62], and at the end, when it is given as a gift to Apollo)[63] and to the herds in the central part, in the form of two symmetric narra-

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56 The theft of animals is associated with rites of passage (FLETCHER, 2008, 31–33). Thanks to it, Hermes was accepted among the gods, and he established bonds of solidarity with his group, and became an adult. Conversely, Ajax, who slaughtered the animals, was rejected by his people, and was doomed to die.

57 Cf. FERNÁNDEZ DELGADO, 2007. For the edition of the *Hymn to Hermes*, cf. RICHARDSON, 2010.

58 The date the *Hymn to Hermes* was composed is uncertain. On the different hypotheses in this regard, cf. FAULKNER, 2011, 12–13, and, especially, VERGADOS, 2013, 131–147, who dates the poem towards the end of the 6th century BC. The place in which the hymn was written is also unknown, although it may be said that Athens is the place where it became most popular; cf. VERGADOS, 2013, 148–158.

59 Cf. SOWA, 1984, 194–197, CLAY, 2006² (1989¹), 95–96 y n. 3.

60 Cf. ABRITTA, 2015, 15–19.

61 According to VERGADOS, 2013, 125–129, the conclusion can be found in vv. 503–580. RICHARDSON, 2015, 24–25, delays the beginning until v. 513. On the other hand, the dialogue between Hermes and Apollo regarding the gift of prophesy (vv. 513–573) has sometimes been considered a later addition. On the general structure of the *Homeric Hymns*, cf. JANKO, 1981.

62 In the *Hymn to Hermes*, the god invents the lyre before stealing the cattle. This order is contrary to what can be found in Sophocles' *Ichneutai* or in other versions of this story, such as Apollodorus 3.10.2. On the priority of the invention of the lyre, cf. SHELMERDINE, 1984.

63 Each of these two parts includes a song sung by Hermes: the first one (vv. 54–61) about his own birth; the second (vv. 424–433) about the origin of the gods. The existence of these songs, along with other double elements (the symmetric travels of Hermes and Apollo, the meetings with the old man of Onchestos, the scenes by the Alpheus, etc.), which are placed in parallel in each part of the play, has been pointed out by RICHARDSON, 2007, 84–85. However, apart from this double structure, the poem is also built around some triads: there are three κλυτὰ ἔργα of the god (lyre, theft and *dais*); there are three verbal confrontations (with Maia, with Apollo and before Zeus); and finally, there are three gifts from Apollo (cattle, wand and bee oracle); cf. CLAY, 2006² (1989¹), 145.

tions (the night trip of Hermes with the cows and the day trip of Apollo following their tracks)[64]. The references to the herds are structured around a central point (the return of Hermes to the cave and the discussion with his mother, Maia) and end with a double confrontation between Hermes and Apollo.

Without entering into the particulars of this structure, which might also be tripartite (κλυτὰ ἔργα, confrontations, reconciliation), what is relevant is that within the *Hymn to Hermes* there are exactly three debates or confrontations, just as in *Ajax*. The first takes place between Hermes and his mother, the nymph Maia, upon his return to the cave[65] after stealing Apollo's cows, taking them to the Alpheus and sacrificing two of them (vv. 154–183). This scene can be compared to the confrontation between Ajax and Tecmessa when Ajax returns to his tent after slaughtering the cattle of the Greek army (vv. 430–595).

The other two confrontations in the *Hymn to Hermes* involve Hermes himself and his brother Apollo. These two scenes can be compared to the two final *agones* in *Ajax*, although the two conflicting parties, Ajax and Odysseus, do not face each other directly, but through intermediaries, Teucer and the Atreidae (Menelaus and Agamemnon, successively). In the first confrontation between Apollo and Hermes (vv. 252–312), the older god threatens the newborn with exile to Tartarus (vv. 256–259)[66], but even that threat is insufficient to get Hermes confess and reveal the location of the cows. In the corresponding *agon* of the Sophoclean tragedy (vv. 1047–1162), Menelaus forbids Ajax's body to be buried, and ends his speech, like Apollo, with a threat – in this case of death, which on the human plane is equivalent to Tartarus for immortals[67]. This *agon* also ends without an agreement.

The second confrontation between Hermes and Apollo (vv. 322–396) takes place with Zeus as a judge and mediator. Again, both gods make their opposing views very clear, and it is Zeus who urges Hermes to return the cattle to Apollo and who tells both brothers to come to an understanding[68]. Similarly, the second *agon* scene between Agamemnon and Teucer in *Ajax* (vv. 1226–1375) features Odysseus as the mediator[69], who convinces Agamemnon to allow the burial of Ajax.

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64 The narration of the trip of the two brothers from Pieria to the Alpheus in Pylos mentions how they crossed Onchestos and how both of them met the same old man there. However, in spite of that encounter with a human, the *Hymn to Hermes* does not include the narration of the epiphany of the god, which was common in long Homeric hymns. On this matter, cf. VERGADOS, 2011a. On the other hand, the analysis of the plant elements and the references to the sandals of Hermes leads CURSARU, 2011, 2014, to link the trip of that god and the katabasis.

65 On the different representations of the cave along the hymn, cf. VERGADOS, 2011b. On the description of the cave made by Apollo in vv. 227–292, cf. VAN NORTWICK, 1980.

66 The threat to send someone to Tartarus is a prerogative of Zeus, and it is reminiscent of some events in the theogonic period; cf. HARRELL, 1991.

67 Since immortals could not be punished with death, they were punished, or threatened, with confinement in Tartarus. On this theme, cf. HARRELL, 1991.

68 In spite of the high percentage of verses in direct speech included in the *Hymn to Hermes*, the words of Zeus are usually included as indirect speech. In this regard, cf. FAULKNER, 2015, 42–43, 45.

69 On tragic debates with two contenders and a third character who acts as a judge, cf. DUCHEMIN, 1968², 139–140.

Both of the confrontations between Apollo and Hermes and the double *agon* between Teucer and the Atreidae are clear examples of forensic or judicial rhetoric[70] and in both cases the rhetorical argumentation becomes very important. In fact, both confrontations include a character who is associated with ambiguous and deceitful language. We refer, of course, to Hermes and Odysseus. *Ajax* suggests that Odysseus cheated to obtain a victory in the Award of the Arms; Hermes clearly tries in the hymn to deceive his brother Apollo and even Zeus. This similarity between the two characters is not odd: they were related through Autolycus, grandfather of Odysseus and son of Hermes. In fact, in the hymn Hermes is referred to twice as πολύτροπος (v. 13, 439), an epithet reserved exclusively for him and for Odysseus (*Od.* 1.1, 10.330)[71]. This relationship between Odysseus and Hermes, as well as the parallels established between the confrontations within *Ajax* and the *Hymn to Hermes*, and between both plays in general, could lead the audience to conclude that Ajax was deceived, which contributes to the rehabilitation of his figure.

But beyond what has been already pointed out, the ultimate meanings of *Ajax* and of the *Hymn to Hermes* are similar, although inverted. In her work *The Politics of Olympus*, CLAY explains that the *Homeric Hymns* represent a critical point in the evolution and stabilization of the Olympic order, which motivates Zeus' mediation and the redefinition or redistribution of the divine *timai*[72]. According to this pattern, the *Hymn to Hermes* focuses on the birth of that god, the last Olympian to be born, and on the reorganization of divine honors, which had already been distributed, and which needed to be altered after that birth. In order to receive what he thinks he deserves, Hermes does not hesitate to steal; he even threatens to do it again if his father does not grant him his due (vv. 174–181).

In *Ajax*, which takes place on the human plane, the same thing happens, although the driving force is not a birth, but a death. Indeed, the tragedy represents the reorganization and redistribution of honors among the Greek troops caused by the death of Achilles, the best of the Achaeans. Just as the birth of Hermes causes in the theogonic period a confrontation between Hermes and Apollo, who claim their right as gods and sons of Zeus, so does the death of Achilles lead in the heroic period to the confrontation between Ajax and Odysseus, who claim their right, as worthy successors of the hero, to the arms of the deceased. And just like Hermes resorted to theft and deceit because he was the last god to be born and because the *timai* had already been distributed, so does Ajax resort to violence to claim what he believes is his, because the Greeks had already

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70 GÖRGEMANNS, 1976, 115–119, highlights the marked rhetorical nature of Hermes' speeches to his brother Apollo, which in his opinion can be used to date the hymn at the beginning of the 5th century BC. For his part, KENNEDY, 1963, 40, points out that "The earliest scene in Greek literature approximating a court trial is probably the dispute between Apollo and Hermes in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*". In this confrontation between brothers, according to Kennedy, we can observe both the strength of the oath in the early trials and the oldest use of the argument from probability. On the legal procedure contained in the *Hymn to Hermes*, cf. PAPAKONSTANTINOU, 2007. On the use of the oath in the hymn, cf. PAPAKONSTANTINOU, 2007, 101–110, FLETCHER, 2008, ROMANI, 2012.

71 On the relation between Hermes and Odysseus, cf. PUCCI, 1987, 23–26, VERGADOS, 2013, 65–67.

72 Cf. CLAY, 2006[2] (1989[1]), 11–16.

granted the arms of Achilles to Odysseus. In the hymn, Zeus recognizes Hermes and the two brothers eventually arrive at an agreement and divide their powers. That is, they move from a situation of antagonism to one of reconciliation[73]. In the tragedy, on the other hand, the exceptional warlike nature of Ajax is recognized and the oratorical skills of Odysseus are highlighted, but reconciliation in never achieved. In spite of this fact, however, in *Ajax* the homonymous hero finally achieves heroic status[74], just as in the *Hymn to Hermes* the god comes to be part of the Olympic pantheon.

But there is something else. As CLAY reveals, in the *Hymn to Hermes* the arrival of the god also involves a change in human existence, because his inventions (lyre, fire, etc.) take humanity out of its primitive state and provide it with access to technology and commerce[75]. Similarly, in *Ajax*, the death of Achilles generates a conflict whose resolution also involves an important change, albeit perhaps not so positive: the events which follow represent the shift from an heroic society to one marked by the predominance of *logos*.

Conclusion

In *Ajax*, Sophocles chooses a theme from the epic tradition and reworks it by introducing significant innovations, which has led some authors to question the unity of the play and the meaning of its final double debate. However, the play in its Sophoclean configuration is better understood when one assumes that Sophocles did not merely attempt to narrate the fate of a hero.

The Award of the Arms sets up a question of immense significance, because in it a tool linked to the use of the word is employed to settle what is at heart a military dispute: identifying the worthy successor of Achilles. The word and the action are two essential aspects of the Greek warrior. We may remember the famous passage in the *Iliad* in which Phoenix relates how Peleus appointed him to teach Achilles to be a speaker of words (μύθων τε ῥητῆρ᾽) and a doer of deeds (πρηκτῆρά τε ἔργων)[76] (*Il.* 9.442–443). Ajax is notable for his actions and Odysseus for his words; the Award of the Arms ultimately debates which one has priority.

In the *Iliad*, neither has priority over the other. In other epic poems, however, Odysseus wins, but the many reinterpretations and justifications of the award, and the nuances it starts having as early as the 5th century BC with Pindar, reveal that the victory is ambiguous. Perhaps Odysseus succeeded because the trial included the word as an

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73   Cf. CLAY, 2006² (1989¹), 101.
74   Ajax was the eponymous hero of one of the ten tribes of Athens (Herodotus 5.66) and he was worshipped in the city (Pausanias 1.35.3).
75   Cf. CLAY, 2011, 242.
76   I use here the edition by WEST, 1998.

essential element, and thus gave him an advantage[77], but understanding the reason for the result does not make that result any less questionable.

All this supports the hypothesis that Sophocles structures *Ajax* as an opposition between strength and words, or between the individual and society, which has been interpreted, in literary terms, as an opposition between epic and tragedy / oratory[78]. However, those two elements, action and word, are an essential part of the epic, and I believe that, although the opposition between them is undoubtedly present, it is also important to state that Sophocles returns in *Ajax* to the *Iliad* in order to highlight the impossibility of choosing between them.

Rather than the individual fate of Ajax, the theme of the tragedy is the consequences of a choice between inseparable elements. That is why the unavoidable death of the hero is placed at the center of the tragedy and why the second part of the play rehabilitates Ajax, shows a kind Odysseus – very different from the one which Sophocles outlines in *Philoctetes* – and brings the audience to once again consider their contest a draw. The second part takes the opportunity as well to highlight an intertextual connection which is helpful in interpreting the entire tragedy.

Indeed, both from a thematic and a structural perspective, *Ajax* shows clear connections with *Ichneutai*, but also with its hypotext, the *Hymn to Hermes*. The comparison between the tragedy and the hymn provides interesting results.

Firstly, the hymn contains a double confrontation between the main characters which is similar to the one which has been largely questioned in *Ajax*, and which may even justify it. Secondly, the *Hymn to Hermes* is the story of how Hermes managed to be recognized as a god in Olympus, just as *Ajax* narrates how this character achieves, in spite of everything, his heroic status. But, above all, if the *Hymn to Hermes* establishes the beginning of a new era among the Olympian gods with Hermes and Apollo able to share the *timai* and reach an agreement, the death of Achilles and the conflict it creates between Ajax and Odysseus, who conversely are not able to come to an understanding, represents in tragedy not the beginning, but the end of another era, the heroic period.

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77 "In the case of the Judgement of the Arms, the shift in type of trial already determines the outcome: Odysseus, who excels at clever speaking, defeats Ajax, even though Ajax most nearly resembles Achilles as a warrior – a discrepancy made more pointed by the fact that the prize for which they compete is actually armour"; cf. MURNAGHAN, 1989, 176.

78 Cf., particularly, MURNAGHAN, 1989, ROIG LANZILLOTA, 2006. However, FINGLASS, 2011, 44–46, explains his reservations in this regard.

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