

Light and Darkness in Sophocles' *Ajax*

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IN *De Sublimitate* 'Longinus' cites the incident in *Iliad* 17.645ff when Ajax, resisting Hector's attack under cover of a miraculous darkness sent by Zeus, utters the unforgettably heroic prayer,

Father Zeus, deliver the sons of the Achaeans from under
the dark mist.

Restore the brightness of day, grant sight to our eyes.

Slay us at least in the light, since your pleasure, it seems, is
to slay us.

'Longinus' comments:¹ "This is the true passionate feeling (*πάθος*) of an Ajax. He does not pray for life—a request that would have been beneath the spirit of a hero—but because in the frustrating (*ἀπράκτω*) darkness he cannot turn his valour to any noble deed, he is vexed at his impotence in the battle and prays for immediate light, being determined to find an *ἐντάφιον*² worthy of his bravery, even with Zeus ranged against him."

'Longinus' ranks this prayer, "Slay us in the light," with the sublime words at the beginning of Genesis, "God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light." Light was the supremely divine and beautiful element of nature for the Greeks. Joy and gladness in it run through all Greek literature from Homer to Kazantzakis. When heroes and heroines had time to express their deepest feelings before their deaths they frequently spoke of their grief at leaving the radiant Greek sunlight. Prometheus' first words, we remember, in his lonely agony, as Aeschylus portrayed him, were to the divinely shining upper air, the immeasurable laughing light-patterns of the moving waters and the all-seeing sun. It was a very Greek decision to insist that one of the

¹ The A and T scholiasts also find magnanimity and wonderful characterization in these lines. Eustathius says that the phrase became proverbial for praying that one's troubles should not be totally unmitigated.

² The word is striking and rather puzzling in this context. Rhys Roberts translates it inadequately as 'death'. Russell gives 'burial', noting the literal meaning 'winding-sheet'. Perhaps in view of Simonides' elegy on the slain at Thermopylae, 'memorial phrase' or 'epitaph' might be best.

attributes of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity in the Nicene Creed should be 'Light of Light'.

Two qualities that ancient critics found in Sophocles' work suggest that he might have been deeply impressed by both these Homeric incidents before he wrote his *Ajax*. Dio Chrysostom in his discourse on the three versions of *Philoctetes* remarks (52.15) that Sophocles' poetry was *σεμνή* and *μεγαλοπρεπής* so as to give a sense of *ὑψος* and *σεμνότης*. Most scholars would, I believe, agree with this judgement at least for the great first monologue of the *Ajax*. Secondly, as has been generally recognized, Sophocles was strongly influenced by Homer,³ as the epithet used of him by Eustathius, *φιλόμηρος*, testifies. I propose in what follows here to consider the possibility that Sophocles, with this love of Homer combined with a sense of 'the sublime', had the two incidents praised by 'Longinus' very much in mind when composing *Ajax*.

The recurrent imagery of light and darkness throughout this play has already been widely noticed by scholars.⁴ But some significant aspects of it have not, I think, been clearly observed. If one considers it in relation to the Slay-us-in-the-Light incident, the play gains greater unity and depth. I would go so far as to say that Sophocles may have conceived and expressed much of the psychological development of *Ajax* in terms of an emergence from darkness into light before Ajax dies, and that the language of the whole play is orchestrated in terms of a crescendo and diminuendo of light-and-darkness imagery.

The play begins when the darkness of night is yielding to the brightness of day. At first Odysseus can only perceive Athena dimly (15). Later (85) Athena tells Odysseus that she will 'darken' Ajax's eyes so that he will not see him. When Odysseus philosophically

³ For recent discussions see G. M. Kirkwood, "Homer and Sophocles' *Ajax*" in *Classical Drama and its Influence*, ed. M. J. Anderson (New York 1965) 51–70; W. E. Brown, "Sophocles' *Ajax* and Homer's Hector," *CJ* 61 (1965) 118–21; and René Bernard-Moulin, *L'élément homérique chez les personnages de Sophocle* (Aix-en-Provence 1966). H. W. Miller, "'Ο φιλόμηρος Σοφοκλής and Eustathius," *CP* 41 (1946) 99–102, lists Eustathius' many references to Sophocles and shows that references to *Ajax* are much more frequent than to other plays.

⁴ See H. Musurillo, *The Light and the Darkness* (Leiden 1967) 10–11; J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles I* (Leiden 1963); and W. B. Stanford, *Sophocles: Ajax* (London and New York 1963), index at 'Light symbolism' and *φῶς*. In my survey here I have not added any discussion of the recurrent emphasis of the various references to seeing and to visibility and invisibility in the play, for which see Michael Simpson, "Sophocles' *Ajax*: his Madness and Transformation," *Arethusa* 2 (1969) 89–90: see especially *Ajax* 229, 457–58, 462–64, 471, 646–47 and 753. They are complementary to the imagery of light and darkness.

comments on the fragility of human beings, he compares them to shadows (126). Tecmessa uses the same word again to describe the dimly seen figure of Athena outside her tent (301), and Agamemnon uses it contemptuously in referring to dead Ajax (1257).

Imagery from light breaks in with the Chorus' reference to the 'gleaming iron' of Ajax's sword (*αἶθωνι κιδήρω*, 147) as he swung it against the cattle in the darkness of the previous night. The epithet is used by Sophocles twice again in the play but not elsewhere in his work. Here it acts as an imaginary spotlight, focussing our attention on the weapon that will eventually kill the hero. At the end of the parodos we are told how Ajax is "setting ablaze (*φλέγων*) a disaster heaven high" (195). The verb will recur in two memorable passages later in the play.

Darkness returns to the imagery for a moment when Tecmessa calls Ajax 'night-time Ajax' (217: it spoils the unusual force of the adjective, rarely used of persons, to take it adverbially). The Chorus almost immediately turn this darkness into light by describing him as 'a gleaming (or glowing) man' (*ἀνέρος αἶθονος*, 222).⁵ (The same heroic glow is made visual in 'the hero light' that invested Achilles, and Irish heroes like Cuchulain, in battle). The spotlight of imagery has now moved from Ajax's sword to himself. In contrast the sword becomes darkened when the Chorus sing of his 'dark sword-thrusts' (*κελαινοῖς ξίφεσιν*, 231) in his slaughter of the cattle of the Greeks. We hear an echo of this heroic glow when Tecmessa—after a much disputed comparison between the abatement of a storm 'without bright lightning' (*λαμπρᾶς ἄτερ στεροπᾶς*, 256) and the easing of Ajax's madness—tells how the evening torches were no longer 'glowing' (*ἦθον*) when Ajax left his tent to kill the Greeks. After that there is no *chiaroscuro* in the imagery except for the passing reference to Athena as a shadow, as already noticed (301), until Ajax begins to speak (or sing, since it is in lyric metre) about his disaster, how he drenched the 'twisted-horned' cattle and their 'famous shepherds' with 'dark blood'

⁵ This is the reading generally preferred by editors here to *αἶθοπος* (in **L** and some *recc.*): see Kamerbeek *ad loc.* Sophocles may have taken the epithet from Homer's comparison of Ajax to an *αἶθωνα λέοντα* which dogs and hunters (or rustic man) drive away from cattle in *Il.* 11.547. Homer also uses the adjective to describe an eagle in a simile for Hector's swoop against Ajax in *Il.* 15.690. But it occurs several times elsewhere in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with reference to horses, oxen, cauldrons, iron, bronze and as a pseudonym for Odysseus. Sophocles may also have remembered Aeschylus' description of Polyphontes as *ἀνὴρ αἶθων λῆμα* in *Septem* 448. See further in Kamerbeek.

(*ἐρεμνὸν αἶμα*, 376).⁶ Twenty lines later there comes one of the climaxes of the play, both in emotion and in imagery. Still expressing himself in lyric metre, Ajax exclaims “Oh, the darkness, my light, the gloom of Hell, brightest ray for me! Take me, take me, to dwell with you!” Here in the agony of Ajax’s soul we have a total reversal of his famous cry in the *Iliad*. Instead of “Slay us in the light” it is now “May I die in utter darkness.” It resembles the terrible outburst of blind Milton’s blinded Samson Agonistes, “O dark, dark, dark! amid the blaze of noon, Irrecoverably dark! total eclipse Without all hope of day!” And soon Sophocles will give Ajax something like the inner light, the spiritual glow, that Milton gave to his Samson.

The *chiaroscuro* disappears for a whole scene while Ajax laments his fate, and Tecmessa tries to reason with him. There is no gleam of *μεγαλοψυχία* here. The opening lines of the first stasimon show awareness of the absence of light and glory from their present situation in the Troad, in contrast with “famous Salamis, ever illustrious (*περίφαντος*) to all” (596–99). Their thoughts turn to Hades ‘that makes everything invisible’ (*ἀϊδηλον Αἴδαν*, 607). Skilful use of euphony is manifest here. The diphthong *αι* occurs eight times in the preceding thirty words (but the text is corrupt), and the assonance culminates in the *αι* of *Αἴας* in the next line. It echoes on in *αἴλινον*, *αἴλινον* in 627 and *αἰῶν Αἰακιδᾶν* in 645 (where it may help to explain the unusual use of *αἰῶν*). Sensitive listeners will not have forgotten Ajax’s terrible *αἰαῖ* at the beginning of his first lucid speech (430) or his poignant *αἶρ’ αὐτόν*, *αἶρε δεῦρο*, in calling for his son (545). The Chorus soon reiterate their gloomy sense of despair with the phrase “Better hidden in Hades were the man who is sick in futility” (*ὁ νοσῶν μάταν*, 635). The adverb expresses the same feeling as we have seen in the quotation from ‘Longinus’—‘the frustrating darkness’. The Chorus have no hope now that even a hero once so glowing as Ajax can survive his recent disaster and his present despair.

But another theme has become dominant in this stasimon—the power of time. Despondently the Chorus, as if they were ringing a solemn knell, use nouns and adjectives to suggest it: *αἰεῖ*, *παλαιὸς χρόνος ἀνήριθμος*, *αἰέν*, *χρόνω*, *ἔτι*, *ποτ’*, *πρίν*, *παλαιᾶ ἡμέρα*, *οὐκέτι*,⁷

⁶ The three epic epithets in three short lines here, *ἐλίκεσσι* (I keep to the traditional meaning despite recent queries), *κλυτοῖς* and *ἐρεμνόν*, suggest an ironic contrast between heroic slaughter in battle and the butchery of mere cattle and goatherds.

⁷ *οὐκέτι* occurs more often in *Ajax* than in any other play of Sophocles.

οὐπω, αἰών. The tone is that of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Nevermore', but it is more subtly expressed.

Immediately after this, Sophocles produces one of his most effective sudden changes of mood. Ajax, too, it seems, has been meditating on the power of time. The opening words of his famous monologue, ἄπανθ' ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος (646), expand the Chorus's phrase χρόνος ἀνήριθμος: "Vast immeasurable Time makes everything that is hidden grow into sight and hides everything that once showed clear." Time is now seen as a revealer as well as a concealer, an accomplisher as well as a destroyer, an ally of light as well as of Hades. Ajax has achieved a philosophy of life that makes his present condition understandable and even, for a while, endurable. He now sees that Time, which recently brought him darkness and madness and disaster, has now brought him illumination and sanity and, in a sense, salvation. (We must remember here the frequent use of φάος and φῶς to mean 'salvation' and 'joy' in earlier Greek literature.) Ajax emblemizes his progress into the light by saying that he will take the sword that Hector gave him—which inflicted those 'dark thrusts' so shamefully on the cattle and cowherds—and bury it where Night and Hades 'can keep it safe below' (658–60): the instrument of his folly and shame will never be seen again.

A few lines later, at the intellectual climax of the play, Ajax shows that he has come to see the meaning and force of this 'dialectic' between darkness and light. In the longest clause in his description of the great forces of cosmic change he tells how the "darksome (αἰανή)⁸ circle (or vault) of the night yields to day with its white steeds, to kindle (φλέγειν) its mystic light" (φέγγος, 672–73).⁹ This particular word for light is specially noteworthy as used here for the first time in this play. In distinction from the common φάος|φῶς it often appears to have an aura of mysticism or emotionalism, suggesting meanings like 'glamour, radiance, splendour, holy light'. In other contexts it

⁸ I now accept Kamerbeek's translation of αἰανή.

⁹ On the meaning of φέγγος in Greek literature down to Euripides see L. W. Lyde, *Contexts in Pindar* (Manchester 1935), a little book that deserves more attention than it has received from scholars interested in the lexicography of terms for light in Greek. On p.44 he observes that when φέγγος refers to times just before or just after sunrise it may be translated as 'dawn', 'daybreak' or 'morn', and, for times just before or just after sunset, 'eventide' or 'twilight' or 'gloaming'. Elsewhere, e.g. in "reference to noon under a clouded sky, one's main object must be to press the emotional note, such as may be felt in 'glimpse' or 'glimmer', 'fleck' or 'flush', 'gleam' or 'glow'." On mystic overtones see Neil on *Knights* 1319, Bury on *Nemean* 9, 42 and W. B. Stanford on *Frogs* 446. Cf. n.14 below.

implies dim, reflected, diffused, 'long-wave' light, as of dawn or dusk or moonlight, in contrast with the clear, direct, 'short-wave' light of the sun at its full strength. It will recur significantly later in the play. Notably, too, the last word of this supreme piece of dramatic monologue says that Ajax has achieved salvation (692). Ajax might with equal implications have said, "I have seen and reached the light." In the words of the Chorus (706) the darkness of grief has now truly been removed from his eyes.

The solemnity of this crucial passage (669–77) is noticeably enhanced by its audial effects.¹⁰ Rhythmically the lines are slowed down by a high proportion of initial spondees—eight in nine lines, compared with four in the first twenty-three lines and six in the last fifteen. (The highest proportion of initial iambs is in lines 678–83, where Ajax is talking about his enemies.) There are no initial tribrachs, anapaests or dactyls, though these occur in Ajax's other long speeches. The frequency of the heavy vowel ω and the diphthong $\epsilon\iota$ is high, and the two are combined in the last line of the philosophical meditation (677). These to my ear are grave and sombre sounds. The tonic accents have a high proportion of low-tone (or falling-tone) graves, and three rising-falling-tone circumflexes dominate the last line, giving a melancholy sound to Ajax's reluctant acceptance of *σωφροσύνη*.

The burst of thrilling joy that begins the following chorus is first—and very Greekly—expressed in terms of dancing. The source of the joy is tersely told (706): "Ares has loosed dread grief from our eyes." It can hardly be wrong to follow Jebb and other editors here in taking this to be a metaphor from a god dispersing a supernatural cloud or mist, as in the context of Ajax's "Slay us in the light" and elsewhere.¹¹ (The suggestion is strengthened by the assonance between $\alpha\chi\omicron\varsigma$ and $\alpha\chi\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$.) Further, when the Chorus go on to invoke Zeus in affirming that "Now the white light of the clear daytime can return to the swift

¹⁰ A computer-based survey of all three euphonic elements—metre, timbre-quality and pitch-variation—in the whole play might well repay the effort. My guess here is that Sophocles has consistently varied these elements to suggest or reinforce its changing moods. Another audial feature worth analysing in detail is the occurrences of terminal *sigma* before initial *sigma*, which seems to me to be far less frequent than one would expect. (Cf. my *Sound of Greek* [Sather Lect. 38, Berkeley 1967] 53–55.)

¹¹ It might also suggest escape from the $\alpha\chi\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$ of death, sickness, passion or mental blindness: cf. the references in LSJ. In *Il.* 17.591, just before Zeus sends the darkness that Ajax protests against, 'a black cloud of grief' ($\alpha\chi\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ νεφέλη . . . μέλαινα) comes over Hector. In Hesiod, *Shield* 264–65, $\alpha\chi\omicron\varsigma$ is macabrely personified as $\text{Α}\chi\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$.

sea-ships," it looks very like a reflection of what happened when Zeus, in answer to Ajax's prayer in *Iliad* 17.648–50, restored the daylight to Ajax and the Greeks. A few lines later the Chorus repeat the theme of time as a destroyer and a restorer, but here (714) it is phrased in terms of both light and heat—"Great Time quenches and kindles (*φλέγει*) everything."

The following scene between the Messenger, Tecmessa and the Chorus has no *chiaroscuro* in its imagery except for a slight touch when Tecmessa orders the Chorus to search 'the evening sea-coves' and 'those that face the sun' (805). But Ajax in his last speech returns to it with strong emphasis. After he has made preparations for his suicide, has voiced his hope that Teucer will perform his burial and has invoked the Erinyes to punish his enemies, he calls on the Sun-god to bear the news to his parents in Salamis. Such an invocation before death is not unusual. But he follows it with another invocation to 'the present radiance of the shining day' (*φαιεννῆς ἡμέρας τὸ νῦν κέλας*, 856), and again invokes 'Helios the charioteer' to bid them farewell. Then just before Ajax's physical gleam and glow are quenched forever, he speaks about the more dimly imagined light (*φέγγος*) of faraway Salamis—and, after six more lines, he dies. There is a beautiful *de-crescendo* here from the glorious splendour of the sun to the dimmer light of remembered Salamis and on to the darkness of Hades, welcomed in his last line. But his final words, "I shall tell the rest to those below in Hades," are not despondent. Ajax will soon be speaking to heroes more worthy of his friendship than those false friends of his on earth—with Achilles, Antilochos and Patroclus (they are grouped with Ajax in *Odyssey* 24.15–17), and perhaps even with noble enemies like Hector and Memnon. Such company would make Hell's darkness bright, as Christian Dante so magnanimously implied in making a haven of radiance and peace for the spirits of illustrious pagans in the depths of his *Inferno*.

This interpretation obviously cannot be proved. Some support for it may, however, be found in a recent article by Karl Schefold.¹² He describes an unpublished lecythos showing a nude man of heroic stature kneeling in front of a sword fixed in the ground with its point uppermost. The man's arms are uplifted and his face has an expression

¹² *AntK* 19 (1976) 71–78. I am grateful to Professor Calder for drawing my attention to this.

of smiling joy.¹³ Schefold identifies this scene with Ajax's suicide in Sophocles' play. On the basis of comparison with similar vase-paintings he dates the lecythos about 450 B.C. He also suggests that it was a votive offering by the play's *choregos* after its performance. If that is so—but it is hardly more than a conjecture—we have contemporary evidence for believing that Ajax died joyfully. In terms of the play's imagery, his prayer to die in the light has been granted. Even in Hades his glowing spirit will not be quenched. Ajax, as Sophocles presents him, does not share the despondency of the defeated athletes described by Pindar at the end of *Pythian* 8.¹⁴ They slink away, ashamed, down the back streets. Ajax, fortified by his recognition that even the greatest powers must always yield to others and that departure is not defeat, can go proudly and luminously into the darkness of Hades. He has reversed his early lamentation that darkness had taken the place of light for him. In company with the great dead heroes he will find Hades a brighter place than the Troad in the sordid company of unworthy Greeks.

The rest of the play is like a sky darkening after sunset. The subdued *chiaroscuro* of the imagery now reflects the growing gloom. The blackness of Ajax's blood as it spurts from his veins is mentioned twice (919, 1412). The Chorus envisage Odysseus as having a 'dark-faced spirit' (*κελαινώπαν θυμόν*, 955), which Jebb paraphrases as "the dark soul which watches from its place of concealment with malevolent joy." Evening and sunrise are mentioned antithetically in a conventional way (874–77), but more unusual terms are used for them later—'all night and during the day', *πάννυχα καὶ φαέθοντ'* (929). The balance is tilted towards night by a single further reference in 1056. There could be an echo of Ajax's 'gleaming iron' in Teucer's phrase *αἰόλου κνώδοντος* (1025), but the epithet perhaps implies discoloration rather than changing light. After Menelaos has stormed in, he prates of how Ajax's spirit was 'quenched' by divine interference when he tried to kill the Greeks (1057). But we now know that it is unquench-

¹³ The facial expression is not entirely unambiguous, but this is the view of Schefold and of the large majority of those attending the symposium at Boulder. Schefold aptly quotes from Hölderlin: "In der Trauer . . . das Freudigste freudig zu sagen."

¹⁴ Cf. Plato, *Phaidros* 250B on the *φέγγος* of *σωφροσύνη*. Seneca in his twenty-first letter to Lucilius develops the contrast between the meretricious light reflected from the favour of audiences on a person in public life—a *fulgor extrinsecus veniens*—and the inner light which *suo lumine inlustris est*. Cf. my comparison of this passage with the end of *Pythian* 8 in *CJ* 37 (1942) 363–64.

able. Menelaos then spitefully calls Ajax an *αἴθων ὑβριστής*, 'a flaming bully-boy' (1088). By doing so he depreciates himself rather than Ajax. Later Agamemnon says that Ajax is now 'non-existent, a mere shadow' (1257). We know better. Only once does a flash of the true Ajacian fire illuminate the diction momentarily. It is when Teucer describes how valiantly Ajax fought Hector among the blazing fires (*πυρὸς φλέγοντος*, 1278) of the burning ships—a last bright spotlight on Ajax's most heroic hour. Noticeably, too, no character in the second half of the play has any touch of brightness attributed to him. Even Odysseus, who is shown to be so honourable and compassionate in this play, is portrayed in neutral, unglowing tones. No ray of imagined light illuminates the final funeral procession.

In this way the crescendo and diminuendo of light-and-darkness imagery in *Ajax* helps to sustain the unity of the play by binding its parts as closely together as night and morning, noon and evening—an elemental unity. This imagery also shows how Ajax's prayer "Slay us in the light" could be granted psychologically, even after defeat and disgrace.¹⁵

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