

FOR JOHN V. A. FINE

## Supplication and Hero Cult in Sophocles' *Ajax*

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JEBB, in his edition of *Ajax*, suggested the hero's cult in Attica as a clue to the play's dramatic unity.<sup>1</sup> On this view, the death of Ajax is not the climax of the tragedy; the securing of funeral rites is essential for his consecration as a hero, and thus would be, for an Athenian audience, the natural goal of the action. This is an attractive proposition, since we know that Sophocles' fellow-citizens saw in Ajax more than the bluff warrior of the Trojan saga; Ajax was a sacred hero with particularly strong local associations. He had a shrine on Salamis, and games were held there annually in his honor. He was the eponymous hero of one of the ten Attic tribes, and received cult honors in Athens itself. After the battle of Salamis he was rewarded for his help with the dedication of a captured warship.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, however, there is not a word of any of this in Sophocles' play; Jebb's theory lies open to the objection raised most pointedly by Perrotta: "della consacrazione ad eroe, del culto dell'eroe Aiace, nella tragedia non si parla affatto."<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, at least one reflection of the hero's cult in *Ajax* that has not received sufficient attention: the brief but moving scene in which Teucer places Eurysaces as a suppliant at his father's corpse. Here, in a ceremony at once intimate and awesome, those who love Ajax enact, at least symbolically, his consecration as a hero.

When Teucer appears and learns with certainty of his brother's death, his first act is to send Tecmessa to get Eurysaces, fearing that the child might fall into the hands of his father's foes (985–87). Teucer then faces Menelaus, who comes to denounce the dead man and forbid his burial, and engages him in a heated exchange. Thus, when

<sup>1</sup> Introduction, pp. xxx–xxxii.

<sup>2</sup> For the cult of Ajax, see L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford 1921) 305–10, together with the ancient sources listed on page 408.

<sup>3</sup> G. Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Messina 1935) 128.

Tecmessa returns with the child, the dramatic focus of the play has shifted to the issue of Ajax's burial. Sophocles links Eurysaces' supplication directly to this issue. Teucer welcomes the arrival of Ajax's wife and child "at just the right moment to give burial rites to the wretched corpse" (1168–70). He himself will attend to preparing the grave (1184), and in his absence Eurysaces is to remain a suppliant at his father's body (1171–81):

ὦ παῖ, πρόσελθε δεῦρο, καὶ σταθεὶς πέλας  
 ἰκέτης ἔφαισαι πατρός, ὃς σ' ἐγείνατο.  
 θακεῖ δὲ προστρόπαιος ἐν χεροῖν ἔχων  
 κόμας ἐμὰς καὶ τῆσδε καὶ αὐτοῦ τρίτου,  
 ἰκτῆριον θησαυρόν. εἰ δέ τις στρατοῦ  
 βία σ' ἀποσπάσειε τοῦδε τοῦ νεκροῦ,  
 κακὸς κακῶς ἄθαπτος ἐκπέσοι χθονός,  
 γένους ἅπαντος ρίζαν ἐξημημένος,  
 αὐτως ὅπωςπερ τόνδ' ἐγὼ τέμνω πλόκον.  
 ἔχ' αὐτόν, ὦ παῖ, καὶ φύλασσε, μηδέ σε  
 κινησάτω τις, ἀλλὰ προσπεσῶν ἔχου.

In these lines we can trace an unparalleled and extremely affecting interweaving of three separate ritual acts—supplication, an offering to the dead and a solemn curse. The vocabulary of supplication runs throughout the passage. Eurysaces is to be *ἰκέτης* and *προστρόπαιος*, the usual designations of the suppliant in tragedy.<sup>4</sup> He is to sit or kneel (*θακεῖ*, *προσπεσῶν*) at his father's corpse like a suppliant at the altar.<sup>5</sup> He faces the threat of forcible removal from his place of refuge (*βία σ' ἀποσπάσειε*).<sup>6</sup> Yet these suppliant commonplaces take on a new meaning in the context of the scene.

Eurysaces lays his hand upon the body not merely as a suppliant, but also as its guardian in Teucer's absence. Thus, his own safety is absorbed into the immediate necessity of protecting the dead Ajax from his foes. To drag the suppliant from his refuge would not only violate suppliant rights but also call down upon the enemy Teucer's terrible curse. The curse, in turn, is directed specifically against the

<sup>4</sup> For *ἰκέτης*, cf. e.g. Aesch. *Supp.* 27, Soph. *OC* 634, Eur. *Hel.* 65; for *προστρόπαιος*, Aesch. *Eum.* 234, Soph. *Phil.* 930, Eur. *Heracl.* 1015.

<sup>5</sup> For *θακέω* in the context of supplication, cf. e.g. Soph. *OT* 20, Eur. *Heracl.* 239; for *προσπίπτω*, Soph. *OC* 1157, Eur. *Or.* 1332. W. B. Stanford, in his edition of the play (London 1963) *ad* 1173–75, summarizes discussion on the postures implied by these words.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eur. *Heracl.* 97–98: *πρὸς βίαν θεῶν τῶν αἰῶν ἀποσπασθέντες*.

violator of suppliant rights, against the man who would break the sacred bond between Eurysaces and the body of Ajax.

That the traditional threat to the suppliant's safety here becomes part of Teucer's curse is but one example of the subtle linking of ritual motifs in this passage. Eurysaces holds in his hands not the suppliant's olive branch but locks of hair, a traditional offering to the spirits of the dead (ἐν χερσῶν ἔχων κόμας); but this offering is also his 'suppliant treasure' (ἱκτῆριον θησαυρόν).<sup>7</sup> Teucer extends this already complex constellation of rituals by making the shearing of his hair the seal upon his curse (αὐτως ὅπως περ τόνδ' ἐγὼ τέμνω πλόκον), a gesture of sympathetic magic designed to ensure its efficacy.<sup>8</sup>

Suppliants are, of course, familiar figures on the Attic stage. The search for protection at an altar of the gods or a hero's tomb occurs with varying emphasis and elaboration in more than one-third of the extant plays. However, the subtle combination of ritual motifs and a fundamental anomaly of situation make the supplication in *Ajax* unique. And it is upon these features, as we shall see, that the full dramatic force of the scene depends.

Supplication is not an arbitrary convention of Greek literature. It is an observance of sacred *nomos* whose continuing significance in the fifth century is attested by the historians.<sup>9</sup> As such, it carries with it, even onto the stage, customary rules and associations. The suppliant seeks refuge in a sacred precinct out of some desperate need. He is sacrosanct under the protection of Zeus *hikesios* as long as he remains within that precinct, for he becomes, in effect, a physical part of the *temenos* to which he flees and is therefore *hieros*.<sup>10</sup>

In tragedy, protection from a violent enemy is regularly the suppliant's need. Thus, for example, Aeschylus' *Suppliants* shows the Danaids' quest for protection against their cousins, and *Eumenides* opens with Orestes a suppliant at Apollo's hearth, surrounded by the

<sup>7</sup> That the locks of hair are meant, in part, to be understood as a substitute for the suppliant wand (*ἱκετηρία*) is suggested by the close parallelism of this phrase with Aesch. *Supp.* 192–93: *ἱκετηρίας . . . ἔχουσαι διὰ χερῶν*.

<sup>8</sup> Kamerbeek and Stanford *ad* 1175–79. The hair-offering at Agamemnon's tomb in Soph. *El.* 449ff is given a similarly extended significance. Electra clearly intends it not only as a token of grief, but also as an offering to her father's spirit designed to elicit his aid. She tells Chrysothemis to place the locks on the tomb and then to pray that Agamemnon "come in kindness to us from below the earth as a helper against our enemies" (453–54).

<sup>9</sup> *E.g.* Hdt. 5.71 (supplication of Cylon); Thuc. 1.134 (supplication of Pausanias) and 3.70–81 (supplication of the Corcyrean oligarchs).

<sup>10</sup> E. Schlesinger, *Die griechische Asylie* (Diss. Giessen 1933) 33.

sleeping furies. Euripides' *Andromache* begins with the heroine in mortal danger seeking refuge at the shrine of Thetis. In *Heracles* the hero's father, wife and children, condemned to death by the usurper Lycus, crowd around the altar before their own palace. In *Ion* Creusa's supplication at Apollo's altar for protection from her own son is a tense, ironic prelude to the recognition scene. The suppliant's rights become an issue in such cases to the extent that his sanctuary is threatened or even physically violated.

A comparison of the suppliant situation in *Ajax* with these typical instances of supplication in tragedy reveals its underlying anomalies. This supplication does not take place within a sacred precinct but over a corpse whose right to burial has been threatened. Eurysaces becomes a suppliant as much to protect the corpse as to protect himself. Yet this protection is made to depend upon the sacrosanctity of the suppliant within the *temenos*, since anyone who wishes to steal or desecrate the body of Ajax must now forcibly remove a suppliant.<sup>11</sup>

The difficulty here is not simply that the supplication does not take place on consecrated ground, although that seems to be without parallel. The larger paradox is that an unburied body provides asylum for a suppliant, and that the suppliant in turn protects the body by taking refuge at it. The child, by seeking protection from the seemingly helpless warrior, reveals that Ajax is not helpless after all. Indeed, the body becomes in effect a hallowed place, for it is recognized to have the power of a hero's tomb even before the question of his burial is settled. This is confirmed by the closest available parallel, Helen's supplication at the tomb of Proteus in Euripides' *Helen*. The tomb protects her because it is the *taphos* of a hero; Eurysaces makes his father's body into such a *taphos* by the very act of supplicating at it.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The significance of the ritual elements in this scene is underlined by an interesting parallel at Eur. *Phoen.* 1661ff. Antigone takes refuge from Creon by holding the corpse of Polynices. But she is not a suppliant; she merely invokes the principle, *μη ἐφουβρίζεσθαι νεκρούς* (1663). No doubt Sophocles could have portrayed Eurysaces' refuge in similar terms, but the effect of the scene would then have been much more limited.

<sup>12</sup> R. Kannicht, in his edition of *Helen* (Heidelberg 1969) *ad* 800–01, argues that heroic tombs did not regularly provide asylum, and that the tomb of Proteus is no exception, since he received divine honors. But Proteus is treated throughout the play as a mortal king, and the only evidence that Kannicht can offer for his view, the phrase *ἐμπύρους τ' ὀρθοστράτας* (547), can hardly be said, whatever its precise meaning, to prove his assertion. Burnt-offerings in themselves need not connote divine honors. Soph. *El.* 405 uses the substantive *ἐμπύρα* to refer to the offerings Electra brings to Agamemnon's grave. Aesch. *Cho.*

The dramatic motivation for this supplication is the need to protect Ajax and Eurysaces from their enemies, but protection can hardly be its central function, for Sophocles never allows child or corpse to be physically endangered. One can easily imagine an effective scene (like those in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, Euripides' *Heraclidae*, or *Oedipus Coloneus*), in which the enemy appears, tries to remove the suppliant, is opposed by the chorus, and is finally stopped by the arrival of the suppliant's champion. Instead, Teucer sees Agamemnon approaching and returns just before his arrival to engage him in debate. The threat of violence never materializes.<sup>13</sup> Why, then, does Sophocles raise the threat at all?

The need for protection is a convincing means of introducing the supplication, but we must look elsewhere for the larger significance of the scene. On one level, this moment of hushed intimacy amid the harsh disputation of the last part of the play provides a contrast to the prevailing mood. The tableau of suppliant child and mourning wife is effective in its own visual terms. The pathetic contrast between the great warrior and the child who now must shield him needs no elaborate comment. Equally important is the fact that this tableau remains before our eyes throughout the bickering to come. As Bowra remarks, "the pathos and insistent claims of the dead body are reinforced by the child Eurysaces and Tecmessa, who kneel in silence by it and suggest that the dead man is waiting to be justified and restored to honour."<sup>14</sup> If our analysis of the scene is correct, however, Sophocles elicits here from the Athenian audience another and more deeply felt response, one that does more than suggest Ajax's restoration. Through its very anomaly as ritual, Eurysaces' supplication symbolically enacts his father's transformation into a sacred hero.

To return, finally, to the larger question with which we began, what does the supplication scene suggest about the dramatic unity of

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485 refers to *ἐμπύροισι κνισωτοῖς* as an offering for the dead. In *Helen*, the exchange between Menelaus and Helen at 800–01 suggests that supplication at a tomb is rare enough to require explanation, but the statement *ἐρρῦέθ' ἡμᾶς τοῦτ' ἕσον ναοῖς θεῶν* surely does not imply that Proteus is regarded as a god. Rather, his tomb has an equivalent power to protect the suppliant. The heroic dead are *δαίμονες*, to be honored *θεοῖσι δ' ὁμοίως* (Eur. *Alc.* 995–1003; cf. Aesch. *Cho.* 106: *αἰδουμένη σοι βωμῶν ὡς τύμβον πατρός*). That their tombs provide refuge for suppliants is stated unequivocally at Aesch. *Cho.* 336–37: *τάφος δ' ἰκέτας δέδεκται φυγάδας θ' ὁμοίως*.

<sup>13</sup> J. Kopperschmidt, *Die Hikesie als dramatische Form* (Diss. Tübingen 1967) 103.

<sup>14</sup> C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 50.

*Ajax*? We need not accept Jebb's insistence that Ajax's claim to reverence as a hero is the chief and essential source of the play's unity. The consecration of the hero is not its subject (as in *Oedipus Coloneus*), and the case for its unity rests on broader considerations of thematic continuity.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we have seen that Sophocles evokes, by the subtlest of suggestions, Ajax's heroic power to extend his curse on his enemies and his blessing on his loved ones from the world below, at the very moment when the question of his burial rages most passionately. The final scenes are played against a solemn ritual tableau which holds the answer and testifies to the final vindication of the hero.<sup>16</sup>

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March, 1972

<sup>15</sup> Of special importance are the motifs of time (permanence and mutability) eloquently set out by B. M. W. Knox, "The *Ajax* of Sophocles," *HSCP* 65 (1961) 1-37. The evocation of Ajax's final, enduring honor reflects, of course, on these themes, as well as on the related motifs of shame and glory, hatred and friendship.

<sup>16</sup> The Thebans' supplication of Oedipus at the beginning of Soph. *OT* offers interesting parallels to the supplication in *Ajax*. A series of verbal ambiguities strongly suggest that Oedipus, at the height of his power and glory, is placed by his people on the level of a god, and that he accepts this estimation. The use of prayer formulae and other ritual elements in this passage creates, as in *Ajax*, a subtle but powerful inflection of the spectator's responses to the dramatic situation, although here for different purposes and to a different effect. See B. M. W. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven 1957) 159-60.