Greek Tragedy in New Translations

The Complete SOPHOCLES

Volume II: *Electra* and Other Plays

GREEK TRAGEDY

IN NEW TRANSLATIONS

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THE COMPLETE SOPHOCLES, VOLUME II

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The Complete Sophocles, Volume II

Electra and Other Plays

Edited by
PETER BURIAN
and
ALAN SHAPIRO

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

"*The Greek Tragedy in New Translations* is based on the conviction that poets like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides can only be properly rendered by translators who are themselves poets. Scholars may, it is true, produce useful and perceptive versions. But our most urgent present need is for a *re-creation* of these plays—as though they had been written, freshly and greatly, by masters fully at home in the English of our own times."

With these words, the late William Arrowsmith announced the purpose of this series, and we intend to honor that purpose. As was true of most of the volumes that began to appear in the 1970s—first under Arrowsmith's editorship, later in association with Herbert Golder—those for which we bear editorial responsibility are products of close collaborations between poets and scholars. We believe (as Arrowsmith did) that the skills of both are required for the difficult and delicate task of transplanting these magnificent specimens of another culture into the soil of our own place and time, to do justice both to their deep differences from our patterns of thought and expression and to their palpable closeness to our most intimate concerns. Above all, we are eager to offer contemporary readers dramatic poems that convey as vividly and directly as possible the splendor of language, the complexity of image and idea, and the intensity of emotion as the originals. This entails, among much else, the recognition that the tragedies were meant for performance—as scripts for actors—to be sung and danced as well as spoken. It demands writing of inventiveness, clarity, musicality, and dramatic power. By such standards, we ask that these translations be judged.

This series is also distinguished by its recognition of the need of nonspecialist readers for a critical introduction informed by the best recent scholarship, but written clearly and without condescension. Each play is followed by notes designed not only to elucidate obscure

references but also to mediate the conventions of the Athenian stage as well as those features of the Greek text that might otherwise go unnoticed. The notes are supplemented by a glossary of mythical and geographical terms that should make it possible to read the play without turning elsewhere for basic information. Stage directions are sufficiently ample to aid readers in imagining the action as they read. Our fondest hope, of course, is that these versions will be staged not only in the minds of their readers but also in the theaters to which, after so many centuries, they still belong.

A NOTE ON THE SERIES FORMAT

A series such as this requires a consistent format. Different translators, with individual voices and approaches to the material at hand, cannot be expected to develop a single coherent style for each of the three tragedians, much less make clear to modern readers that, despite the differences among the tragedians themselves, the plays share many conventions and a generic, or period, style. But they can at least share a common format and provide similar forms of guidance.

1. *Spelling of Greek Names*

Orthography is one area of difference among the translations that requires a brief explanation. Historically, it has been common practice to use Latinized forms of Greek names when bringing them into English. Thus, for example, Oedipus (not Oidipous) and Clytemnestra (not Klutaimestra) are customary in English. Recently, however, many translators have moved toward more precise transliteration, which has the advantage of presenting the names as both Greek and new, instead of Roman and neoclassical importations into English. In the case of so familiar a name as Oedipus, however, transliteration risks the appearance of pedantry or affectation. And in any case, perfect consistency cannot be expected in such matters. Readers will feel the same discomfort with "Athenai" as the chief city of Greece as they would with "Platon" as the author of *The Republic*.

The earlier volumes in this series adopted as a rule a "mixed" orthography in accordance with the considerations outlined above. The most familiar names retain their Latinate forms, while the rest are transliterated; *-os* rather than Latin *-us* is adopted for the termination of masculine names, and Greek diphthongs (as in Iphigen*eia* for Latin Iphigenia) are retained. Some of the later volumes continue this practice, but where translators have preferred to use a more consistent practice of transliteration of Latinization, we have honored their wishes.

2. *Stage directions*

The ancient manuscripts of the Greek plays do not supply stage directions (though the ancient commentators often provide information relevant to staging, delivery, "blocking," etc.). Hence stage directions must be inferred from words and situations and our knowledge of Greek theatrical conventions. At best this is a ticklish and uncertain procedure. But it is surely preferable that good stage directions should be provided by the translator than that readers should be left to their own devices in visualizing action, gesture, and spectacle. Ancient tragedy was austere and "distanced" by means of masks, which means that the reader must not expect the detailed intimacy ("He shrugs and turns wearily away," "She speaks with deliberate slowness, as though to emphasize the point," etc.) that characterizes stage directions in modern naturalistic drama.

3. *Numbering of lines*

For the convenience of the reader who may wish to check the translation against the original, or vice versa, the lines have been numbered according to both the Greek and English texts. The lines of the translation have been numbered in multiples of ten, and these numbers have been set in the right-hand margin. The (inclusive) Greek numeration will be found bracketed at the top of the page. The Notes that follow the text have been keyed to both numerations, the line numbers of the translation in **bold**, followed by the Greek lines in regular type, and the same convention is used for all references to specific passages (of the translated plays only) in both the Notes and the Introduction.

Readers will doubtless note that in many plays the English lines outnumber the Greek, but they should not therefore conclude that the translator has been unduly prolix. In most cases the reason is simply that the translator has adopted the free-flowing norms of modern Anglo-American prosody, with its brief-breath-and-emphasis-determined lines, and its habit of indicating cadence and caesuras by line length and setting rather than by conventional punctuation. Even where translators have preferred to cast dialogue in more regular five-beat or six-beat lines, the greater compactness of Greek diction is likely to result in a substantial disparity in Greek and English numerations.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATIONS

The translations in this series were written over a period of roughly forty years. No attempt has been made to update references to the scholarly literature in the Introductions and Notes, but each volume offers a brief For Further Reading list that will provide some initial orientation to contemporary critical thinking about the tragedies it contains.

THIS VOLUME

Only seven plays of Sophocles have come down to us complete, a small fraction of the hundred and twenty-three whose titles we have. These seven are, nevertheless, sufficient to establish Sophocles among the greatest of poets and playwrights. Those who know only *Oedipus* or *Antigone* may be surprised to discover how varied our small sample of Sophocles' art really is—and how unsettling and provocative still. This volume contains the surviving tragedies that are not connected to the history of the troubled family of Oedipus. *Aias* [*Ajax*], *Electra*, and *Philoctetes* are based on episodes from the Trojan saga; *Women of Trachis* dramatizes the death of the greatest of Greek heroes, Herakles.

Sophocles' life spanned almost the entire fifth century. He was most likely born in 495 BC, the same year as Pericles, and he is said to have led the boys' chorus in the celebrations of the Athenian triumph at Salamis in 480. He won his first victory at the City Dionysia competing against Aeschylus in 468, and went on to win eighteen more first prizes there (each prize for a tetralogy, for a total of seventy-two plays), and an unknown number at the smaller Lenaean festival. In addition, Sophocles had a significant public career, serving as elected general, as Hellenotamias (treasurer of the Athenian Empire), and in other important posts. He also introduced the cult of the healing god Asclepius to Athens. Sophocles died in 406, having become one of the most admired men of his day and having played a central role in a time and place of singular ferment and achievement, political, intellectual, and artistic.

Chance has left us with plays from something like the last forty years of Sophocles' very long life. Of the four in this volume, *Philoctetes* can be firmly dated to 409; *Electra* only very tentatively to around 415; *Ajax* may go back as far as the 450s BC, though (as our translators suggest) 445–40 may be closer to the mark; and *Women of Trachis* seems altogether undatable, with some claiming to find in it early traits, some late. Our translators suggest a date in mid-career, close to that of *Ajax*.

Ajax is often described as a "diptych" tragedy, since it appears to fall into two parts: one action that culminates in the hero's suicide, and a second in which his burial is contested by his enemies but finally assured. This division used to be taken by scholars as a defect (or at least a sign of dramatic immaturity), but it can be easily shown that the two parts, contrasting in tone as well as perspective, are part of a single, carefully planned dramatic progression. The action begins after Ajax has been humiliated by his comrades, who awarded the arms of the fallen Achilles to Odysseus, rather than to him. In terms of the "heroic code" portrayed in Homer's *Iliad*, in which the stalwart warrior's sense of self is

entirely invested, Ajax has had his honor stolen from him and must act to reclaim it. This he chooses to do by killing those he holds responsible for his humiliation, Odysseus and his allies Agamemnon and Menelaus. Athena saves them by turning Ajax's wrath against the army's sheep and cattle instead. We first see Ajax in the depths of his delusion, then awakened from his madness to the realization that his attempt to salvage his honor has led only to further humiliation. The hero sees suicide as the only means of preserving his honor, and despite the pleas of his loved ones and his own attempt to find some accommodation with the new reality in which he now moves, he falls on his sword, still cursing his enemies.

The play opens with the goddess Athena, implicated as fully as her human victim in the harsh code of honor and revenge, inviting Ajax's great enemy Odysseus to exult with her over his ruin. Significantly, Odysseus declines to do so, saying that he pities "the poor wretch, though he's my enemy. / He's yoked to an evil delusion, / but the same fate could be mine" (**148–50** / 122–24). This broader human sympathy provides an alternative to the Homeric code and provides a key to the action that follows Ajax's death. Ajax has rejected the notion that one's friends can become one's enemies and that one must yield to the inevitability of such change. It must be said that the poetry of this play is largely invested in his magnificent defiance. In a sense, however, his world dies with him, to be superseded by one that is less uncompromising and more magnanimous. The great monologues of Ajax now yield to the fractious and unattractive posturing of the debates that pit Ajax's brother Teukros (or Teucer), who fights for his brother's honor, against Agamemnon and Menelaus, who exult in their enemy's defeat and want to seal their triumph by forbidding his burial. It is Ajax's other enemy, Odysseus, using his art of persuasion (a fundamental attribute of the new democratic consciousness) to wrest consent from his comrades for the hero's last rites.

Ajax, whose home island of Salamis was Athenian territory in historical times, was a major sacred hero, nowhere more than in Attica; he gave his name to one of the ten Athenian tribes and his cult was especially celebrated at Salamis, where it was said that he rallied the Greeks in their victory over the Persians. Sophocles' *Ajax* suggests ways in which such a figure could be adapted to the needs of a different age and a new political culture. Teucer's positioning of Ajax's concubine, Tekmessa, and her child, Eurysakes, as suppliants at the fallen warrior's corpse (**1312–26** / 1171–82), both to protect it and to offer them protection, suggests the hero who will emerge from the wreckage of this great, ill-fated man to be revered as a tutelary spirit of the polis.

Women of Trachis shares with *Ajax* a "diptych" structure and the theme of a great hero's death. Herakles may be said to dominate the play even in his absence but for most of its length, the action is centered on, and largely focalized through, Herakles' wife, Deianeira, whose love for him leads her to make the tragic mistake that will kill him—and when she recognizes what she has done, to kill herself. The final fourth of the play brings Herakles on stage at last to enact both an astonishing representation of his death agonies and a recognition of his own: that all this was foretold and that he must now take charge of his death to fulfill the oracles he received long ago.

Deianeira is portrayed with great sympathy in her anxiety for her missing husband, her pity for the captives he has sent before him as booty from the city he has destroyed, and then her desperation when she understands that one of them, the princess Iole, has supplanted her in Herakles' heart. We watch as, overcome by passion, she tries to recapture her husband's love by smearing a cloak with a "love potion" given to her by the centaur Nessos. Nessos had tried to rape her and had been fatally wounded by Herakles' arrows. Deianeira only recognizes that Nessos' "charm" was in reality poison from those arrows when she hears that Herakles' body is being horribly ravaged by its contact with his skin. In effect, it destroys her, too.

As so often with Sophocles, the ending is unsettling. Herakles, hearing from his son Hyllos about Nessos' revenge, realizes that death is upon him and takes charge of his own dying. He makes Hyllos swear a solemn oath to do his bidding no matter what, then commands his son to burn him alive on a funeral pyre and to marry Iole, the source of so much grief. Hyllos recoils in horror at Herakles' apparent cruelty to him and at the gods' apparent cruelty in inflicting such pain on Herakles, son of Zeus though he be. The meaning of the ending, however, is far more open and equivocal than Hyllos' bleak vision suggests. Sophocles withholds any overt suggestion of the traditional conclusion to the story of Herakles' immolation on Mt. Oita, his ascent to Olympus and immortal life among the gods. The original audience would have known and been primed for that ending, but Sophocles denies them the satisfaction of having their knowledge confirmed. Nevertheless, Herakles' sense that out of this suffering something good will yet come ("I want the finish of this welcome, unwelcome work / to be joy," **1212–13** / 1262–63), and the play's final words ("nothing is here // . . . that is not Zeus," **1225–27** / 1278) hold out that possibility at the very least.

This play is one of several Greek tragedies that deserve to be called "neglected masterpieces." Such was William Arrowsmith's claim in his foreword to the original publication of this translation, calling *Women of*

Trachis "a staggering achievement, one of the very greatest of Greek plays. For sheer tragic power and horror, it is the equal of anything Sophocles wrote—superior in every way, I think, to *Electra* and even *Antigone*. A great play, and an incredibly neglected one." Some may find this judgment hyperbolic, but readers who open themselves to this drama will find its emotional and physical extremes both uncomfortable and amply rewarding.

Electra returns us to the aftermath of the Trojan War and one of tragedy's most familiar subjects. Indeed, this is the only story for which we have surviving versions by all three surviving tragedians. In Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (or *Choephori*), the second play of the monumental *Oresteia* trilogy of 458, Orestes' killing of his mother, Clytemnestra, is sanctioned by Apollo but comes as the culmination of a long series of crimes and retributions that are themselves new crimes that call out for revenge. Vengeance leads in the third play to Orestes' pursuit by his mother's Furies, until at last finally, in the city of Athens, a resolution is reached that brings Orestes' acquittal in a court of law and the transformation of the Furies into *Eumenides*, the "kindly ones" of the play's title. Some decades later, Sophocles and Euripides each wrote an *Electra*—most likely between 420 and 410, although we do not have a precise date for either, or know which came first. These plays have in common, in contrast to the multigenerational scope of the Aeschylean trilogy, a more limited focus on the revenge killings of Clytemnestra and her new consort, Aegisthus. They also give the central role to Orestes' sister Electra, whose role in Aeschylus was more limited and more passive.

Beyond that, the two dramas are very different in character and tone. Euripides, at his revisionist best, gives us an Orestes reluctant to kill his mother and pushed to act by a sister dominated by self-pity and anger at her own circumstances rather than a sense of righteous vengeance. Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are drawn with unexpected sympathy and murdered in entirely unheroic ways. Both Orestes and Clytemnestra feel shame and remorse when the deed is done, and question the validity of Apollo's command. Sophocles' version is both subtler and morally more ambiguous. On the one hand, his Electra is the most sympathetic and emotionally engaging character in the play. Her suffering becomes almost unbearable when, in the play's central deception, Orestes presents her with the bronze urn said to contain his own ashes; her joy at the discovery that he is still alive is unbounded. Yet she becomes almost a kind of fury as she exults in her mother's execution and stages the play's final deception, catching Aegisthus in her trap by pretending that Clytemnestra's shrouded corpse is that of her dead brother.

In the versions of Aeschylus and Euripides, Clytemnestra's death comes only after the usurper Aegisthus has been disposed of, as the climax of the action. The fact that Orestes kills his mother first in Sophocles, with the final scene dedicated to the punishment of Aegisthus, suggests a certain muting of the issue of matricide. There is no hint of pursuit by the Furies, as in Aeschylus, and no apparent need for contrition or remorse, as in Euripides. It is sometimes said therefore that Sophocles has reverted to the version of the story we find in the *Odyssey*, where Orestes' retribution is treated as praiseworthy and unproblematic. The nineteenth-century German critic A. W. Schlegel famously described the play as "a mixture of matricide and high spirits."

A more generous conclusion would be that Sophocles has left the door open for the spectator to connect his telling to the traditional tale of the Furies' pursuit and its final resolution—but he doesn't take us through that door himself. What he does do is show the internalization of the Furies, so to speak, in Electra herself. She knows that her sufferings have grievously distorted her nature: "By dread things I am compelled. I know that. / I see the trap closing" (**295–96** / 221). When the moment of revenge arrives, a harshly triumphant Electra emerges to greet it: "Hit her a second time, if you have the strength" (**1883** / 1415), she yells to Orestes as he stabs their mother; and, as Aegisthus is led to the slaughter, "Throw his corpse out / for scavengers to get" (**1974–75** / 1487–89), the ultimate act of degradation. Sophocles' heroine confronts us with the effects on the human soul of vengeance deferred and vengeance achieved.

The plot of *Philoctetes* involves a hero cast out by his comrades because of the festering (and seemingly ill-omened) wounds from a snake bite, then sought again by those same comrades when they discover that they must bring him (and the unerring bow and arrows he inherited from Herakles) to Troy if they are to win the war. Like *Electra*, this is a play of deception, but the moral debate that deceit engenders is made far more central. Sophocles' tragedy is the only one of that name to survive, but we do have indirect evidence for earlier Philoctetes dramas by Aeschylus and Euripides, largely thanks to orations by Dio Chrysostomos, a rhetorician of the later first-century CE. From his comparison of the three dramas, we learn that Sophocles made two decisive innovations. First, Lemnos becomes a desert island, so that Philoctetes' banishment has cut him off from any human community, completely alone in his agony. Second, he adds Neoptolemos, Achilles' young and inexperienced son, as a partner in the mission to fetch Philoctetes (in the epic tradition, it was the seasoned warrior Diomedes; in Aeschylus, Odysseus; in Euripides, both). In this version, it is not only

Philoctetes who must choose what course to take but also Neoptolemos. For Philoctetes, there can be no thought of helping the comrades who have betrayed him to such extreme misery. Neoptolemos, on the other hand, is torn between the glory he hopes to win in the conquest of Troy and the pity for the suffering Philoctetes that increasingly weighs on his conscience.

Odysseus appears in one of his accustomed roles on the tragic stage, as a sort of ur-Sophist, able to make any means seem acceptable if it achieves the desired end. Since he cannot possibly appear in person before Philoctetes, who sees him as the most villainous of his enemies, he makes Neoptolemos his agent. Neoptolemos plays his role effectively, but with ever greater discomfort. Part of the fascination of the drama is the uncertainty we feel from moment to moment: Is what Neoptolemos says about himself and Odysseus representing his true feelings or is it part of the ruse, or perhaps both? Does the sailor (disguised as a trader) whom Odysseus sends to pass along the prophecy that Philoctetes must be brought to Troy by persuasion—adding that Odysseus will nevertheless use force if he has to—provide, despite the ruse, a true report, or is his whole speech just another ruse? In the end, revulsion for deceit and pity for the suffering hero win out in Neoptolemos. After facing down Odysseus, and then Philoctetes when he aims an arrow at Odysseus, Neoptolemos makes his best honest effort at persuading Philoctetes to overcome his bitterness and sail to Troy, conveying the prophecy that only at Troy can he be healed. When Philoctetes still refuses, Neoptolemos agrees to take him home after all.

Of course, this cannot be. Philoctetes and his bow must go to Troy and Troy must be taken. A special irony of this play is that Odysseus, however flawed the means he employs, has the right end in view, for his community and for Philoctetes. Sophocles has brought the play to a Euripidean *aporia* (many critics have pointed out that Philoctetes shows the influence of Euripides on his older colleague), and he uses a Euripidean device to get the myth back on track. Philoctetes' old patron and friend, the now deified Herakles, appears *ex machina* to persuade Philoctetes to do what he must do. The result is, however, another form of the very Sophoclean open ending we have noted in the other plays in this volume. Herakles offers nothing more than what Neoptolemos has already promised—healing and glory in Troy—but he does it in the voice of a beloved and trusted comrade. And, speaking to Neoptolemos, he emphasizes the need for human solidarity: "you aren't strong enough to take Troy / without him, nor he without you, but each of you must guard the other / even as two lions that feed together" (**1626–29** / 1434–36). We are left to decide for ourselves what to make of the promise of healing and human

solidarity in a world so rife with deceit. When we think about the questions raised in this drama about how to balance ends and means, the needs of the community and decent treatment for the individual, it is well to remember that for the audience that witnessed *Philoctetes* in 409, this was a moment of particular discomfort and anxiety. Two years earlier, Athens had suffered an oligarchic coup, and it still stood in danger of losing a war that might mean the end of the polis itself. Of course, moments of discomfort and anxiety are hardly rare, and there is much in *Philoctetes* that should give us cause for reflection today.

The plays in this volume were originally published between 1978 and 2003. ANNE CARSON is a Canadian classicist, essayist, translator, and a widely read and honored poet. Among her many books are *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), *Glass, Irony, and God* (1992), *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998), *Men in the Off Hours* (2001), and *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2002). In addition to Sophocles' *Electra*, Carson has translated tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides. RICHARD PEVEAR, best known for his many acclaimed translations of Russian novels in collaboration with Larissa Volokhonsky, has also translated from French and Italian and published two volumes of his own poetry. CARL PHILLIPS, a poet who has garnered many awards, is the author of ten books of poems, including *Cortège* (1995), *The Tether* (2001), *The Rest of Love* (2004), *Quiver of Arrows: Selected Poems, 1986–2006* (2007), and *Speak Low* (2009); and a book of prose, *Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Art and Life of Poetry* (2004). The award-winning books of C. K. WILLIAMS, one of America's best-known poets, include *Lies* (1969), *Flesh and Blood* (1987), *Repair* (1999), *The Singing* (2003), and *Collected Poems* (2007). He has also published a translation of Euripides' *Bacchae* and volumes of poetry from French, Polish, and Japanese. He is the author of a memoir, *Misgivings* (2001). DISKIN CLAY is RJR Nabisco Professor of Classical Studies, Emeritus, at Duke University and the author of a number of distinguished books and monographs on classical literature and ancient philosophy, including *Lucretius and Epicurus* (1983), *Paradosis and Survival: Three Chapters in the History of Epicurean Philosophy* (1998), *Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher* (2000), and *Archilochos Heros: The Hero Cult of Poets in the Greek Polis* (2004). Among his published translations is Euripides' *Trojan Women* (2005). GREGORY W. DICKERSON is Professor Emeritus of Greek at Bryn Mawr College. HERBERT GOLDER, a former editor of this series, currently edits *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* at Boston University, where he is Professor of Classical Civilization. He has published a translation of Euripides' *Bacchae* (2001). MICHAEL SHAW is Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Kansas.

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INTRODUCTION

I

"The ancient simplicity into which honor so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared," wrote Thucydides (3.83), describing the moral decline of the late fifth century B.C. That same judgment might equally well be applied to the story of the Homeric warrior Aias, whose betrayal and tragic suicide embodies the final eclipse of ancient honor itself. In the arts of war and in sheer magnificence, Aias, Homer's "bulwark of the Achaians," was second only to Achilles. By rights, after Achilles died, his armor, the highest prize of honor, was owed to Aias. But the Greeks denied Aias his due, awarding the arms instead to the wily Odysseus. To Aias, the man of action, that *his* prize should be given to Odysseus, the man of words, was intolerable. Outraged and humiliated, noble Aias did as his honor demanded, dying on his own sword.

Sophocles inherited an Aias tradition from Homer's *Iliad* and other epic poems. Aeschylus and Pindar, Sophocles' older contemporaries, had also presented versions of Aias' story. Together, these versions create the convention against which Sophocles shaped his own radically different Aias. But Sophocles' concept of heroism is also deeply rooted in the tragic heroism of Homer's *Iliad*. "Always to be best" (*aien aristeuein*) was the charge given to Achilles, Homer's greatest hero—the epitome of epic heroism. To the modern ear this may perhaps sound like mere competitive egoism. But being "best" (*aristos*) in Homer meant rather a *striving* for excellence or *arete*, a suprapersonal ideal pursued without compromise, even at the cost of life itself. In his first speech, Sophocles' Aias sounds the Homeric note: "Honor in life / or in death: if a man is born noble, / he must have one or the other" (**530–32** / 479–80). Thus the hero dies as he lives—absolutely. The stress is on the manner, not merely the matter, of living and dying. The word *aristos* ("best") in Greek is

clearly related to the word *arete*, usually translated as "excellence." But *arete* is not merely an ethical term. It is above all a quality of character, to be realized only in action, by active fulfillment of one's *daimon*, or "indwelling destiny." "Character," said Heraclitus, "*is* destiny." Sophoclean tragedy explores and dramatizes this dynamic; character emerges through the act, or agony, of becoming. And, at a certain point, action becomes fatal, revealing, finally, the hero's destiny. The hero is therefore involved in a great struggle with his *daimon* "to become the thing he is," to adapt Pindar's noble phrase. Sophocles inherited this concept of heroic *arete*, in which character and destiny are one. But, in the case of Aias, the identity of character and destiny seems conspicuously absent: Aias, the man of honor, dies in shame. This paradox is at the heart of Sophocles' play. But only in the context of the received traditions can the full import of the Sophoclean Aias' "fatal" act be revealed.

Homer's Aias exemplifies ancient honor almost as much as Achilles himself. A giant of a man, famous for tenacity and valor rather than eloquence, Aias seems at first sight an Achilles manqué—the inarticulate man of action. But Achilles and Aias represent two complementary, tragic types; together they provide a fuller sense of the tragic hero than either hero alone. Achilles was passionately volatile and famous for swiftness, which made him deadly, especially on the attack. Aias, in contrast, was the steady, immovable defender; his colossal size and obdurate relentlessness made him quite literally the "bulwark of the Achaians." Each had his unique *daimon*, which disclosed his essential character through his acts. By inactivity, Achilles resisted his *daimon*; he is less than himself when he sits idly on the beach and talks of returning home to a long, inglorious life. By the same token, Aias, when forced by Zeus to retreat, ceases to be Aias:

> But Zeus on high drove fear upon Aias so that he stood
> amazed *and threw the seven layered, oxhide shield behind him*,
> terror in his eyes, he glared all around like a cornered beast
> and backed up slowly, turning this way and that like a fiery lion
> beaten back from the cattle-yard by dogs and farmers,
> . . . furious but afraid
> Aias retreated from the Trojans, *his heart sinking, much unwilling* . . .
> *hard to move as a mule* in a cornfield, who stays feeding
> though beaten with sticks . . ."
>
> (*Iliad* 11.544–61)

Though peerless in war, Aias loses three times in the games at Patroklos' funeral. He is, by nature, too inflexible to play "games." He is most himself when most serious—in mortal combat with Hektor, or when he

single-handedly drives off the Trojans from Patroklos' body, or prevents the enemy from firing the ships. Standing firm against a worthy adversary or impossible odds is the real genius of Aias:

> . . . holding back the Trojans, *as a timbered rock ridge*
> *holds back water*, one stretching the length of a plain,
> with flooding currents from strong rivers pounding against it,
> still holding and beating the waters right back across the plain,
> no wave having nearly strength enough to break it,
> so the two Aiases held off the attacking Trojans forever.
>
> (*Iliad* 17.747–53)

To move unmoving Aias is to change him: the mountain ceases to be a mountain if it moves. But for both unbending Aias and swift-footed Achilles, a defining strength is also a fatal weakness.

Each man suffers a different temporal tragedy. Achilles is "swift-footed," but the intensity with which he fights and lives ensures that he will be "swift-fated"; his life will be brief. Aias, the immovable man of honor, is instead bound to outlive his world, to see it change and time pass him by. He is not "a man for all seasons." Achilles is at least spared the pathos of living on in an unheroic age. But Aias lives to see his heroic labors come to nothing. His tragedy, however, is not simply that of individual obsolescence, but also that of a society that sacrifices its highest ideals of honor and nobility to expediency. The expedient Odysseus is the canny and flexible opportunist, Homer's "man of many turns"; his *arete* is an ability to adapt, to change with the times. No hero was more strikingly different from both Achilles and Aias. "As the gates of Hades," says Achilles to Odysseus (*Iliad* 9.312–13), "I hate the man who hides one thing in his heart and says another." But to Aias, who has spoken bluntly of honor and friendship, Achilles replies, "You have spoken, Aias, like a man after my own heart" (*Iliad* 9.645).

Homer does not tell us how Aias fell. Epic poems, lost to us but known to Sophocles' audience, narrated the grisly sequence of events. Like Aeschylus and Pindar before him, Sophocles was free to adapt this story as he chose, counting on his audience's familiarity with the mythical variants. By emphasizing, omitting, or innovating, the poet could use a myth to express his own vision. No spectator would fail to notice variations on stories known by heart; the poet knew what his audience knew and therefore what that audience might expect. The conventions, established by previous treatments of Aias' suicide, created the expectations with which, and against which, Sophocles wrote.

From fragments the episodes of the epic cycle can be pieced together. A quarrel arose between Aias and Odysseus over Achilles' arms; unable

to choose between them, the Greeks asked Trojan prisoners to judge. Though accounts vary, the supple talker and thinker, Odysseus, prevailed. Shamed by defeat, Aias disappeared into his tent to die, "blameless" in Greek eyes; later, he was given a hero's funeral. In still another version, Aias' rage turns to madness, which leads in turn to suicide. In yet another—the one employed by Sophocles here—Aias went mad and slaughtered the Greek livestock before taking his own life; for this, he was denied a hero's burial. In presenting an Aias drama, Sophocles could choose from a number of potentially dramatic accounts and a variety of interpretations. All the variants raise questions about the three aspects of the myth that Sophocles chose to confront directly: madness, suicide, and burial. Precisely these elements determine whether Aias is to be considered heroic, and in what sense. The verdict is moot, and Sophocles is therefore free to explore what meaning he might find among the various Aias legends.

Aeschylus had already offered a comprehensive interpretation of the legend. His Aias trilogy presented a sequence of events that suggest a heroic, even divine, Aias, and a moral progression that characterizes Aeschylean theater. In Sophocles the suicide is the dead center of a single play, overshadowing everything else; in Aeschylus the suicide was only one of three equally significant theatrical events—the debate, the suicide, and the establishment of Aias' hero-cult on the Athenian island of Salamis. Like the *Oresteia*, the trilogy exhibited a redemptive pattern: Aias' anger was the "Fury" that, in the final play, was redeemed. Far from being the center of the trilogy, the suicide and events preceding it were not dramatized at all but reported by an eyewitness. A curious mythical variant regarding the hero's invulnerability was also introduced. When, bent on suicide, Aias failed to find the vulnerable point, a god appeared to aid him. He died, in other words, befriended by heaven and nearly godlike in his invulnerability. Finally, in the last play, Aias' death was revealed as part of a more universal scheme. And since both Salamis and Aias were "Athenian," Aeschylus' dramatic portrayal of Aias enshrined upon Salamis surely redounded to the glory of Athens herself.[1]

But to the Theban aristocrat Pindar, the death of Aias represented the end of the heroic age. Indifferent, even hostile, to Aeschylus' cosmic optimism, Pindar presented an Aias whose loss irreversibly diminished the world. Greece had betrayed its own greatness when it abandoned noble Aias in favor of crafty Odysseus. Pindar, moreover, injected an anachronistic

1. The three plays were *The Award of the Arms*, frg. 174–78aN; *The Women of Thrace*, frg. 83N; and *The Women of Salamis*, frg. 216N. My reconstruction of this trilogy is, of course, conjectural.

political meaning into his treatment of the myth, linking Aias not to Salamis (and Athens) but to his favorite city, Aigina, a bastion of conservative, aristocratic Greece (and perhaps no less important, the enemy of Athens). Having been betrayed by its ally Sparta, Aigina now "belonged" to Athens. So it is tempting to see in Pindar's ode, composed for an Aiginetan victor at the Nemean games, an equation between the defeat of this "unAthenian" Aias and that of Pindar's city of heroes—a victory of immoral intelligence, that famous "Attic cleverness," over honor:

> Envy's fang bit into the flesh of Aias and twisting inside
> ran him through with a sword.
> Strong—even in silence—he is eclipsed by that hateful fight,
> the greatest prize given for the flashy lie,
> the Greeks flattering Odysseus, their secret ballot leaving
> Aias stripped of the golden arms, alone
> to wrestle with death.
>
> But the winner was no match for Aias at ripping
> wounds in warm flesh, when his long spear
> was their only shield in the fight that raged
> over Achilles' body, or in a thousand other struggles
> in those days of too much dying.
> Despicable, even then, the art of guile
> —weaving webs of words, twisting thoughts, casting blame,
> working to no good end—drives splendor into darkness
> and honors the obscure, holding up a glory
> rotten to the root.
>
> (*Nemean* 8.23–34)

To this vividly implicit condemnation of Athens, Sophocles responds by immediately, in the first scene, rehabilitating Pindar's villain, Odysseus. But by isolating Aias, by focusing solely on the suicide, and finally by suppressing the confident Aeschylean coda, Sophocles also refuses Aeschylus' optimistic marriage of the divine hero with Athens. Everything essential to Sophocles' interpretation, moreover, has been condensed into a single play, and the suicide is the midpoint climax to which it builds. Thereafter Aias' huge corpse dominates the stage.

But dramatizing Aias' suicide creates genuine problems for an Athenian playwright passionately concerned, like Sophocles, with human greatness. There was simply no precedent for heroic suicide. For Greek males, suicide was, unlike the *seppuku* of the Japanese samurai, not an honorable death. Under extreme circumstances, heroes might long for death; and while they often chose courses of action that led to death, they never took their own lives. Suicide was a desperate act, restricted in tragedy solely to women. Far from confirming heroism,

Aias' suicide in fact marks the end of the heroic tradition, just as the victory of Odysseus signals the beginning of a new and less heroic age.

In Athens, where Aias was the eponymous hero of one of the ten tribes, suicide may have raised moral questions. His statue, paid divine honors, stood prominently in the marketplace, and clans claiming descent from Aias were among the city's most illustrious citizens. "Divine" Aias was honored by all of Greece, along with Poseidon and Athene, for his tutelary role in the Greek victory over Persia at Salamis in 480 B.C. Athens was justly proud of its link to the deified hero and its role as savior of Greece. Hence, the ignominy of Aias' suicide was hardly the most propitious subject for artistic representation; and in Attic art generally, it is Aias' military prowess, not his suicide, that is emphasized. So we can be reasonably certain that Sophocles' insistent, dramatic focus on the "forbidden" subject must have surprised his audience, violating, as it did, their expectations.

Still more surprising is the characterization of Aias as eloquent and reflective. The Homeric ideal as embodied by Achilles was excellence in both word and deed. But the Homeric Aias is clearly lacking in eloquence and mental agility. A staunch defender, he is never depicted as a strategist, nor does he participate, like the other heroes, in the councils of the chieftains. At one point, his tenacity in battle is compared to that of an ox (*Iliad* 13.703–7), a comparison invidiously "re-called" by Agamemnon in this play ("An ox, for all / its great girth, is driven down the road / with a little whip," **1403–5 /** 1253–54); elsewhere, his steadfastness invites comparison with a stubborn ass (cited above). His great size and simplicity helped to create the traditional image of the hulking brute. Even in death, in his sublime Homeric moment, Aias is famous for what Longinus called his "eloquent silence": the refusal of his shade to speak to Odysseus in Hades. By contrast, the Sophoclean Aias dominates the stage, not only with his imposing presence, but with four of the most remarkable speeches in drama. One must go to Shakespeare—to Richard II's prison monologue or Macbeth's "brief candle" speech or even Hamlet's "to be or not to be"—to find anything like Aias' prodigious speech on time (**712–69** / 646–92). These are lines, Bernard Knox writes, "so majestic, remote and mysterious, and at the same time so passionate, dramatic, and complex, that if this were all that had survived of Sophocles he would still have to be reckoned as one of the world's greatest poets."[2] The profound novelty of this eloquent and deadly lucid Aias is absolutely crucial to the reader's understanding of the play.

2. Bernard Knox, "The *Ajax* of Sophocles," *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Greek Theater* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 125. Reprinted from *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 65 (1961).

II

The great Sophoclean Aias emerges in his confrontation with death. Through the speeches that arise from that confrontation he comes into being. It is his reflections and the transforming urgency of his rhetoric that make his suicide wholly unconventional in its metaphysical resonance. The hero's deftly paced and penetrating words detach him completely from the ignominy traditionally associated with his death; at the same time, they give his suicide a meaning radically different from that of the Aeschylean apotheosis. This Aias is neither the deified hero of Athenian cult nor the archaic warrior who dies in shame—not the hero whom time has passed by, but rather the *man* who steps beyond time.

Sophocles begins his play, however, with the familiar figure of Aias disgraced. Exploiting the most sensational version of Aias' fall, the dramatist presents an Aias at the extreme epic end. His audacious words and savagery seem brutish simplicity beside the humane Odysseus, whose vision of human transience ("we who live / are all phantoms, fleeting shadows," **151–52** / 125–26) makes him sound more like Pindar himself ("Creatures of a day. What is man? What is he not? Man / shadow of a dream," *Pythian* 8.95–96) than the immoral schemer of *Nemean* 8 ("twisting thoughts, casting blame, working to no good end"). Timeless Greek wisdom stands behind Odysseus' compassionate humility, whereas Aias is tainted by horror and a blood-lust fueled by violent hatred, Homeric self-assertion taken to a murderous extreme. Smeared from head to toe with the gore of his animal victims, mad Aias visibly confirms the death throes of Homeric heroism. Worse still, if Athene had not deterred him and driven him mad, he would have been soaked with human blood. This dark and savage project of murdering the Greeks in the night is Sophocles' own invention. The Aias of the *Iliad* had moved in the light, preferring death in light to life in darkness: "Father Zeus," he once cried in battle, "remove us from darkness, let our eyes see bright aether, / and then destroy us in shining daylight, / since this is now your pleasure" (*Iliad* 17.645).

Sophocles' Aias himself has become a vision of darkness. The sight of him conjures up "phantoms" and "fleeting shadows" before Odysseus' eyes; and "Darkness, my light! / brightest gloom" (**430–31** / 394–95) is Aias' own vision when he wakes from madness. The archaic warrior seems now an avatar from some dark and brutish past, more like a pre- than a post-Homeric memory. He could not be more degraded, more ludicrously absurd.

Tekmessa's description of the night's events only darkens the initial image; she reports Aias' insane joy in inflicting torture, breaking necks, and flaying victims alive. The worst, she warns, is yet to come. The

following scene does little to mitigate her forebodings and our revulsion: "sprawled / in the wreck of his fate" (**351–52** / 323), a saner Aias is wheeled out into view on the trundle stage, the *ekkyklema*—but nothing has changed except that his delusions are gone, replaced by his fatal shame. Aias still hates the Greeks; his only regret is that his hand missed its true target. Even when he is allowed to recall something of his former Homeric greatness—

> Skamander, river
> hostile to the Greeks,
> there is one man your water
> will not mirror
> again—I will have
> my full say—a man
> like none Troy ever set eyes on. (**455–61** / 418–25)

—the spectacle of the hero-butcher overwhelms us, intensifying his dreadful fall.

But here, at Aias' lowest point, his transformation begins. No tragic characters sink lower, or rise higher, than those of Sophocles. Their savage degradation is vividly depicted—Philoctetes' oozing wound, Oedipus' bleeding eyes, Herakles' pain-racked body—in order to intensify their godlike struggle against that degradation. Disgraced, drenched in animal blood, victim of his own brutality, Aias discovers his agony as a mortal. He now knows his true fate: his name, *Aias* (from *aiadzein*, "to cry in pain," cf. **468–72** / 430–33), *is* his destiny. Aias stands before us polluted with gore; but this brute blood is tragic confirmation that he, too, is a creature of blood—mortal, born to die and therefore to cry *aiai*.

The anguished cry *aiai*, which begins Aias' speech (**468** / 430), and the heroic finale "Honor in life / or in death" (**530–31** / 479) express the range of his character; beyond this, as Aias concludes, "You've heard all there is to say" (**533** / 480). The outcry and the avowal of silence frame Aias' lament for a greatness the world has lost. We get a hint of what he might have become, if the world had not changed: a man like his father, Telamon, shipmate of Herakles and sacker of Troy, who sailed home with the highest prize of honor. But dishonored now, Aias can never return to face such a father. A shadow of his Homeric self, surviving in a world that has outlived his kind of *arete*, Aias sees that the only heroism left him is the essential human achievement—dignity in dying, "some act that will prove / [his] nature" (**520–21** / 470–72). This is the man the world has lost:

> To stretch your life out when you see
> that nothing can break its misery

> is shameful—day after day
> moving forward or back from the end line
> of death. (**523–27** / 473–27)

Though diminished by the changing world he abhors, enough of Aias is left for him to speak like the hero who led the fight against Troy: Better all at once to take our chances at living or dying, / than be worn away slowly by the dreadful slaughter . . . (*Iliad* 15.511–12).

Even his farewell to Tekmessa and Eurysakes pointedly recalls the famous Homeric scene of Hektor's farewell to Andromache and their son (*Iliad* 6.390–496). Hektor hears words from Andromache remarkably like those of Tekmessa here; he also instructs his young son on the warrior code. In a scene at once harsh and tender, epic and human, Aias appears not only as a shadow of his former self but also as the shadow of Hektor, the archenemy to whose fate his own is ironically linked. Now, more visibly than ever, through this shadow play of his enemy's fate, Aias appears little more than a memory, a "fleeting shadow" of that lost heroic world.

But Sophocles undercuts even this humanly revealing moment. The outmoded epic hero is finally too implacable to assume his new human role with grace. Displaced from his epic context, as in the opening scene, Aias appears absurdly ruthless; but, even in this Homeric farewell scene, he seems relatively grim. He has no such consoling words for Tekmessa as Hektor had for Andromache, whose day of slavery grieves him more than the deaths of all his family. Hektor's are strong words, but there is nothing like them in Sophocles' play: "She will win my praise / if she does what I command" (**589–90** / 527–28) is all that Aias says. Tekmessa's appeal does not persuade Aias to accept her tragic view—"My lord, there is no greater evil / among us than inescapable / chance (**538–40** / 485–86)—although his own fate confirms her words. She who was once Aias' captive now loves him; the Greeks who were his friends now hate him. Odysseus whom he most hates pities him; and, "by chance," Aias the man "like none other" reenacts the fate of the enemy he fought so hard to destroy. In madness Aias was degraded. But even in his farewell to Tekmessa and his son he is hard and stubborn: "It is foolish," he says to Tekmessa in parting, "to think you can school me now!" (**673** / 594–95).

III

Aias has now made his exit, and the Chorus sings: "Let Hades hide him, his affliction has gone / beyond all measure" (**702–3** / 635), and "Oh,

luckless father, you've yet / to learn what unbearable end / your son has come to" (**707–9** / 641–42). The Chorus confirms what has been anticipated: Aias has gone to die. At this point, the audience doubtless expects the great messenger speech of the play, like that perhaps of Aeschylus' vivid account of the hero's last moments: "like a man stretching a bow, he bent back the sword on his impenetrable skin" (frg. 83N).

Instead, expectations are disappointed. What follows is indeed the play's great speech. Not a messenger's speech *about* Aias, but a meditation on mutability delivered *by* Aias. The audience believes that Aias is in his tent, either dead already or dying. But Sophocles has surprisingly reshaped the myth so as to reveal now the emergence of the new Aias, whose speech and suicide will transform the meaning of his myth:

> Great, unfathomable time
> brings dark things into the light
> and buries the bright in darkness.
> Nothing is too strange, time seizes
> the most dread oath, the most hardened
> mind. Even I . . . (**712–17** / 646–50)

The play has indeed brought a "dark thing to light": that mad, bloodstained Aias, who inspired Odysseus' reflections on our tragically shadowy existence. Pindar had attributed the eclipse of Aias to human treachery: "Guile . . . drives splendor into darkness and honors the obscure." But Sophocles' Aias sees *beyond* his own tragedy into a universal darkness; there is a brutal mutability at the heart of things—betrayal, god-inflicted madness, and degradation are merely its symptoms. No Sophoclean play is so concerned with time and so saturated with temporal expressions ("always," first word of the play in Greek, "sometimes," "in time," "whenever," "never"). But Aias is the first to see clearly what the Chorus will realize only later—much too late—when it sings, "Time, since the best men / contended for the arms of Achilles, / has been a potent begetter of sorrows" (**1032–34** / 933–36). The world of Aias is a universe in flux, modeled perhaps on Heraclitus' river of change but without the philosopher's comforting hint of continuity. In this world only one thing is certain: uncertainty. From this law nothing is exempt, not "the most dread oath, the most hardened / mind." Not even Aias.

This speech is the heart of the play, the moment of fatal choice. Aias sees the world for what it is but, by deciding to move *against* the flow, *becomes* himself. Because Tekmessa and the Chorus misunderstand Aias' resolve, the speech has been dubbed the "deception speech." Nothing could be further from the truth. Sophocles has not composed this

speech, surely one of the greatest in Greek drama, so that the man of absolute honor may tell lies. In fact, Aias does not even speak to Tekmessa and the Chorus. He enters, deep in thought, and delivers an unprecedented monologue-in-the-presence-of-others. This tragic isolation of the hero, even while surrounded by his friends, is profoundly Sophoclean. Aias no longer belongs to the world of others. He is involved in a final struggle with his own *daimon*, which, like its emblem the sword, now appears hostile and alien.

Here and only here Aias speaks with two voices. But these are not voices of uncertainty. Rather, we see two Aiases: one Aias who recognizes the law of change by which all else lives and dies; another Aias who will act in accord with the absolute law of his own nature. The speech is pure drama, in the sense that its meaning is inseparable from its dramatic context. As T. S. Eliot remarked of some of Shakespeare's great speeches:

> The lines are surprising, and yet they fit in with the character; or else we are compelled *to adjust our conception of the character in such a way that the lines will be appropriate to it* . . . dramatic . . . poetry . . . does not interrupt but intensifies the dramatic situation . . . you can hardly say whether the lines give grandeur to the drama, or whether it is the drama which turns the words into poetry.[3]

The Aias who *seems* to soften, who *seems* capable of living in a world of double meanings, is the *fondo* from which the new Aias, the fatal Aias, emerges. The drama lies in the agony with which the warrior-hero speaks, first words of pity, then words of reconciliation ("we will know / how to yield to the gods," **739–40** / 666–67), and finally in the scorn with which he describes submission ("bow down before the Atreidai," **741** / 667). Aias uses the same word (*loutra*) of cleansing and purification ("I will go to a bathing place," **724** / 654) that is later used to describe the ritual of his death (**1597** / 1405). His fate speaks *through* and *in* his *daimon*, even as his words appear to deny it.

At the outset Aias describes himself as "unbending / in action" (**718–19** / 650). He now asserts his presence among "the most unbending" elemental powers, though they are, ironically, his models of submission:

> . . . snow-tracked
> winter yields to the rich growth
> of summer, dark-vaulted night
> gives way to the shining, white-horsed

3. T.S. Eliot, "Poetry and Drama," *On Poetry and Poets* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), p. 89 (originally published 1951); "Yeats," *idem*., p. 305 (originally published 1940).

> brightness of day, a blast
> of appalling wind stills the sea's rage,
> even all-overwhelming sleep
> binds only to let go . . . (**744–51** / 670–76)

The succession in each case—winter to summer, night to day, storm to calm—is characterized by movement from "dark" to "light." The final term is sleep, but the antithesis—waking—is missing. The ellipsis will be answered by an action. "All-overwhelming sleep" epitomizes the world's condition, tossed to and fro in the oblivion of change. Yet, even as he speaks, Aias is on the threshold of "awaking" into another order, "a world elsewhere."

Moving purposively from the god-sent "storm" of darkness, Aias at last arrives at fatal clarity. He speaks with sarcasm ("Then how / shall we not learn wise restraint?" **751–52** / 677), which betrays absolute certainty. In his closing reflection on the frailty of friendship and enmity alike, Aias tells what cosmic mutability means in human terms:

> I know now to hate an enemy
> just so far, so that another time
> we may befriend him. And the friend
> I help, I will not help too greatly,
> knowing that one day will find him
> my enemy. (**753–58** / 678–82)

In a world where nothing lasts, where even the inexorable forces of nature change, little can be expected of fragile human feeling. The Aias who ends his speech with a *topos* on treachery ("For most mortals / friendship is a treacherous harbor," **758–59** / 682–83) has already decided that he will no longer live in *this* world—and still be Aias. He now *knows*: the absolute moment of his life is his death. To *go on* being Aias he must end his life—beyond choice, chance, change. At the close of the speech there is no further ambiguity. Aias *becomes* himself—by ceasing to be.

Something innately human has pushed Aias beyond contingency: love, the other side of his equally absolute hatred. His first intelligible word was a call for his son (**370** / 339), followed by a cry for his brother (**373** / 342), then an address to his "friends, / my only true-minded friends" (**381–82** / 349). Moreover, he has left specific instructions for the care of his old parents, that his son be brought to "ease the weight of their years" (**642** / 570). And just before he dies, between his farewell to the light and invocation of death, Aias will think of his poor parents' grief. But what of his brusque way with Tekmessa? Surely he rebuffs her

because he is vulnerable to her above all. Between them is a kindness (*charis*) greater than kinship. As the Chorus said, Aias won her by the spear, but she won his heart (**229–31** / 210–12). His harshness with her is a resistance to what she alone can do, what even time cannot do: change Aias. "Even I, whose will / was tempered like iron, unbending / in action, for a woman's sake / am become a woman in my speech" (**717–20** / 650–52). His seeming callousness conceals his real human vulnerability. Aias loves absolutely; and so to achieve permanence—the principle that preserves love itself—he must paradoxically leave those he loves. He will not accept a world in which the absolute values of love, friendship, oaths, honor, even hatred do not last. The words spoken by another unconditional lover, Shakespeare's Cleopatra, in the scene leading to her triumphant suicide, might have been those of Aias: ". . . and it is great / To do that thing that ends all other deeds; / Which shackles accidents and bolts up change" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, act 5, scene 2).

An overpowering human force drives Aias beyond the human, allowing him to transform death into destiny, without relinquishing his absolutes. Only an immutable act can defeat the enemy that undermines all "human things"—"great, unfathomable time." That Tekmessa and the Chorus fail to understand his words only heightens the power of the speech and dramatizes the solitude in which the hero's fatal struggle with his *daimon* has taken place. "I will go," says Aias, "where I have to go" (**767** / 690).

IV

The certainty of his final words, however, dissolves in the Chorus' sudden ecstatic reaction to them. There was matter in the speech itself to induce hope and prepare the audience for a denial of the suicide convention. Song and dance, moreover, are strong medicine ("Desire thrills in me, joy gives me wings!" **770** / 693), and an audience cannot remain wholly unaffected. Sophocles was famous for these odes of joyous delusion, but perhaps nowhere else are they used to such dramatic effect. We now *feel hope* as we *felt despair* in the preceding choral dirge. Suspense and song draw us into the choral world of change, possibility, and therefore hope. "*Time truly is great . . . / nothing's too strange* / if Aias can turn / his heart from hatred" (**791–94** / 714–17 [emphasis added]), the enrapt Chorus sings, echoing Aias' words but reversing his meaning. The poet *dramatizes* the gulf separating us from Aias and his fatal certainty.

Even the messenger who at last arrives is, contrary to expectation, a harbinger of uncertainty. In place of the long-awaited account of the

hero's death, we are told that Aias' life is contingent upon "this [one] day's light" (**832** / 753)—the point is stressed four times—the length of Athene's anger. Aias has scorned those men whose lives are measured by days, "day after day / moving forward or back from the end line / of death" (**525–27** / 475–76), and it is just this which Tekmessa and the Chorus' to-ing and fro-ing, in the hope of saving Aias, now dramatizes. The messenger also presents still another distortion of the traditional image of Aias. Speaking the familiar language of Greek morality, the messenger describes Aias as a man of *hybris*—an "outsized body" (**838** / 758) untamed by human thoughts. His account of Aias' blasphemous words to Athene ("Go . . . / stand by the rest of the Greeks. / The line won't break where I hold it," **857–59** / 774–75) has no epic precedent and consorts strangely with Aias' words of gratitude for what he earlier thought was Athene's divine alliance.

But Aias has "let [his mind] go beyond the human" (**840** / 761) and truly "owe[s] nothing more to the gods" (**668** / 590), though not in the sense that such presumptuousness is usually understood. Aias has indeed passed so far beyond both the "human" and the messenger's "divine" that Sophocles feels it necessary to empty the stage—an extremely rare occurrence in extant drama—in order to prepare for Aias' appearance. We are suddenly in another world, a liminal space where the opposed realities of land and sea, heaven and earth, converge. The grave tableau—Aias beside his upright sword—is now rolled out on the *ekkyklema*. At last, the true nature of his defiance, that of the *metaphysically* stiff-necked man, will be revealed.

The "killer" sword stands ready, firmly planted by Aias. In Homer the sword symbolized certainty and honor; here it is the visual emblem of change, an image of Aias' fate, a present from Hektor, "an enemy's gift" (**737** / 665) to the man who won only enmity from friends. Sharpened on the "iron-eating stone" (**915** / 820), the sword is destiny for the rocklike man, "whose will / was tempered like iron, unbending / in action" (**717–19** / 650–51). But in the sword we also have an image of that force behind all flux, Aias' real enemy—Time. Imagine how this sword might have appeared to those sitting in the Theater of Dionysus: the blade straight up, in the early morning light, it must have cast a long shadow—like the needle of a giant sundial—across the *ekkyklema* on which Aias stands. It is "Time's sword," moving even as Aias speaks. The hero's character now requires that he enact the truth of his own words. As Time's sword moves "against" Aias, so he moves to make Time stop.

Zeus, Hermes, even Death are now, in Aias' words, made to wait on him. The gods he invokes are not, like Athene, powers of contingency who meddle with men. He invokes these gods solely as guardians of the

dead, divinities of passage to man's "long home," beyond time, beyond change. Curses in the name of the primeval Furies assure his *eternal* hatred of the Greeks. But his most striking and significant address is to Helios, specifically as heavenly charioteer. Speaking in mythical terms, Aias commands Helios to rein in his chariot: to halt the Sun is to stop Time. Aias has transformed his death into an epiphany of permanence. His huge body covering the sword, he will eclipse Time and die, not in darkness, but, as his final invocation suggests, radiantly in the light. Now the unbending, immovable Aias has at last appeared. There is no trace of the lamenting Aias or the mad Aias of the opening scenes, or the shadowy "relenting" Aias of the Time speech; there is only the inflexible, commanding presence that here triumphs and destroys itself. We see his *ethos* become his *daimon*. He exceeds the world he is in, and passes beyond it. But in contrast to Homer's mute shade, this Aias promises speech in death: "I *will speak* to the dead in Hades" (**965** / 865 [emphasis added]), or, as *mythēsomai*, his final word, declares, "live on as undying 'myth.' "

Aias has decided; and the "day" has been made to attend upon his decision. Even Odysseus' tragic wisdom about "fleeting shadows" has been refuted. Indeed, Aias' stature grows until he literally touches the divine. He demands and achieves something that is not of the temporal world. His final invocation of heavenly light and sustaining earth (". . . O radiance! / O holy ground," **957–58** / 859) suggests something like the apotheosis of Oedipus at Colonus. The hero belongs to both heaven and earth. Elemental powers—divine *physis*, the eternality of Nature herself, not her changing seasons—are summoned from above and below to converge upon the hero. For Sophocles, men at the peak of their powers *reveal* the gods who are *there* but unrealized until men disclose them.

V

Does the suicide take place in view of the audience or not? The question is crucial, but unfortunately, our text provides no unequivocal answer. If, as Aias spoke his last words, he leapt on his sword, this would be the unique instance of dramatized violence in Greek tragedy. In any case, Sophocles is not concerned with a sensational suicide but rather with the *meaning* of the act. As with the Oedipus' self-blinding, it is the vision—it is the outward seeing transformed into inward sight—that matters, not the violence of the plunging blade. Aias finally had to move beyond words, to the enactment of his truth; at this point, verbal meaning becomes visual. And it is this that takes place in the coming scene with Teukros.

Teukros' arrival has been long awaited. Aias has three times referred to his coming (**373–74** / 342–43, **631–34** / 562–64, **764–66** / 688–89), and now Tekmessa anticipates it (**884–94** /797–804, **1018–20** / 921–22). The significance of his arrival is linked to the preceding events. As Aias finishes his speech, he and the sword are trundled inside the stage building. The Chorus enters the orchestra in confusion, followed by Tekmessa beside the body of Aias on the *ekkyklema*. But the Chorus does not in fact see Aias (**1008–9** / 912–14). More important, its request to see him is emphatically refused by Tekmessa: "He must not be seen! I will cover / his body, I will wrap him completely / in my mantle" (**1010–12** / 915–16).

If the Chorus cannot see the body, neither can the audience. The concealment suggests that later the body will be uncovered. But Tekmessa, who had urged Aias to accept contingency and who, like the Chorus, is resigned to the tyranny of time, is not the proper person to uncover the body and reveal the heroic truth Aias has enacted.

The following scene is all revelation. The question "Where is Teukros?" is at last answered. The plot requires his coming in order to protect Aias' dependents, but his arrival is carefully linked to the concealing of the body (**1010–20** / 915–22). His long speech begins with three sight words: " . . . of all my eyes have seen / this is the most painful sight" (**1099–1100** / 992–93). The point could hardly be more emphatic. Teukros now asks for visible confirmation of what he has heard. "Uncover him," he finally says to Tekmessa, "let me look at the whole evil" (**1109–10** / 1003).

The *face* of Aias is what he sees: "that hard face, / that grim self-command!" (**1111–12** / 1004–5)—literally, "that face hard to see, full of bitter daring" (*o dystheaton omma kai tolmēs pikras*). The line makes it clear that Aias has fallen sideways on his sword, and that he now lies impaled *face-up*. His fierce face is a constant feature from Homer on; bright eyes and an eagle glare characterize him in the play (**100–101** / 84–85, **187–91** / 167–72). This same grim face—staring up at radiant light—must be what Teukros is describing. Aias has faced death as he faced his enemies: head on, without fear. He is now revealed as a man who has dared to look at the world's truth and face its consequences rather than suffer its uncertainties. Anything but a "fleeting shadow," Aias dies at the height of his powers, a hero "in the light."

VI

The dead Aias dominates the stage more than ever, but the heated dispute over his burial now jeopardizes his *meaning*. A hero's burial

had an aura of mystery quite alien to us. Like a canonized saint, the hero had the power to bless the land in which he was buried and the people who revered him. To deny Aias burial is not only to dishonor a great man and deny the "otherness" he embodies, but to violate the sacred laws that bind the living to the dead. When the hero refused burial is also an Athenian hero, the morality of the "sacred city" itself is at stake.

But the tangible dramatic difference of the second half of the play has led critics to complain that the play is clumsily composed. The hero is "gone" by midpoint, and the remainder of the play seems merely an extended debate. Plays such as *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, or *Women of Trachis* close with a crescendo. The diminuendo here is undeniable. But the purpose is certainly to dramatize how the world would be without an Aias. The unheroic tone of the speeches with their threats, boasts, and insults reveal the meanness of this new world. Heroism seems to have died with Aias on his sword. The great speeches earlier, rich with noble epic language, are all spoken by Aias. The lyric mode itself, tragedy's "higher voice," fades away; the first half of the play contains four choral odes, the last half has only one. Grandeur of every kind diminished or vanished, the loss of Aias becomes achingly real. Absent, he is powerfully present in a world of smaller men. Even as a corpse, he dwarfs the survivors (good and bad alike). As the Chorus sang in its entrance song, ". . . small men / crumble without the great" (**181–89** / 158–59).

When presented, the *Aias* reportedly aroused a violent reaction. We will never know what nerve the final five hundred lines of this play touched. But something in Athenian experience must surely be related to the passing of the heroic age that these last scenes dramatize. Tentatively dated to c. 445–40 B.C., the play would seem to have been produced at a time when Athens was examining the policies and perhaps the morality of her empire. Political arrogance resonates in the rhetoric and power politics of the very un-Homeric Agamemnon and Menelaos. But nothing is served by identifying the particular contemporary types represented by the Atreidai. They may be Spartan oligarchs or the amoral expansionists of imperial Athens. In any case, they are despots who possess political, not moral, authority and whose power rests upon fear and exploitation of others. Such men are found almost anywhere, at almost any time. Aias' greatness was based upon the *arete* implicit in Odysseus' description of him. But true greatness is rare, and the Atreidai's "principled" outrage is merely a perversion of Aias' heroic *hybris*. Aias' supreme self-assertion was of an altogether different order, anything but the basely selfish "morality" of the Atreidai.

Which leaves Odysseus as Aias' improbable moral heir. The compassionate and conciliatory Odysseus of the last scene (the only favorable portrayal of him in extant tragedy) represents the new ethos of democratic Athens at its best. In his speech on Time, Aias predicted that harshness would yield to gentleness. *Aristos*—the term earlier applied to Aias—is now applied to Odysseus by Teukros. Like Aias, Odysseus also honors friendship, recognizing that the *arete* of the dead Aias trivializes their former enmity: "I am moved more by his greatness / than by my enmity" (**1537–38** / 1357).

Odysseus' final exchange with Agamemnon paradoxically engages the terms *friend* and *enemy*. For Odysseus, they are relative terms: a confirmation of the contingent morality resolutely rejected by Aias. But, though canny and adaptive, Odysseus is no moral opportunist. He speaks as a man who understands that since all men suffer the same fate, compassion and compromise are the appropriate virtues. And he is therefore able to adapt even the self-willed exceptional man, Aias, to his democratic vision. As in the earlier scene, the sight of Aias inspires Odysseus' tragic view of humanity. His earlier reflection of human transience is a tragic *topos*, poetically expressed ("phantoms, fleeting shadows"); his advice to Agamemnon arises from this same vision but is put very differently. Now Odysseus' words suggest a practical strategy with political implications—a basis, in other words, for human (and Athenian) democracy:

AGAMEMNON I must let them bury the body,
is that what you say?
ODYSSEUS It is.
I will face the same need some day.
AGAMEMNON It is all one, then, and each man works
for himself.
ODYSSEUS There is reason in that.
Who else should I work for?

(**1547–52** / 1364–67)

This is not Homeric individualism in the grand manner; but neither is it the opportunistic selfishness of the final years of the Athenian fifth century. It is both political and tragic wisdom: the foundation for a society in which compassion is perceived as the basis of preservation. Thucydides wrote:

> ... men too often take upon themselves in the prosecution of their revenge to set the example of doing away with those general laws to

> which all alike can look for salvation in adversity, instead of allowing them to subsist against the day of danger when their aid may be required.
>
> (3.84, Crawley transl.)

Odysseus, contrary to expectation, shows how society might preserve not only "that ancient simplicity into which honor so largely entered" (3.83) but also those endangered "general laws."

But Sophocles refuses full closure. The audience instead is challenged by a paradox. Despite his mediating role, Odysseus is not allowed to touch the hero's body; Aias, even dead, is resolute in his hatred. If that huge body commanding the stage is seen as inimical to Odysseus, then how can the spirit that animated it ever be domiciled in Athens? In the single choral ode after Aias' death, an ode beginning in despair but ending in hope (**1331–66** / 1185–1222), the Chorus strives for a resolution. How long, it asks, will the Trojan War last, and it recalls happier times, days of wine, song, sleep, and love-making. These sentiments of ordinary life, seemingly anomalous in high tragedy, compel us to ask what impulse lies behind them? Surely, what the Chorus *sees*—the tableau of Aias protected by his loved ones that dominates the play at its close.

Tekmessa and Eurysakes kneel over the body. The boy holds three locks of hair, with which he supplicates his dead father. Mother, son, and father form a tableau of *philia*, the "human bond" by which the dead and the living are joined in sacrament. Moved by the spectacle, the Chorus remembers *its* "world elsewhere," that of its loved ones, the joy and peace it has left behind. It then laments the loss of the man on whom its return depended, its "great wall / against weapons and terrors / under the pall of night . . . relentless Aias" (**1355–57** / 1211–13). What joy is left, the Chorus asks, now that its Aias is dead (**1361–62** / 1215–16)? It concludes, however, by expressing its yearning to sail toward the "wooded rampart of Sounion" and "holy Athens" (**1363** / 1220, **1366** / 1222). What it might have hoped for while Aias lived—the pleasures of peace and home—now lies in Athens, the city so renowned for its compassion toward exiles and suppliants.

The point is made and confirmed by the poet's fusion of hero and city in the double image of a "bulwark": "relentless" Aias, "the great wall" (*probola*, **1355** / 1212) and the "rampart" (*problēma*, **1363** / 1217) of Sounion, the promontory where Attica most vividly meets the sea. Epic bulwark and Attic headland merge into what even the Theban Pindar had hailed as the "bulwark of Greece, holy Athens" (frg. 76). In the final scene, by applying to Odysseus the epithet *aristos*, elsewhere reserved for Aias, Teukros signals the emergence of a new *arete*, different

from that of Aias, but originating nonetheless in his myth. By reconciling others to Aias, Odysseus demonstrates that the hero—daimonic even in hatred—is an enduring "presence," a power indispensable to that city that claimed to be "the education of Hellas." Just as the city needs the hero, so the hero, at least in death, needs others, needs the city and the human solidarity it represents. But now the burden of heroism must belong to all; aristocratic *arete* must be democratized. But ultimately the Chorus' new "bulwark" preserves the image of unyielding Aias—Homer's "wave-beaten ridge," that Sophoclean "rock in the sea" which, like old Oedipus, "abides the coming of the waves." For the "divine" in "human things," for the values of endurance, tragic solitude, and heroic hybris—the basis of the permanent values that energize the democratic city—Aias is the paradigm.

And so the play rightly closes with Aias. The final image is an image of blood—not animal blood as in the first scene, but the human blood of Aias. Body, burial, a hero's blood—these are now the final revealing images. Teukros, Eurysakes, and the chorus lift Aias whose "black life force . . . still flowing out / of his warm veins" (**1601–2** / 1411–13) now covers those who hold him. Blood-violence has become blood-bond, the link that binds living and dead, city and hero, "radiance" and "holy ground."

HERBERT GOLDER

ON THE TRANSLATION

The dialogues in this version of the *Aias* are composed in sprung rhythm, with three stresses to a line. There is no set pattern in which the stresses fall and no rule governing the number of unstressed syllables in the line. The stresses may be single or doubled. This system allows for lines as brief as

> I will bury Aias

or as long as

> There were swords drawn. It would have gone badly

to be read as prosodically equivalent. Sprung rhythm is the natural rhythm of speech heightened by the formal constraint of a fixed number of stresses and the ear's perception of regularity behind the irregularity. Keeping the number of stresses in mind will also help the reader (or actor) to hear how the lines should be spoken.

The choral odes and other more formal passages in the play (**162–279** / 134–262, for instance) are also in sprung rhythm, with lines of one to five stresses. They mirror the structures of the original. The entrance of the Chorus (*parados*, **162–91** / 134–72) is composed in a rocking four-stress line, as is the final *exodus* (**1594–1608** / 1402–20), with its brief anticipation in lines **1304–8** / 1164–67.

I hope that these poetic principles have enabled us to avoid the effect of the double iambic trimeter, the meter of dialogue in Greek drama ("I see you've come on foot, not riding on a horse"), which can be rather ludicrous in English, and at the same time to make an actable version of the play that keeps some sense of the high formality of Greek tragedy, so often lost in free-verse translations.

Mention should be made of our use of certain Greek outcries and lamenting words: *Io! Io moi moi! Omoi! Aiai!* English has almost no such words, yet to eliminate them from the *Aias* seemed a grave loss. Instead,

we have followed the example of Paul Claudel, whose great French translation of the *Agamemnon* allows for such cries as: *Otototoï! Iô popoï! Iou iou!* and *oïmoï!* The reader will understand that these are not so much words as noises. King Lear makes his last entrance with the line: "Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!" And so I always read it. Only when I saw the play performed did I realize that the old man enters *howling*.

RICHARD PEVEAR

AIAS [AJAX]

Translated by

HERBERT GOLDER

and

RICHARD PEVEAR

CHARACTERS

ATHENE	
ODYSSEUS	
AIAS	
CHORUS	of sailors from Salamis
TEKMESSA	wife of Aias
EURYSAKES	son of Aias
MESSENGER	
ATTENDANTS	of Aias
TEUKROS	half-brother of Aias
MENELAOS	
ARMED ATTENDANTS	of the Atreidai
AGAMEMNON	

Line numbers in the right-hand margin of the text refer to the English translation only, and the Notes beginning at p. 81 are keyed to these lines. The bracketed line numbers in the running heads refer to the Greek text.

The scene is the Greek camp on the coast at Troy. The stage building represents the quarters of AIAS *surrounded by a stockade with double gates in the center.*

ATHENE *appears aloft.*

ODYSSEUS *enters from the side.*

ATHENE I always see you like this,
Odysseus, hunting out some advantage
against your enemies. Now
you're sniffing around where Aias
and his sailors pitched their tents
at the end of the battle line,
pacing over his fresh tracks, wondering
if he has gone in or is still
out roaming. The scent has led you
like a sharp-nosed Spartan bitch 10
to the right place. No need
to peer through the gates: he's there,
his head and sword-slaying hands
still dripping sweat. But tell me,
why are you pursuing him?
You may learn from what I know.

ODYSSEUS Athene! No god is closer
to my heart! I cannot see you
but your words ring like a bronze-mouthed
trumpet in my mind. You're right, 20
I'm hunting an enemy, circling
his footprints: Aias, the great shield
Last night he did something in-
conceivable—or he may have done it,
nothing's sure, we're still bewildered.
I took the burden of proof
on myself. Just now we found
all our spoil of cattle,
herds and herdsmen, butchered,
torn to pieces by some monstrous 30

hand—his hand, we think.
A witness claims he saw him
leaping across the field
alone, swinging a wet sword.
When I heard that, I sought out
the trail, and it led me here.
But these tracks baffle me; some
I know are his, but the others
are hard to make out. You've come
when I most needed you, goddess! 40
Your hand has always steered me
and always will.

ATHENE I knew that.
I've been following you for some time,
caught up in the hunt myself.

ODYSSEUS Then my tracking has not gone wrong?

ATHENE I assure you, the man did everything
you have said.

ODYSSEUS A reckless hand!
What drove him to it?

ATHENE Rage
over the award of Achilles' armor.

ODYSSEUS But why slaughter the cattle? 50

ATHENE He thought he was smearing his hands
with your blood.

ODYSSEUS With ours?
Then he meant to kill Greeks?

ATHENE And would have
if I had not been watching.