

# The Theme of Illness in Sophocles' *Ajax*

Ido Israelowich

## Introduction

This article addresses the theme of illness in Sophocles' *Ajax*.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the tragedy both the chorus and Tecmessa, Ajax's wife, repeatedly describe the hero as sick. His illness is named as the reason for his madness.<sup>2</sup> Madness is its symptom. In turn, the process of Ajax's regaining his consciousness and coming to terms with what he had done is described by Sophocles as one of healing. This process of recuperation means the disappearance of the illness' symptoms — madness — and paves the path for Ajax's coming to terms with what he has done and the inevitable consequences of his actions. This heuristic model of illness and recuperation calls to mind other fifth century BCE works, which were attributed to Hippocrates and offered a new means of explaining illness and a new typology for discussing it. Indeed, Sophocles' decision to use such an explanatory model for Ajax's actions is remarkable. Though insanity is recurrent in Greek tragedy, and, in the form of *ἄτη*, appears already in Homer, Sophocles' novelty lies in his portrayal of his Ajax's madness as a symptom of an illness. Likewise, the process of regaining consciousness is portrayed as a symptom of healing. It was not a self-evident choice in the context of a tragedy, where humans are but pawns in the hands of the gods,<sup>3</sup> and in an age where a medical author claimed that the disease called sacred is no more divine than any other natural phenomena.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this article is therefore to question how and why Sophocles came to employ such a medical understanding of Ajax's state of mind. I will ask whether the Hippocratic notions of illness were influential on Sophocles' play or whether their presence in Sophocles' tragedy indicate that such notions were in circulation independently of the Hippocratic works.<sup>5</sup> The article is based on a textual analysis of Sophocles' *Ajax*. It aims to ask when, how and why the play was composed and what its characteristics reveal about the wider culture in which it was written. However, I will consider the play in the context of a range of other sources, both textual and archaeological. The article will examine whether the notion of illness and healing which appears in Sophocles' *Ajax* is comparable to those presented in

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<sup>1</sup> For the presence of Hippocratic themes in the plays of Euripides see Clarke Kosak (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship on madness in Greek tragedy is vast. See in particular: Thumiger (2013); Said (2013); Simon (1978); Padel (1995); Hershkowitz (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Though not a conclusive definition of (Greek) tragedy, it is the spirit of Odysseus' own words: ὁρῶ γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν εἶδωλ' ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν ἢ κούφην σκιάν (For I see that all we who live are nothing more than phantoms or fleeting shadow) *S. Aj.* 125-6.

<sup>4</sup> Περὶ μὲν τῆς ἱερῆς νόσου καλεομένης ὧδε ἔχει· οὐδὲν τί μοι δοκεῖ τῶν ἄλλων θειοτέρη εἶναι νόσων οὐδὲ ἱερωτέρη, ἀλλὰ φύσιν μὲν ἔχει καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ νοσήματα, ὅθεν γίνεται (Hippoc. *Morb. Sacr.* 1. ed. Jouanna).

<sup>5</sup> For a general study of the connection between Hippocratic technical vocabulary and that of Sophocles see Giovanni (2009).

the early treatises of the Hippocratic corpus, and indeed those which governed the cult of Asclepius.

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The theme of illness in Sophocles' *Ajax* echoes contemporary notions concerning medicine in an era in which disease first took a mechanical meaning and its magical and religious elements began to be questioned.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, since that time there have been attempts to medically treat what contemporaries themselves diagnosed as mental disorders. The elaborate vocabulary used by the Hippocratic authors to denote mental disorders is a clear indication of this new pattern of thinking.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, according to the Hippocratics, some ailments have psychological symptoms.<sup>8</sup> These notions were first explicitly articulated in the early treatises of the Hippocratic corpus, such as *On the Sacred Disease*, *The Nature of Man*, *On Ancient Medicine* and others. It is my contention here that the early date in which Sophocles presented his *Ajax*, in comparison to these Hippocratic works, suggests that such ideas were already in wide circulation before they were put in writing by the Hippocratic authors. Sophocles was born in the early 490s and died in late 406. An attempted dating suggests that Sophocles performed his *Ajax* in the mid-40s of the fifth century BCE, more than a decade before the first Hippocratic treatises had been published.<sup>9</sup> Sophocles used the theme of illness as a means to explain the actions of Ajax during the last night of his life and to account for why they were beyond his control. By making Ajax's illness the means for the vengeful Athena to execute her plans, rather than using any other mechanism, Sophocles must have been guided by his knowledge of his audience's beliefs.<sup>10</sup> The introduction of illness into the myth of Ajax during the first half of the fifth century BCE therefore discloses a general shift in the understanding of illness in general and mental disorders in particular in contemporary Athenian society.

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<sup>6</sup> Bibliography on the innovative character of the Hippocratic corpus is vast. See Vutton (2004) chaps. 4-6; Jouanna (1999).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Greek terminology see Di Benedetto (1986) 52-86; van Der Eijk (2000-1), II, 144-5, 153, 214-15; Thumiger (2013); Giovanni (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Epid.III,3.112.11=Kühlewein 17,case2.6, τὰ περὶ τὴν γνώμην μελαγχολικά. Thumiger (2013) 63-4.

<sup>9</sup> Our sources offer the following dates for Sophocles' life: according to the Parian Marble (*TrGF* IV T B 3) Sophocles died in 405/6 aged 92, cf. Finglass (2011) 1. For the date of the first production of Sophocles' *Ajax* cf. Finglass (2011) 1-10; Harsh (1944) 91; Moore (1969); Golder (2010) 1-22; Walting (1953) 7. For the date of the earliest Hippocratic works cf. Nutton (2004) 55.

<sup>10</sup> The presence of Athena on the stage and her role as author of Ajax's madness must be borne in mind. Athena is both a real deity and a fictional or literary character. Her anger at the words and actions of Ajax has instigated the night's events, but this should not diminish the realistic aspect of the illness, which she used as means. For the expectations of the audience and their impact on Sophocles (and other Greek tragedians) see Graham (1991) 33ff.

### The Myth of Ajax

The Sophoclean version of the myth of Ajax focuses on the events that led to his suicide during the last night of his life. In his disappointment for not having been awarded with the arms of the deceased Achilles, Ajax set out to avenge himself upon Odysseus and the Atridae and all the Greeks who had injured his pride. However, Athena interrupted his cunning plans by sending him an illness, which clouded his perception. Instead of killing his enemies Ajax took vengeance upon flocks and herds. When Ajax came back to his senses and realized what he had done he was left with no other honourable option but taking his own life. The Atridae then forbade his burial, despite the best efforts of Teucer. It was only with the persuasion of Odysseus himself that the burial of Ajax was finally secured.

In the *Iliad* Ajax is a prominent figure. Arriving in Troy from Salamis with twelve ships, he was stationed in the extreme left of the camp while Achilles was holding the corresponding position on the right. He is regarded as the second best warrior amongst the Greeks, with only Achilles as his superior.<sup>11</sup> His help in holding off the Trojans during the Greeks' long retreat is favourably mentioned in books 11 to 16, where Ajax is often accompanied by Teucer, his half-brother. Ajax fought a formal duel with Hector in book 7, at the end of which he granted his opponent his belt and reciprocally received Hector's sword.<sup>12</sup> However, unlike the Sophoclean hero, the Ajax of the *Iliad* bears no trace of Athena's condemnation of presumptuous self-confidence and rejection of divine help in war.<sup>13</sup>

The story we find in Sophocles first appears in the *Odyssey*. Here a contest for the arms of the deceased Achilles, which resulted in Ajax's suicide, is first mentioned.<sup>14</sup> Odysseus came across Ajax's soul in the Underworld. In a powerful scene, Ajax appeared reluctant to accept Odysseus' reconciliatory attempts.<sup>15</sup> The myth, as it appears in the *Odyssey*, attributed the decision to bestow Odysseus with Achilles' arms to the sons of the Trojans and to Pallas Athena. As has been noted by Sir Richard Jebb, the whole scene evidently presupposes some well-known work or works in which the contest for the arms was a prominent theme.<sup>16</sup> The scholiast says that 'the story comes from the Cyclic poets'.<sup>17</sup> Two of these poems are known to have contained the story of the suicide of Ajax.<sup>18</sup> The first is the *Aithiopsis*, by Arktinos of Miletos (circ. 776 BCE), which reports that during the aftermath of Achilles' funeral a quarrel (στάσις) developed between Ajax and Odysseus over the arms, which, we infer, was followed by a judgment: Ajax killed himself after a verdict had been reached, at the break of dawn.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Il.* 2.768-9; 7.227-8; 289; 17.279-80; Cf. *Od.* 11.469-70; 24.17-18; 11.550-1; Alcaeus 387 LP; Carm. Conviv. 898 PMG, P. *Nem.* 7. 27; S. *Aj.* 423-6.

<sup>12</sup> Hom. *Il.* 7.661-3.

<sup>13</sup> Jebb (2010) xi.

<sup>14</sup> Hom. *Od.* 11.543-7.

<sup>15</sup> Hom. *Od.* 11.541-65.

<sup>16</sup> Jebb (2010) xii.

<sup>17</sup> Schol. H on *Od.* 11.547 ἡ δὲ ἱστορία ἐκ τῶν κυκλικῶν.

<sup>18</sup> It is likely that these poems contain pre-Homeric material, which may include their handling of the Ajax's myth; Finglass (2011) 27.

<sup>19</sup> The quarrel: Arg. 4d; Ajax's suicide: *fr.* 6=Sch. Pind. *Isth.* 4. 58b.

The second testimony of the myth of Ajax to have reached us is that of the *Little Iliad*, which later in antiquity was frequently ascribed to Lesches of Lesbos (*circ.* 700 BCE). It begins with the ‘Judgement of the Arms’. It is here that we learn of the counsel of Nestor. Nestor advised the Greeks that in order to decide who merited the honour they should send their number below the walls of Troy to eavesdrop on the Trojans’ discussion of the valour of the two contestants.<sup>20</sup> While on this quest, the Greeks overheard a conversation between two Trojan girls. One praised Ajax, who carried the body of Achilles away from the battlefield.<sup>21</sup> The other, ‘by the foresight of Athena’ (Ἀθηνᾶς προνοίᾳ), argued in contrast that even a woman can carry a heavy load, while only a man can fight.<sup>22</sup> Odysseus is thereupon declared victorious, while Ajax went mad, destroyed the spoils of the Greeks and committed suicide.<sup>23</sup> However, this earlier version of the myth does not indicate that it is Athena who generated Ajax’s madness. Likewise, it bears no trace of an illness that caused Ajax’s madness, or that he came back (by recuperation or otherwise) to his sense before taking his own life.

It is noteworthy that in the *Aethiopsis*,<sup>24</sup> which told of the death of Achilles and mentioned the contest for the arms, another important detail is given: Podaleirios identified a fierce light in the eyes of Ajax and the weight upon his spirit, which foretold the end:

ὅς ῥα καὶ Αἴαντος πρῶτος μάθε χωομένοιο  
ὄμματά τ’ ἀστράπτοντα βαρυνόμενόν τε νόημα.<sup>25</sup>

The identity of Podaleirios is significant.<sup>26</sup> His diagnosis of Ajax is the first hint that an illness attacked him during his last night. Podaleirios was the son of Asclepius and Epione and brother of Machaon. Like his father and brother, the Homeric Podaleirios was known as a heroic or divine physician.<sup>27</sup> In the cyclic epics he heals Philoctetes.<sup>28</sup> Unlike his brother, who was a renowned surgeon, Podaleirios was recognized as a physician skilled in diagnosis of obscure ailments.<sup>29</sup> The Alexandrian scholiasts went as far as crediting Machaon with the foundation of surgery, while marking Podaleirios as the first physician.<sup>30</sup> Thus, both in the *Aethiopsis*, as well as in the *Little Iliad*, Ajax acts frantically after the awarding of the arms to Odysseus. In both epics Ajax took his own life after accomplishing what he himself conceived to be an act of vengeance on the

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Finglass (2011) 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Fr.* 2. Sch. Ar. Eq. 1056a.

<sup>22</sup> *Fr.* 2. Sch. Ar. Eq. 1056a.

<sup>23</sup> ἢ τῶν ὄπλων κρίσις γίνεται καὶ Ὀδυσσεὺς βούλησιν Ἀθηνᾶς λαμβάνει. Αἴας δ’ ἐμμανὴς γενόμενος τήν τε λείαν τῶν Ἀχαιῶν λυμαίνεται καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἀναίρει; Arg. 1a.

<sup>24</sup> For the attribution of this fragment to the *Aethiopsis*, rather than to the *Little Iliad* see West (2012) 160, who follows Jebb (2010) xiii n. 2.

<sup>25</sup> “Indeed he was the first to know that angry Ajax’s eyes were flashing and his mind oppressed”, Schol. *Il.* 11.515.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Kullmann (1960) 80; Garvie (1998) 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Hom. Il.* 11,833.

<sup>28</sup> *Apollod. Epit.* 4,8; cf. *S. Phil.* 1333.

<sup>29</sup> *Schol. Il.* 11.515.

<sup>30</sup> Erbse (1974) 223; Nutton (2004) 38.

Greek leaders. However, in neither version is it implied that Ajax regained his sanity before taking his own life.

The image of Ajax was also very much present in archaic and classical art. His duel with Hector is found on Attic and Corinthian ware; he was portrayed carrying the body of Achilles from the battlefield, and in amicable scenes with Achilles.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the suicide of Ajax was the subject of Greek works of art from the seventh century BCE onwards. Images show his downward-facing corpse, as if standing on his hands and knees, with his sword penetrating his body.<sup>32</sup> Late sixth-century and early fifth-century works of art also capture the events leading up to Ajax's suicide. The 'Judgement of the Arms', too, is a common theme, often with Athena presiding above the Greek leaders and at times with Odysseus by her side.<sup>33</sup> Such images alluded to the quarrel between Ajax and Odysseus.<sup>34</sup> In addition, in at least one instance, the killing of the animals was depicted on the same vase which portrayed the suicide of Ajax, thus suggesting causal relations.<sup>35</sup> It would have been interesting to compare the treatment by Aeschylus, who was first to present the story on stage, but only a few fragments survive of his *Judgement of the Arms*, *Thracian Women*, and *Women of Salamis*.<sup>36</sup>

### The Theme of Illness in Sophocles' *Ajax*

Despite the fact that the myth of Ajax was well established in the Greek world, Sophocles' *Ajax* was novel. Sophocles was, most likely, the first to bring Ajax back to sanity before his death.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Ajax's attempted attack on the Greek leaders is not attested to before Sophocles. It has been suggested that this extreme version of Ajax's reaction to the 'Judgment of the Arms' aimed to surprise Sophocles' audience as much as it surprised Odysseus himself (44-50).<sup>38</sup> In the Sophoclean version, Ajax's irrational attack on the Greek leaders would have been accomplished if Athena had been careless or indifferent.<sup>39</sup> More specifically, Athena directed Ajax towards the flocks and the mixed booty by casting upon him attacks of madness:

ἐγὼ δὲ φοιτῶντ' ἄνδρα μανιάσιν νόσοις  
ᾧτρυνον, εἰσέβαλλον εἰς ἔρκη κακά.<sup>40</sup>

I urged the man on his frenzied movement with attacks of madness and threw him into evil hunting nets

As has been noted by Patrick Finglass, madness sent by a divinity was not uncommon in fifth century tragedy.<sup>41</sup> A fragment of Aeschylus spoke of ἀσαλῆς θεόθεν

<sup>31</sup> Finglass (2011) 28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> §80-6.

<sup>34</sup> §71-3, with Finglass (2011) 30-1.

<sup>35</sup> Louvre C 11335; *circ.* 500-480 BCE. See Williams (1980) 137-8.

<sup>36</sup> Mette (1963) 121-7.

<sup>37</sup> Rose (1995) 64; March (1991-3) 21-2.

<sup>38</sup> Heath and O'Kell (2007) 366.

<sup>39</sup> *S. Aj.* 40-5.

<sup>40</sup> *A. Aj.* 59-60.

<sup>41</sup> Finglass (2011) 156.

μανία.<sup>42</sup> A further fragment of Euripides mentioned ἐκ θεοῦ γὰρ προσβολῆς ἐμηνάμην.<sup>43</sup> Other near contemporary fragments mention divine sickness.<sup>44</sup> Thus Sophocles' depiction of his protagonist as being afflicted by madness should be unequivocally understood to be god-sent. However, unlike *mania* in its pre-fifth century sense, which took the meaning of a personification of madness of divine nature and origin, and was known in the Greek world already in the archaic age as an object of a religious cult, the madness of Ajax is much closer in meaning to the term μανία as it was used in a medical context in the Hippocratic authors. The vocabulary Sophocles used portrays Ajax's madness as a symptom of illness. This vocabulary calls to mind the Hippocratic explanations of madness, which they perceived to be a result of an illness and a symptom of a disease. It is evident from (i) the Hippocratic use of μανία as qualifying certain illnesses; (ii) the recurrent explanations of madness as a derivative of earlier somatic processes, and (iii) from the fact that throughout the Hippocratic corpus μανία is not an illness' name but the result of another — preexisting — named condition. Sophocles' use of the theme of madness, and its disappearance, in a fashion which resonated with its use by his near contemporaries Hippocratic authors allowed his Ajax to regain understanding because he recuperated.

μανία appears at least fifty one times throughout the Hippocratic Corpus, usually as a description of the result of some kind of somatic irregularity. Indeed, Sophocles described his Ajax as lying, after falling sick with an illness that clouded his perception.<sup>45</sup> The Hippocratic author of *Aphorisms* asserts that like melancholia, epilepsy, bloody flux, angina, colds, sore throats, coughs, and various skin diseases, madness (τὰ μανικά) occurs during the winter and in the summer.<sup>46</sup> Thus, madness is merely a symptom of an illness. It is a somatic irregularity, which, like various other ailments, is often caused by exterior forces. Although instigated by Athena, Ajax was ill and his madness is a symptom of this illness.<sup>47</sup> This explanation is similar to the understanding of madness, which the Hippocratic of *Aphorisms* ascribed to women whose blood collects at their breast and brings to a manic behaviour (μανίην σημαίνει).<sup>48</sup> Hence madness is a physical condition. Μανία, which the Hippocratic authors understood not as a particular illness, but as a condition by which a person is out of his mind, was often explained as a result of blood vessels deformities or swellings.<sup>49</sup> This nosology agrees with the portrait of Sophocles' Ajax, whose mental disorder is a symptom of an illness. In addition, the Hippocratic author explained madness as an evolution of certain illnesses or as offering a key to a prognosis of other conditions. Thus, in acute diseases it is a good sign for madness to be followed by dysentery, dropsy, or raving.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere it is explained that those who stammer with the tongue

<sup>42</sup> Aesch. *fr.* 319 *TrGF*.

<sup>43</sup> Eur. *Fr.* 472e.9

<sup>44</sup> Tr. *Adesp. Fr.* 296. *Frr.* 650, *Ant.* 421, Eur. *Fr.* 286b.4-5 *TrGF*, cf. Parker (1983) 243.

<sup>45</sup> S. *Aj.* 205-7.

<sup>46</sup> Hippoc. *Aph.* 3.20 (winter) 3.22 (summer).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. S. *Aj.* 59-60; 66-7; 205-7; 609-11.

<sup>48</sup> Hippoc. *Aph.* 5.40

<sup>49</sup> Blood vessels: Hippoc. *Aph.* 6. 21, 56; Swellings: *Aph.* 5.65; *Epid.* 2.18. For the meaning of μανία in the Hippocratic corpus see Pigeaud (1989) 100-12.

<sup>50</sup> Hippoc. *Aph.* 7.5.

and cannot control their lips will later become empyemic. That is resolved by extensive pain in the lower body, deafness, bleeding from the nose, or madness (μανία).<sup>51</sup> Thus, like the Hippocratic authors, who often used the noun adjective μανικός, as well as the adverb μανικῶς, the meaning of Sophocles' Ajax's μανιάσιν νόσοις is physical. Though Sophocles only hinted that his Ajax lost his sound of mind due to illness, this madness is portrayed as a qualification, through use of an adjective, of an illness. In this respect, the meaning of madness as a somatic condition caused by an illness resembled its Hippocratic meaning.

In the Sophoclean version, the nature of Ajax's condition is not mysterious or elusive; he is ill. In fact, his illness is so easily diagnosed that Odysseus only needed a mere glimpse of Ajax to recognize it. Athena encouraged him to look so that he could report back upon Ajax's condition to the Argives:

δείξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανῆ νόσον,  
ὡς πᾶσιν Ἀργείοισιν εἰσιδῶν θροῆς (66-7)

To you [i.e. Odysseus] I shall display this sickness in full view, so that when you have seen it you may tell of it aloud to all the Argives

The ability of a lay person like Odysseus or Tecmessa to accurately diagnose the illness of Ajax (and then act as a reliable eye witness to all the Greeks on the matter) calls to mind the reality depicted by the Hippocratic treatises, where the general public is both the addressee of treatises on medicine and the arbiter on disagreements within the realm of medicine. It is Tecmessa who informs the chorus of Ajax's sailors that their lord is seized with "madness as death".<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, it is she who later realized that Ajax recuperated and is back to his senses.<sup>53</sup> Tecmessa is able to perform such a diagnosis on the basis of the disappearance of the lightings flash, his calm temper, and his sanity.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, her method of diagnosing seems to resemble that of the Hippocratic physicians, which used symptoms to retrace the illness that caused it. Hippocratic works, such as *The Art* show how physicians had to persuade an audience of non-specialists of the validity of their discipline, their personal qualities, and the accuracy of their diagnosis. In fact, the treatise begins by saying that there is a wide tendency amongst the general public of denying that medicine is an art altogether.<sup>55</sup> It is the purpose of the author of *The Art* to prove that there is an art of medicine, which removes the sufferings of the sick and lessens the violence of diseases.<sup>56</sup>

The tendency to deny the existence of a discipline of medicine and the requirement of professional physicians from the fifth century BCE onwards to persuade non-experts that it exists corresponds with the prevailing habit of selecting a public physician by

<sup>51</sup> Hippoc. *Epid.* 2.5.2.

<sup>52</sup> S. *Aj.* 214-15.

<sup>53</sup> S. *Aj.* 257.

<sup>54</sup> Less than two centuries later, Plautus will include a similar scene of diagnosing madness by a physician, this time in the context of comedy, but the symptoms sought bear great resemblance: Plaut. *Men.* 829-30 with Stok (1996) and Israelowich (2014), 450.

<sup>55</sup> Hippoc. *Art.* 1.

<sup>56</sup> Hippoc. *Art.* 3.

non-specialists.<sup>57</sup> The medical marketplace of fifth century Greece is one in which professional authority is sanctioned by the public. Physicians have to prove their ability and the validity of their discipline to the general public. Treatises like *The Art*, *On Airs*, *Airs Waters and Places* and others aimed to persuade the general public that medicine is a genuine discipline and teach its practitioners how to demonstrate their ability in a world, which had no licensing system. In democratic cities like Athens a choice of a public physician was made by the whole of the citizenry, brought together in popular assembly.<sup>58</sup> It is therefore to be assumed that the people felt confident in making such a choice. Though the Hippocratic works depict, from the point of view of the professional doctor, the struggle of physicians to prove their merit in a sophistic environment while using verbal wrestling techniques, they also presume that the general public felt qualified to discern professional merit among physicians. Though Sophocles might not have expected his audience to diagnose his Ajax by itself, he could have expected it to respond favourably to a diagnosis offered.

Later in the play, the chorus of Ajax's sailors called upon him to lead them in rebuffing the wild accusations Odysseus had fabricated and insinuated into everybody's ear.<sup>59</sup> They seem to have heard of their master's nightly activities, but were confident that a deity had sent Ajax to commit these crimes. The sailors were certain it was not Ajax's own mind that had led him against the flocks. The explanation they wished to propose was that a divine illness (ἦκοι γὰρ ἄν θεία νόσος)<sup>60</sup> had come from the gods and led Ajax to execute this unlawful act.

Finally Tecmessa came out of the house and informed them that Ajax was sick:

νῦν γὰρ ὁ δεινὸς μέγας ὠμοκρατῆς  
Αἴας θολερῶ  
κεῖται χειμῶνι νοσήσας (205-7)

For now the great untamed Ajax lies after falling ill with a turbid storm of madness

The severe physical condition of Ajax is stressed by the use of the two adjectives, which often describe him, μέγας and ὠμοκρατῆς.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the portrayal of madness in terms of waves, and storms was not uncommon in contemporary Greek poetry.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, as has been mentioned above, the Hippocratic acknowledged that madness is not necessarily permanent. Thus, the acute condition of a hero whose reputation is of being strong and untamed is stressed by the juxtaposition of his regular epithets with his current condition of lying after falling ill (κεῖται χειμῶνι νοσήσας). The expression of this illness, according to Tecmessa's explanation is madness (μανία).<sup>63</sup> Its symptom was the loss of sanity, and the process of healing involved regaining sound judgment. It is therefore clear that Tecmessa used the term μανία in the same way as the Hippocratic.

<sup>57</sup> On public physicians in general see: Cohn-Haft (1956).

<sup>58</sup> Jouanna (1999) 78-80.

<sup>59</sup> S. *Aj.* 134-200.

<sup>60</sup> S. *Aj.* 185.

<sup>61</sup> Hom. *Il.* 9.169; 11.563; 16.358; 23.811; Ibycus *fr.* S151.34 PMGF; S. *Aj.* 548; 885-6; 931.

<sup>62</sup> Aesch. *PV* 885-6; Eur. *Her.* 1091-2; *Or.* 279; Dem. 19.314.

<sup>63</sup> S. *Aj.* 216.



In fact, when Ajax finally came back to his senses (φρόνιμος)<sup>64</sup> and came to terms with what he had done, Tecmessa declared that he was “no longer ill” (οὐκέτι... οὐ νοσοῦντος).<sup>65</sup> It is a description of recuperation similar to the ones found throughout the Hippocratic corpus.

The theme of being ill and then recuperating plays an important part in the development of the play. The meaning of recuperation is no longer being ill, which, in the case of Ajax, means regaining one’s mental clarity. Sophocles used illness and recuperation to explain Ajax’s state of mind during the crucial night and over the course of the day, which followed. In fact, the shift from being ill to being of sound mind was important enough for Sophocles to have Tecmessa reiterating what had happened twice, first when she explained what had happened to the leader of the chorus in a long dialogue (201-269) and then in a short summary:

άνηρ ἐκεῖνος, ἡνίκ’ ἦν ἐν τῇ νοσῶ... νῦν δ’ ὡς ἔληξε κἀνέπνευσε τῆς νόσου. (271-4)<sup>66</sup>

That man, while ill... but now, since he ceased and had respite from his illness

When the leader of the chorus at last entered the house, having been asked to do so by Tecmessa, and after having heard from her what had happened during the previous night, he saw Ajax for the first time and diagnosed him as sick or as having suffered recent illnesses:

άνηρ ἔοικεν ἢ νοσεῖν ἢ τοῖς πάλαι  
νοσήμασιν ξυνοῦσι λυπεῖσθαι παρών.<sup>67</sup>

‘It seems that the man is ill, or that he is grieved by illnesses that have been with him for some time’

The theme of illness is further developed by Sophocles when his hero realizes what he has done, the consequences of his actions, and the identity of the goddess who brought it all upon him. It was after recuperating that Ajax was able to understand the full meaning of his nightly activities, who orchestrated them, and by what means. It was Ajax himself who declared that when he was directing his hands against the two kings and Odysseus Athena inflicted upon him a disease of madness (λυσσώδη νόσον).<sup>68</sup>

This realization of the protagonist is soon reiterated by the chorus. Ajax is described as being difficult to heal and as the victim of a divine mania:

καί μοι δυσθεράπευτος Αἴας  
ζύνεστιν ἔφεδρος, ὅμοι μοι,  
θεία μανία ζύναυλος.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> S. Aj. 259. Though the primary meaning of φρόνιμος is ‘wise’ rather than ‘healthy’, the description of Ajax as once again φρόνιμος should be best understood as ‘regained his health (with clarity of mind being the symptom of this recuperation)’

<sup>65</sup> S. Aj. 257-69.

<sup>66</sup> S. Aj. 271-4.

<sup>67</sup> S. Aj. 337-8.

<sup>68</sup> S. Aj. 452.

<sup>69</sup> S. Aj. 609-11.

Ajax is here next to me, hard to heal, a fresh competitor that I must wrestle with, dear me,  
who dwells with divine *mania*

The fact that Ajax was understood to be ill by all was demonstrated by the chorus' fears in respect to Ajax's mother concerning what she will do when she hears of his mind-destroying disease:

(...μάτηρ νιν ὅταν νοσοῦντα / φρενομόρως ἀκούσῃ).<sup>70</sup>

His mother will be destroyed when she hears of (him) being ill

Hence, throughout the play, illness is used by Sophocles to explain the transgressions of his protagonist; why his behaviour had been inevitable, and how he was finally able to come to terms with what he had done; the consequences of his actions and the driving force behind them, namely the will of Athena. Thus, the nature of Ajax's illness plays an important role in the promotion of the tragic plot. It forces the tragic figure to do what he did not intend to, and his recuperation allows Sophocles to confront his protagonist with the consequences of his deeds.

A further indication of the shift in the understanding of the notion of illness by Sophocles, in comparison with previous narrations of the myth of Ajax, can be seen through an analysis of Sophocles' vocabulary.<sup>71</sup> The medical vocabulary used in the Sophoclean version is similar to that which is found in Pindar. In his ode praising Asclepius, Pindar presented a classification of illnesses alongside the remedies used to cure them. Illnesses, according to Pindar, could come into existence by themselves within the body, via wounds, or, in the case of certain diseases, were due to the seasons.<sup>72</sup> Cures therefore included spells, potions, and surgery.<sup>73</sup> Sophocles' *Ajax* contains a very similar vocabulary. When addressing his son Eurysaces to explain why it is necessary for him to end his life, Ajax used a medical metaphor similar to the one used by Pindar: it is unwise, he told his son, for a physician to wail with incantations in case a disease needs the knife:

οὐ πρὸς ἱατροῦ σοφοῦ  
θρηνεῖν ἐπὶ δᾶς πρὸς τομῶντι πῆματι.<sup>74</sup>

It is not for the wise physician to whine charms over a sore that requires the knife

The meaning of this statement is that Ajax distinguishes between medicine and magic.<sup>75</sup> Though the medical vocabulary is used here metaphorically it must have reflected common notions, much like the Sophoclean employment of a mechanistic notion of illness — like the ones found in the works of the Hippocratics — to promote the tragic plot.

<sup>70</sup> S. *Aj.* 625-6.

<sup>71</sup> See more generally the work of Giovanni (2009).

<sup>72</sup> Pind. *Pyth.* 3.47-50; Nisetich (1980) 171; Jouanna (1999) 146.

<sup>73</sup> Pind. *Pyth.* 3.47-53.

<sup>74</sup> S. *Aj.* 581-2.

<sup>75</sup> Finglass (2011) 308.

### Changing Conceptions of Illness

When looking into the notion of illness in Sophocles' *Ajax* the most important point of reference is Homer. More specifically, illness and madness, which act as the means to promote the tragic plot in Sophocles' *Ajax* should be seen as something innovative, and different from the Homeric ἄτη. Madness in a medical sense does not exist in Homer, unlike in tragedy, where madness is either a metaphor or explicitly clinical.<sup>76</sup> A comparison of all aspects of the Sophoclean version of the myth with the one found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is pertinent not only because it reveals change over time, but also because the Homeric poems were the point of reference for Sophocles and his audience. Thus, despite the presence of illness, injuries, and medicine in the Homeric poems, the fact that a different notion of disease is found in Sophocles' *Ajax* than in all known previous versions of the myth indicates that a widespread change in the perception of illness had occurred by the time of Sophocles.<sup>77</sup> Modern scholars have been aware of Homer's attention to medical matters ever since Frölich concluded, on the basis of Homer's remarkable emphasis on wounds and other medical matters that the poet himself had served as a deputy chief of the medical staff with Agamemnon's army before Troy.<sup>78</sup> However, the meaning of disease in the Homeric poems is very different to the one seen when Sophocles describes his Ajax. While Homer used the term disease, and, much like Sophocles, ascribed a deity with its instigation, it was to the author of the *Iliad* only a non-descriptive means of killing. No symptoms are mentioned. Cure, when finally came, only meant the absence of the disease.<sup>79</sup>

In his anger at the Greeks' refusal to meet the requests of his priest, Chryses, Apollo sends his arrows with 'evil illness' to strike the Greek camp, men and animals alike. After nine days the Greeks realize that they have erred against Apollo and must, therefore, appease the god for the plague to pass. They then seek the advice of a seer, a priest or a dream interpreter as to the precise cause of Apollo's wrath. As have been noted by Vivian Nutton, there is no place for an *iatros* here, 'for the poet makes it clear that everyone believes in the divine origin of this affliction, and, as a consequence, that it is not an *iatros* but someone skilled in understanding the gods who is required'.<sup>80</sup>

This is not the only occurrence of a deity inflicting a plague in the Homeric corpus. In addition to Apollo, such acts are attributed to Zeus and Artemis.<sup>81</sup> It is true that there are early traces of the division of diseases into those which are god-sent and those which are not, as can be seen in Odysseus' question to his mother in the underworld as to whether she died due to a long illness or because Artemis struck her down with an

<sup>76</sup> Saïd (2013) 363; Padel (1995) 188; Hershkowitz (1998) 126. For ἄτη see Saïd (2013) 364

<sup>77</sup> Widespread, because tragedy as a genre and theatre as a venue addressed the general Athenian public.

<sup>78</sup> Frölich (1879); Nutton (2004) 37.

<sup>79</sup> For detailed surveys of medicine in the Homeric poems cf. Lorentz (1976) and Laser (1983). Nutton (2004) chap. 3 provides an authoritative account of pre-Hippocratic medicine in general, with particular attention paid to Homer and the Homeric tradition.

<sup>80</sup> Nutton (2004) 39. Hom. *Il.* 1.8-474. This theme is, of course seminal for Sophocles himself in his *Oedipus Rex*.

<sup>81</sup> Hom. *Il.* 21.483-4; 24.605-7; *Od.* 9.411.

arrow, or from more prosaic remarks in Hesiod's *Works and Days*.<sup>82</sup> However, neither of these authors ascribed a natural character to illness. Homer and Hesiod mentioned no symptoms, nor did they hint at a difference between the various illnesses. They did not refer to a nosology, even if such a nosology would not have meant the exclusion of the divine authorship of illness.<sup>83</sup> In this respect, the fifth century displays a remarkable change. Tragic authors often made use of medical knowledge, in its Hippocratic form, either in terminology or in representation of illnesses on stage.<sup>84</sup> A fragment of Aristophanes, for example, from the 420s displays a chorus of semi-divine heroes who are depicted as 'the stewards of good and evil' and threaten the wicked with a variety of illnesses — cough, bad spleen, dropsy, catarrh, scab, gout, madness, lichens, swellings and agues.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the absence of nosology in Homer — at least when it came to god-afflicted illnesses — proves that unlike the Athenian audience of Aristophanes, Homer's (and Hesiod's) notion of illness was not mechanical.<sup>86</sup> It was not the result of a somatic irregularity, which yielded it. It could not be explained in terms of a disturbed balance between the bodily fluids in the same fashion by which the Hippocratic author of *On the Sacred Disease* explained epilepsy. The Homeric illness had no πρόφασις, be its instigator natural or divine.<sup>87</sup>

A different grasp of illness and the connection between madness and illness is evident in Herodotus, who was a personal acquaintance of Sophocles.<sup>88</sup> In the case of madness, Herodotus recognized two categories: one which was of divine authorship and another that was caused by illness.<sup>89</sup> Madness as a symptom of illness was particularly noted by Herodotus in the case of the so-called 'sacred disease'. He told of Cambyses that he suffered from a horrible disease since birth which some call the sacred disease and that it is no wonder that if he had this illness his mind was also unsound.<sup>90</sup> Hence, whether the illness he ascribed to Cambyses was epilepsy or not, Herodotus recognized that this illness was first and foremost somatic, and that once it existed it caused some sort of mental disorder.<sup>91</sup>

Mental disorders which result from illness or from somatic irregularities are common throughout the Hippocratic corpus. A complete study of mental illnesses in Hippocratic

<sup>82</sup> Hom. *Od.* 11.171-3; Hes. *Op.* 100-4; 238-45; Nutton (2004) 41.

<sup>83</sup> Such exclusion is explicitly unnecessary even in Hippoc. *Morb. Sacr.* Which begins by claiming that: Περὶ μὲν τῆς ἱερῆς νόσου καλεομένης ᾧδ' ἔχει· οὐδέν τι μοι δοκέει τῶν ἄλλων θειοτέρη εἶναι νόσων οὐδὲ ἱερωτέρη, ἀλλὰ φύσιν μὲν ἔχει ἦν καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ νοσήματα, ὅθεν γίνεται. Φύσιν δὲ αὐτῇ καὶ πρόφασιν, i.e. all illnesses are equally godly.

<sup>84</sup> Jouanna (2012) 70.

<sup>85</sup> Ar. *fr.* 322, ed. Kassel-Austin, probably from his *Heroes*, cf. Cordes (1994) 51-9; Nutton (2004) 40.

<sup>86</sup> Nutton (2004) 38-9.

<sup>87</sup> For the continence of the non-rationalistic views of illness throughout the ancient world cf. Kudlien (1967); Lloyd (1990) 14-38; Nutton (2004) 40, and *passim*.

<sup>88</sup> Sophocles followed the narrative of Herodotus (Hdt. 2.35) in A. *Oed. Col.* 337, which often led to the conclusion of acquaintance and friendship.

<sup>89</sup> Hdt. 3.33; 6.75, 84; Xen. *Mem.* 3.12.6; Dodds (1951) 65 *sqq.*

<sup>90</sup> Hdt. 3.33.

<sup>91</sup> For the question whether the sacred disease Herodotus ascribed to Cambyses cf. Temkin (1971) 15.

medicine is, of course, beyond the scope of this article. For the purpose of contextualizing the Sophoclean notion of madness which is caused by illness, an appeal to the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease* will suffice. This is an important work devoted to ‘the disease called sacred’.<sup>92</sup> The author of this treatise explicitly included madness as one of its symptoms, as did later medical authors.<sup>93</sup> The first part of the treatise is devoted to a polemic attack against those who see this illness as being caused by the personal intervention of a deity, and who treat it by purifications, incantations, and dietary prohibitions. The Hippocratic author denounces such endeavours as incompetent and impious. Instead he offers a somatic explanation of the disease called sacred (commonly identified by modern scholars as epilepsy) and argues that it is curable.

The treatise *On the Sacred Disease* is in its essence a sophistic work, aimed at proving the superiority of the author in understanding and treating the disease called sacred.<sup>94</sup> The polemic nature of this treatise was often used to mark this work as a point of reference in the (not necessarily linear) evolution of modern science.<sup>95</sup> However, an analysis of the meaning and use of the theme of illness in Sophocles’ *Ajax* suggests that these views were already widespread half a century before the publication of the Hippocratic treatise. It is therefore noteworthy that there is no trace of purification rites prior to Ajax’s recuperation. While not proof that the Empedoclean notions of healing by purification (which rested on an understanding of disease as some sort of pollution) were obsolete by the time Sophocles presented his *Ajax*, the Sophoclean version of *Ajax* certainly proves that a naturalistic explanation of madness was not at odds with the *communis opinio*. The same growing need for rational explanation which brought about Hippocratic medicine in the first place must have driven Sophocles to denote his *Ajax* as ill, thus complying with the requirements of genre while providing a new type of explanation for his acts.

### Conclusion

Through this study of the theme of illness in Sophocles’ *Ajax* it has become clear that in the Sophoclean version of the myth *Ajax*’s madness is not ascribed to ἄτη but to illness: νόσος or μανία, both of which are physical phenomena. This break from the Homeric tradition of ἄτη and its replacement by a physical phenomenon, such as νόσος or μανία, is indicative of a widespread change. And though the implication of not choosing ἄτη as the compelling force behind the hero’s actions exceeds the scope of the present study, it can be said that within the context of the history of medicine Sophocles’ choice reveals an important shift in the common view of illness.

In a discussion of illness in the works of Sophocles, Penelope Biggs argued that ‘no human knowledge, we are constantly reminded, is competent to deal with these

<sup>92</sup> Περὶ μὲν τῆς ἱερῆς νόσου καλεομένης; Hippoc. *Morb. Sacr.* 1.

<sup>93</sup> Hippoc. *Morb. Sacr.* 1.3; for a general view of epilepsy in classical antiquity see Temkin (1971).

<sup>94</sup> Laskaris (2002) 2, and *passim*.

<sup>95</sup> Pohlenz (1938) 87; Deichgräber (1939) 126.

maladies'.<sup>96</sup> Though she referred to the *Ajax*, alongside *Heracles* and *Philoctetes*, there is no evidence or indication in Sophocles' *Ajax* that such a realization was present.<sup>97</sup> Likewise in reference to the same protagonists she argued that 'the heroic diseases, though described in human, physical terms, are beyond mortal comparison or cure'.<sup>98</sup> However, Sophocles' decision to explain the actions of his Ajax in terms which comply with rational explanations, such as illness, is a novelty which has to be addressed and explained. In fact, the choice of Sophocles to account for the actions of Ajax using terms like νόσος or μανία rather than ἄτη brings humans closer to such an understanding. Sophocles made his Ajax more accessible to his audience. Illness, in its newly acquired somatic meaning, is a means to an end. In the context of the history of the myth of Ajax, the Sophoclean version indicates how adjusting it to reflect the *Zeitgeist* made it seem more approachable and relevant to a changed society. In the context of the history of medicine it is suggestive of the framework in which the Hippocratic authors operated and might even be used as evidence of an antecedent to the notion of disease offered by the author of *On the Sacred Disease*.

Hippocratic medicine did not come into being *ex nihilo*. It emerged during the latter half of the fifth century at the same time and, possibly, in tandem with the cult of Asclepius.<sup>99</sup> Sophocles himself was the host, and possibly also a priest of Asclepius.<sup>100</sup> The appearance of novel notions of illness in the work of Sophocles is therefore an indication of the power these new ideas had over Athenian society at this time.

Tel Aviv University

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<sup>96</sup> Biggs (1966) 233.

<sup>97</sup> While it is true that no effort at cure is made, and that the goddess is said to be the cause of the disease, the nature of the illness is easily perceived by all.

<sup>98</sup> Biggs (1966) 233.

<sup>99</sup> For the inter-relations between the cult of Asclepius and the work of the Hippocratics, see Gorrini (2005).

<sup>100</sup> Mitchell-Boyask (2011) 112.

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