The Politics of Sophocles' *Ajax*

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Interpretations of Sophocles' *Ajax* in relation to fifth-century political issues have a long history. The drama invites such readings, both in specific passages, such as the reminder that the loathsome Menelaus is Spartan at 1102, and in the play's theme of the hero's isolation in life and re-integration in death. Already F.G. Welcker argued that the poet introduced both Menelaus and Agamemnon in debate with Teucer because, while Agamemnon was the leader who could actually decide, Menelaus was the representative of hated Sparta.[1] Since then, scholars have offered many political interpretations, some very far-fetched.[2]

The most convincing direct allegorization has associated Ajax with Cimon.[3] Plutarch (relying on Stesimbrotus) describes Cimon as a representative of the old simplicity, lacking the characteristic Athenian love of talk (*Cimon* 4.4-5); the Ajax of the play certainly does not lack eloquence, but he distinguishes himself sharply from Odysseus, the ἄλημα, the αἱμυλώτατον (381, 388). Cimon also claimed descent from the hero through Philaeus (Herod. 6.35). Cimon could embody hoplite virtues, but his military leadership against the Persians depended on and expanded Athenian naval power, and the play, as I shall argue below, places extraordinary emphasis on the chorus' status as sailors. As the play enacts the future cult of the heroized Ajax, one of Cimon's great performances was his discovery of the bones of Theseus on Scyros and their conveyance to Athens (*Cimon* 8.6-7). It is thus hard to believe that the drama would not have evoked him in the minds of at least some members of its earliest audiences, particularly if the play were performed soon after his death.

On the other hand, while the chorus is utterly faithful to Ajax, nobody could pretend that all Athenians were unfailingly loyal to Cimon; he was, after all, ostracized after the Athenians were humiliated by the Spartans in 461. Menelaus complains that Ajax never obeyed him (1069-1070), but Cimon was notoriously philo-Laconian and named one of his sons Lacedaemonius. Furthermore, the play gives Ajax only one son, Eurysaces. While an alternate genealogy could insert Philaeus as Eurysaces' son (Pausanias 1.35.2), the play treats the Salaminians as already Athenian, and so deprives Philaeus of his aetiological function of giving the island to Athens (Herod. 6.35). Furthermore, Sophocles makes a special effort to humiliate his hero as intensely as possible, in a way that would seem distinctly odd if he meant to depict an admired friend. It would have been possible to create an *Ajax* that did not include the slaughter of the cattle at all, but

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1 F.G. Welcker, 'Über den Aias des Sophokles', *Kleine Schriften zur griechischen Literaturgeschichte* II (Bonn, 1845; a revision of an article published in *RM* 1829), 334-40.

2 For a summary, see F. Johansen, 'Sophocles 1939-1959', *Lustrum* 7 (1962), 171, who comments: 'It is embarrassing to see good scholars arguing in that way'.

3 C.H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study in Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), 45-6.

Sophocles not only includes it, but first teases the audience with the horror it cannot see and then reveals it to them.

More recently political interpretation has wisely been more cautious about making specific identifications, and sees the characters as types. In this paper I hope to give some old questions of the political background a different and more nuanced examination. Contemporary political concerns resonate within the play, but not in a direct or unequivocal way. Furthermore, the political is only one strand in the dramatic web. Much of the play concerns issues and emotions that are political only in a very broad sense or not at all — family and friendship, gods and time — and it would be reductive to try to make the political aspect dominant.[4] Hence, this paper does not attempt a global interpretation. Instead, I shall examine two themes: Ajax in relation to the chorus of Salaminians, and the issue of alliance in the latter part of the play. The play gives contradictory indications about how the Greek army can be conceived: is it a quasi-polis, or an alliance of independent cities?

The uncertainty of dating of the play increases the difficulty of reading it politically — especially because datings often rely on political interpretations. On some stylistic grounds, the *Ajax* appears to be among the older of the extant plays.[5] Beyond that there is a great danger of circularity: a political reading depends on assuming a date, but then seems to confirm the date chosen. [6] However, the style and the political indications point in the same general direction. It is hard to resist seeing some connection between Agamemnon's attack on Teucer's right to speech, and thus citizenship, with the Periclean law of 451:

> Οὐ σωφρονήσεις; οὐ μαθὼν ὅς εἶ φύσιν
> ἄλλον τιν' ἄξεις ἄνδρα δεῦρ' ἐλεύθερον,
> ὅστις πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἀντὶ σοῦ λέξει τὰ σά;
> σοῦ γὰρ λέγοντος οὐκέτ' ἂν μάθοιμ' ἐγώ·
> τὴν βάρβαρον γὰρ γλῶσσαν οὐκ ἐπαΐω. (1259-1263)[7]

The passage may not address precisely the concerns of the law, but Agamemnon's suggestion that Teucer needs a προστάτης gives the passage a distinctly contemporary sound.[8] We do not know how long the issues of citizenship treated in the Periclean law

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4 This is the basic objection to J. Griffin's political interpretation in 'Sophocles and the Democratic City', in *Sophocles Revisited*, ed. J. Griffin (Oxford, 1999), 83-90.

5 See the comments of K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, trans. H. and D. Harvey (Oxford, 1979; first published 1933), 16-18; B. Seidensticker, *Die Bauformen der griechischen Tragödie*, ed. W. Jens (Munich, 1971), 200-9, on the stiffness of the stichomythia. On the other hand, the play shows *antilabe*.

6 For example, J.C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles: Commentaries. The Ajax* (Leiden, 1963), 16-17, dates the play to not long after Cimon's death in part on the assumption that Ajax is to some extent based on Cimon.

7 Citations follow H. Lloyd-Jones and N. Wilson, *Sophoclis Fabulae* (Oxford, 1990).

8 F. Robert, 'Sophocle, Périclès, Hérodote et la date de l'Ajax', *RPh* 38 (1964), 213-17 saw the treatment of Eurysaces in this light. The Periclean law has been prominent in recent German scholarship: C. Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, trans A. Webber (Baltimore, 1993), 184; C. Eucken, 'Die thematische Einheit des Sophokleischen "Aias"', *WJA* N.F. 17 (1991), 132-3; W. Nicolai, *Zu Sophokles' Wirkungsabsichten* (Heidelberg,

were under discussion, or for how long after the law's passage its provision may have been controversial, but the passage certainly makes a date in the late 50s or early 40s attractive. Again, 1102 emphasizes that Menelaus is Spartan, and the poet did not need to stress the point.[9] In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, after all, Menelaus appears to live in Mycenae, while Pindar (*P.* 11) puts Agamemnon's death in Amyclae. So although the treatment of Menelaus cannot prove that the drama was produced at a period of tension between Athens and Sparta — and thus, if the date is generally early, before the Thirty Years' Peace — it makes that hypothesis seems likelier.

One aspect of the play that has received less attention than it deserves is the constitution of its chorus.[10] First, the chorus members are repeatedly called sailors. This is not as self-explanatory as it might seem. They are, as Ajax' followers, not only the rowers of the ships that brought the hero to Troy, but also the fighters who serve under him in battle; but the former function receives far more emphasis than the latter. Tecmessa initially greets them as ναὸς ἀρωγοὶ τῆς Αἴαντος (201). In contemporary Athenian terms, the chorus could easily have been assimilated to ἐπιβαταί. Indeed, once Ajax addresses them as sailor/warriors ἄνδρες ἀσπιστῆρες, ἐνάλιος λεώς (565) — but only once. Although in the 'reality' of the play they are both sailors and hoplites, the emphasis lies entirely on their being sailors. Furthermore, their function as sailors is initially stressed in precisely those passages that simultaneously emphasize their loyalty to Ajax. In characteristically Sophoclean style, both strophe and antistrophe of Ajax' opening lament address his follows both as sailors and as his only true friends:

> ΑΙ. ἰώ
> φίλοι ναυβάται, μόνοι ἐμῶν φίλων
> μόνοι ἔτ' ἐμμένοντες ὀρθῷ νόμῳ,
> ἴδεσθέ μ' οἷον ἄρτι κῦ-
> μα φοινίας ὑπὸ ζάλης
> ἀμφίδρομον κυκλεῖται. (348-353)
> ...
> ἰώ
> γένος ναΐας ἀρωγὸν τέχνας,
> ἅλιον ὃς ἐπέβας ἑλίσσων πλάταν,
> σέ τοι σέ τοι μόνον δέδορ-
> κα ποιμένων ἐπαρκέσοντ'. (356-360)

1992) 29; T. Szlezák, 'Sophokles oder die Freiheit eines Klassikers', in *Griechische Klassik*, eds E. Pöhlmann and W. Gauer (Nuremberg, 1994), 71; M. Altmeyer, *Unzeitgemäßes Denken bei Sophokles* (Stuttgart 2001), 55.

9 T.B.L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles*[2] (London, 1969), 180, argues that the play is not anti-Spartan, since the hostility between Ajax and the Atridae was traditional and that the drama requires that they be portrayed negatively.

10 R.W.B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies* (Oxford, 1980), 6. C. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus* (Iowa City, 1987), 52-3, argues that they are soldiers as much as sailors, and that their costumes would have shown that they were soldiers, but the text gives no indication of this.

Ajax himself is brought into this context by being identified very closely with Salamis. The point is not made in the prologue, but when the chorus enters, it immediately attaches Ajax to the island:

> Τελαμώνιε παῖ, τῆς ἀμφιρύτου
> Σαλαμῖνος ἔχων βάθρον ἀγχίαλον (134-135)

The point is not trivial, because Ajax as warrior, in the Homeric tradition and in the play, is not a naval character.[11] The play retains his Homeric association with his immense shield, which defines him as a proto-hoplite. He was, however, closely associated with the battle of Salamis, along with his father: the Greeks called on the Aeacids as allies, bringing the images of Aeacus and Aeacids from Aegina, and calling on Ajax and Telamon αὐτόθεν μὲν ἐκ Σαλαμῖνος (Herod. 8.64.2). Three captured Persian ships were dedicated at the Isthmus, at Sounion, and to Ajax αὐτοῦ ἐς Σαλαμῖνα (Herod. 8.121). The address is proleptically appropriate to the hero whose shrine stood on the island.[12] When the sailors sadly address their home,

> ὦ κλεινὰ Σαλαμίς σὺ μέν που
> ναίεις ἁλίπλακτος εὐδαίμων,
> πᾶσιν περίφαντος αἰεί (596-598)

they again proleptically evoke the glory that the audience associated with the island and with Ajax. As a tribal hero and as the helper against the Persians, Ajax belongs firmly in the tradition of the democracy.

The presentation of Ajax' men as sailors clearly has political implications. Surely it makes the Salaminian contingent easier to assimilate to Athenian democracy; but it is not clear how sharply the Athenian audience would have felt a chorus of sailors to be distinctly more 'democratic' than one of hoplites. The relationship between naval power and Athenian democracy is controversial. Certainly by the later fifth century oligarchic circles regarded naval power and democracy as inevitably joined, believing that a city that depended on its navy could not avoid placing power in the hands of the poor, who rowed in the fleet (ps.-Xenophon 1.2, Plato *Laws* 706c-707a). However, we cannot be certain that such ideas were current by the mid-fifth century, or that they were found in wider circles — they are not part of the discourse of the democracy itself.[13] Some have seen a reflection of a struggle over the importance of the fleet in the memorializations of the battles of Marathon and Salamis. Whether there was a real conflict in Athenian social memory between Marathon, the hoplites' battle, and Salamis, that of the sailors, depends largely on the interpretation of the paintings of the Stoa Poikile described by Pausanias (1.5), and it is far from certain.[14] Cimon, son of the victor of Marathon,

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11 P. Rose, 'Historicizing Sophocles' *Ajax*', in *History, Tragedy, Theory*, ed. B. Goff (Austin, 1995) 70, emphasizes the naval character of Sophocles' Ajax.

12 For the prolepsis of Ajax' cult in the latter part of the play, see A. Henrichs, 'The Tomb of Ajax and the Prospect of Hero Cult in Sophokles', *ClAnt* 12 (1993), 165-80.

13 P. Ceccarelli, 'Sans thalassocratie, pas de démocratie? le rapport entre thalassocratie à Athènes et démocratie dans la discussion du Ve et IVe siècle av. J-C', *Historia* 42 (1993), 444-70.

14 A. Wardman, 'Tactics and Tradition of the Persian Wars', *Historia* 8 (1959), 49-60; C. Fornara, 'The Hoplite Achievement at Psyttaleia', *JHS* 86 (1966), 51-4. C. Pelling,

probably made a particular effort to ensure that Marathon was remembered, but that does not mean that he promoted hoplite over naval achievement ideologically. Still, there is no reason to think that the idea that there was some connection between democracy and naval power was not a good deal older than its first explicit attestations.[15]

Sophocles, in any case, had a choice of how he would portray his chorus, and by making them sailors, he associated them with the demos. In 428, Athens manned one hundred ships with citizens, excepting those of the two highest classes (Thuc. 3.16.1). Apparently, the poorer sections of the citizen body by this period were all competent as rowers.[16] The dating of Sophocles' play to the early 40s — if correct — associates them with the social classes whose political power had recently increased dramatically. The zeugitae had become eligible for archonship in 458-57 (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 26.2). Citizens were paid to attend the assembly, while the power of the Areopagus was diminished (Cimon opposed the reform of the Areopagus, *Cimon* 10.7-8, 15; the other reforms took place after his ostracism). Sophocles depicted his chorus as sailors although Athenian civic practice, even at the height of the democracy, tended to portray the ideal citizen as a hoplite and to ignore the contributions of the fleet.[17] While the extent to which official Athenian discourse genuinely denied the contributions of the poor citizens is debatable, there can be no question that the portrayal of Ajax' men as sailors, and Ajax himself as particularly Salaminian, is thus politically weighted. The tragedy seems unequivocally to favor naval power. Furthermore, although the members of the chorus are not especially heroic, they are completely sympathetic characters whose loyalty receives powerful praise.

To be sure, there is no overt democratic ideology in the relationship between the chorus members and Ajax; they do not claim anything resembling equality with him. Indeed, they stress that this bad fortune makes them as helpless as doves (139-140). After Ajax' death, they describe Ajax as their protection against fear by night and enemy weapons (1211-1213). In their anxiety about the rumors they have heard, their

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'Aeschylus' *Persae* and History', in *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, ed. Pelling (Oxford, 1997), 1-20, makes a strong case for a democratic reading of the Stoa Poikile.

15 J. Ober, 'Revolution Matters: Democracy as Demotic Action (A Response to Kurt A. Raaflaub)', in *Democracy 2500?* eds. I. Morris and K. Raaflaub (Dubuque, 1998) 67-85, argues that the decision to 'militarize the thetes' presupposes democracy, while Raaflaub responds in the same volume, 'The Thetes and Democracy (A Response to Josiah Ober)', 87-103, that the militarization of the fleet was the cause of full democratization in the reforms of 462-450 rather than a consequence.

16 J.M. Davies, *Democracy and Classical Greece* (Atlantic Highlands, 1978), 91.

17 See N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*, trans. A. Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 34-6. In *Demokratia: a Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*, eds. J. Ober and C. Hedrick (Princeton, 1996), K. Raaflaub, 'Equalities and Inequalities in Athenian Democracy', 139-74, stresses the low status of thetes (and the consequent importance to them of political equality); B. Strauss, 'The Athenian Trireme, School of Democracy', 313-25, emphasizes their civic identity and pride; V.D. Hanson, 'Hoplites into Democrats: The Changing Ideology of Athenian Infantry', 289-312, argues that the use of hoplite symbolism was not an aristocratic survival in the democracy, but a successful unifying device.

reflections mingle an aristocratic, Pindaric concern with envy with emphasis on the mutual interdependence of rich and poor:[18]

> πρὸς γὰρ τὸν ἔχονθ' ὁ φθόνος ἕρπει.
> καίτοι σμικροὶ μεγάλων χωρὶς
> σφαλερὸν πύργου ῥῦμα πέλονται·
> μετὰ γὰρ μεγάλων βαιὸς ἄριστ' ἂν
> καὶ μέγας ὀρθοῖθ' ὑπὸ μικροτέρων.
> ἀλλ' οὐ δυνατὸν τοὺς ἀνοήτους
> τούτων γνώμας προδιδάσκειν. (157-163)

The obvious meaning of ὁ ἔχων is 'the rich man', which is a sign that Ajax is here assimilated to a contemporary social group. Among Trojan heroes, he is traditionally the least impressive in wealth and men, bringing only twelve ships. Only a few lines before Athena has warned Odysseus not to become arrogant, ἢ χειρὶ βρίθεις ἢ μακροῦ πλούτου βάθει (130). Odysseus, compared to other heroes, is neither strongest nor wealthiest, for Ajax is mightiest, but Agamemnon excels in wealth, and both Ajax and Agamemnon are arrogant as he is not. Ajax can be rich, then, only in comparison to the ordinary soldiers at Troy, as a member of the elite.

The loyal members of his own contingent believe that others feel class resentment against him. Yet they also speak of μεγάλων ψυχῶν in the same context (154), and do not hesitate to imagine ill of the Atreids and Odysseus (187-189); their loyalty to Ajax includes a judgment of value and is not an unquestioning acceptance of general norms of social superiority. They acknowledge their own inferiority both as warriors and in power: nasty rumors about themselves would not be believed (155-156). The song thus elides any distinction between Ajax' status as their leader and his superior merits. Throughout, everyone sympathetic to Ajax acknowledges the excellence of his ancestry — of which he himself is painfully conscious — along with his own earlier achievements. Athena herself says that nobody προνούστερος ἢ δρᾶν ἀμείνων ηὑρέθη τὰ καίρια (119-120) — that is, he was best in both counsel and deeds. The play endorses the aristocratic ideology of inherited excellence, but since his people seem fully to support him, he can be a democratic leader and an aristocrat at the same time.

On the other hand, everyone in the play treats the chorus members with respect. Agamemnon denies the standing of Teucer (1227-1231), but nobody is rude to the sailors. Tecmessa calls them Erechtheids, providing them with noble Athenian descent. They address Odysseus as ἄναξ 'Οδυσσεῦ (1316), exactly as Agamemnon does (1321). As a chorus, the men sing of their longing for home in symposiastic terms. The symposium is the characteristically upper-class institution, but here it is democratized — the sailors stand, in effect, for everyone except Ajax and his successor Teucer.

The relationship with Ajax that their parodos defends is not subservient, but is an idealized fantasy of harmony between a rich leadership and followers in Athens. The play elides any distinction between Ajax as a warrior with a great shield and Ajax as a leader of sailors. The sailors represent the entire contingent of Ajax — he has no other

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[18] T. Hubbard, 'Pindar and Sophocles: Ajax as Epinician Hero', *Échos du monde classique/Classical Views* n.s. 19 (2000), 315-32, points to the Pindaric coloring of the first part of the play (I am not convinced, however, that *P.* 8 is a *terminus post quem*).

followers — so that, within the world of the play, the hoplite is subsumed into the sailor. Within the Athenian/Salaminian context, there are only two real classes: the extraordinary, charismatic leader — who is unique, though after his death his brother replaces him — and the everyday, faithful sailor. The sailors are a synecdoche, in which the lowest class stands for the entire body of citizens. Like the funeral oration, the drama offers an idealized vision of the city, but the representative group becomes sailors rather than hoplites. Nobody questions the basis for Ajax' position, and the source of his authority is left undefined. We thus have an apolitical politics. There are no conflicts. The gesture is easier because Ajax has an Athenian cult as one of the tribal heroes; the heroes stand for the civic unity of the people.

This is not an atypical move for Sophocles. In his last surviving work, he praises in the Colonus ode Poseidon's gifts to the Athenian people:

> ἄλλον δ' αἶνον ἔχω ματροπόλει τᾷδε κράτιστον,
> δῶρον τοῦ μεγάλου δαίμονος, εἰπεῖν, <χθονὸς> αὔχημα μέγιστον,
> εὔιππον, εὔπωλον, εὐθάλασσον.
> ὦ παῖ Κρόνου, σὺ γάρ νιν ἐς
> τόδ' εἶσας αὔχημ', ἄναξ Ποσειδάν,
> ἵπποισιν τὸν ἀκεστῆρα χαλινὸν
> πρώταισιν ταῖσδε κτίσας ἀγυιαῖς.
> †ά δ' εὐήρετμος ἔκπαγλα χοροῖσιν
> παραπετομένα[19] πλάτα†
> θρῴσκει, τᾶν ἑκατομπόδων
> Νηρῄδων ἀκόλουθος. (*OC* 707-719)

The ode is especially fraught politically, since the shrine of Poseidon Hippius played a part in the oligarchic revolution of 411, in which Sophocles himself was implicated.[20] The ode, however, implies an underlying unity of the cavalry, the elite province of the horse-sustaining rich, and the fleet, manned by the poor. The cavalry actually have a part in the action, when they rescue Antigone and Ismene, but the sea is not relevant to the play's location or its action. The song emphasizes Poseidon's gift of seamanship in order to claim a supernaturally-based common origin for the excellences of the most opposed social groups, and thereby to give Athens a unity beyond political or economic differences.

Outside this privileged Athenian harmony, of course, the play is full of political conflicts. The parodos already opens the most difficult aspect of the play's politics. Ajax and his followers evidently represent an idealized polis, but they exist within the Greek army, a larger unit that may or may not be the equivalent of an enlarged polis. In the parodos, the army seems to be a single community; the sailors define those who feel envy of Ajax not as members of other units or citizens of other cities, but as 'the foolish'. Although their fear is the result of their direct dependence on Ajax, they do not base their unwillingness to believe evil rumors about him on their particular relation to him, but on their more general resistance to foolish envy. Similarly, when Ajax praises

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19 I have added obeli to the text of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (above, note 7), who print their own conjecture in this very difficult passage.

20 I am in agreement with M. Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley, 1986) 340-1, that Sophocles is unlikely to have been oligarchic in his politics.

their loyalty, his repeated use of μόνον implies that others have betrayed him. While he emphasizes that they are sailors, he does not emphasize that they are his own sailors. Their loyalty is thus more valuable, since it is based on their moral qualities rather than on their dependence on Ajax. Those who are not loyal friends are presumably from other cities, but their absence is not motivated politically. The army thus appears as a city. Within this city, the sailors are ethically superior to others.

Menelaus very explicitly treats the city as the model for the Greek army (1069-1083). His city, however, lacking the spontaneous loyalties of the Salaminians, is strongly hierarchical:

> καίτοι κακοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς ὄντα δημότην
> μηδὲν δικαιοῦν τῶν ἐφεστώτων κλύειν. (1071-1072)

Within it, Ajax is a δημότης. Among his own men, Ajax' high position is unquestioned; when the community is expanded, however, Menelaus sees himself and his brother the same way. Just as there are only two classes among the Salaminians, so there are only two for Menelaus. To be sure, he recognizes Ajax as a member of a different polis from his own:

> ΜΕ. ὁθούνεκ' αὐτὸν ἐλπίσαντες οἴκοθεν
> ἄγειν 'Αχαιοῖς ξύμμαχόν τε καὶ φίλον,
> ἐξηύρομεν ξυνόντες ἐχθίω Φρυγῶν· (1052-1054)

Crucial in this formulation is the word ἄγειν; Ajax is a part of the army he himself leads, which functions as a polis.

The city of only two classes, leaders and followers, is inherently less appealing in this different context. Because the rowers of the fleet belong to the lowest property-class, their unquestioning support for the man at the top offers an easy legitimacy. They can elide any groups other than Ajax and themselves, because other groups have no presence in the play. Since the people evidently support Ajax, and no institutions are mentioned to explain his position, his leadership can be assumed to be democratic, especially since his role anticipates his place as a hero of the democracy. Once the high status of Ajax has been established, however, the army as a whole cannot have the simple structure of the Salaminians. Menelaus turns the leader of a group into an undistinguished citizen in a situation where conflict has arisen. Furthermore, the followers defined Ajax' position. Menelaus seeks to define his own. In another context, his statements about the importance of obedience might be unexceptionable. Here, however, he sounds like a tyrant or an oligarch who dismisses all others' claims to a share in power.

Teucer, on the other hand, denies that the army is a polis:

> ἄγ', εἴπ' ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὖθις, ἦ σὺ φῂς ἄγειν
> τόνδ' ἄνδρ' 'Αχαιοῖς δεῦρο σύμμαχον λαβών;
> οὐκ αὐτὸς ἐξέπλευσεν ὡς αὑτοῦ κρατῶν;
> ποῦ σὺ στρατηγεῖς τοῦδε; ποῦ δὲ σοὶ λεὼν
> ἔξεστ' ἀνάσσειν ὧν ὅδ' ἤγετ' οἴκοθεν;
> Σπάρτης ἀνάσσων ἦλθες, οὐχ ἡμῶν κρατῶν·
> οὐδ' ἔσθ' ὅπου σοὶ τόνδε κοσμῆσαι πλέον
> ἀρχῆς ἔκειτο θεσμὸς ἢ καὶ τῷδε σέ.
> [ὕπαρχος ἄλλων δεῦρ' ἔπλευσας, οὐχ ὅλων

στρατηγός, ὥστ' Αἴαντος ἡγεῖσθαί ποτε.][21]
ἀλλ' ὧνπερ ἄρχεις ἄρχε... (1097-1107)
οὐ γάρ τι τῆς σῆς οὕνεκ' ἐστρατεύσατο
γυναικός, ὥσπερ οἱ πόνου πολλοῦ πλέῳ
ἀλλ' οὕνεχ' ὅρκων οἷσιν ἦν ἐπώμοτος,
σοῦ δ' οὐδέν· οὐ γὰρ ἠξίου τοὺς μηδένας (1111-1114)

In the mythical context, Teucer refers to the oath of Helen's suitors, and the argument seems narrowly legalistic; the distinction between subordination to Menelaus and to an oath to help Helen's husband is very fine. In the contemporary situation, however, Teucer presents Ajax as a member of an alliance in which no member can legitimately assert hegemony, and the difference was not trivial at all. The issue of Ajax' place as 'ally' is all the more salient in that Ajax as a figure of cult was conceived as an ally of the Athenians: ἅτε ἀστυγείτονα καὶ σύμμαχον, ξεῖνον ἐόντα προσέθετο (Herod. 5.66). It is in this context that Teucer attacks Menelaus as specifically Spartan. He probably implies that Spartans typically seek power over their equals — but this is only a hint; the anti-Spartan message is confined to a single line. The dispute over whether Ajax had to obey the leaders or his oath clearly has contemporary resonance; complexity arises when we actually work out the contemporary implications.

We must start from the assumption that the audience must sympathize with Teucer, and agree that a member of an alliance — at least an invaluable member, like Ajax — is not thereby a subordinate. (That does not mean that Ajax has been right in every way, but only that Menelaus is wrong). A perfect allegorization of this part of the play would require that Ajax equal Athens, Menelaus Sparta, and the audience imagine a situation in which Athens has a good reason to complain that it was being treated unequally by its equals within an alliance. However, this seems a bizarre complaint at any time in the mid-fifth century, even for the most patriotic Athenian. No such reading is possible without hermeneutic contortion of some kind.

Any allegorization requires that at least one element be ignored in order that the interpreter may fully 'cash in' others. For example, we can identify Ajax with Athens, and accept the identification of Menelaus with Sparta.[22] Then we need to find a memorable occasion on which Sparta had attempted to treat Athens as its inferior within an alliance. Such an allusion cannot be contemporary, if the date suggested above is right. Athens ended its war with Sparta by a truce in 451-50. If we weaken the correspondence between play and event to a simple complaint of ingratitude, it could refer to the Spartans' dismissal of the Athenians under Cimon who had answered their request for help in the siege of Ithome. That has a tricky side, though. Rejecting help looks more like Ajax' kind of arrogance than Menelaus', and the Spartans refused Athenian aid not from arrogance, but from mistrust — at least as Athenians saw it (Thuc. 1.102). Still, it led directly to Athenian abandonment of the anti-Persian alliance with Sparta and a new alliance with Argos. Directly after the Persian Wars, however, Pausanias so alienated

21 H. Lloyd-Jones and N. Wilson, *Sophoclea* (Oxford, 1990), 34, make a convincing case for Schneidewin's excision of these lines.

22 This is essentially the view of the most subtle political interpretation of the play, P. Rose, 'Historicizing Sophocles' *Ajax*' (note 11 above), 59-90; Cf. A.F. Garvie, *Sophocles: Ajax* (Warminster, 1998), 216.

the Ionians that they asked the Athenians to take over the hegemony — this is how Thucydides tells the story, at any rate (1.94-95), and how an Athenian would have remembered it. Spartans, then, could be regarded as ungrateful to their allies. Thucydides also relates the tale of how Themistocles had to distract the Spartans to give Athens time to restore her walls (1.93.8). In Athenian tradition, if Sparta did not regard Athens as an inferior power, it certainly hoped to render her one. This reading can rely on the association between the action against the Trojans and that against the Persians, already an obvious move by the mid-century. Menelaus certainly evokes negative stereotypes of Sparta; the question is to what extent these control broader interpretation.

Second, if Ajax is still the representative of Athens, but we emphasize the failure of gratitude within the play, the complaint can be directed more broadly at Greeks who fail to appreciate Athens' role as the protector of Greece.[23] This requires that we take the complaint against Sparta as, in effect, a throw-off line, an expression of resentment that is primarily directed elsewhere, at the allies who resent Athenian leadership. However, this reading relies on a very general accusation of ingratitude; it requires the audience to ignore the specifics of the argument completely.

Finally, the hearer may wholly ignore the identities of the speakers as Spartans/Athenians and focus entirely on the substance. The scene evokes the contemporary situation very closely: it is a comment on the gradual transformation of the League into the Athenian Empire, which included the use of cleruchies, the forcing of allies who had provided ships into givers of tribute, the transfer of the Treasury from Delos to Athens (454), and the appropriation of the League's money for Athenian building projects. Thucydides is vague about the chronology, but unsqueamish in summarizing the outcome:

> After this, the Naxians revolted and they made war on them. After a siege they surrendered. This was the first allied city to be enslaved contrary to custom (πρώτη τε αὕτη πόλις ξυμμαχὶς παρὰ τὸ καθεστηκὸς ἐδουλώθη) but later it happened to the others according to the particular circumstances. There were various causes of revolt, but the greatest were failures to pay the tribute and provide ships, and desertion when that took place. For the Athenians were meticulous in their demands, and harsh in applying compulsion to people who were not accustomed and did not want to undergo hardship (1.98.4-99.1).

Thucydides, looking back on the process, describes allied cities as enslaved (Aristophanes may have shown them as slaves on the stage in *Babylonians*, 426). If we once imagine the play in the context of Athens' treatment of her allies, it is hard not to connect it with the famous passage of Plutarch that describes opposition to Pericles' building program:

> Out of all the political actions of Pericles, his enemies maligned and slandered that one, shouting that the people were getting a bad reputation and being criticized for bringing the common money of the Greeks from Delos to Athens: 'The finest excuse that the people

23 So D. Bradshaw, 'The Ajax Myth and the Polis: Old Values and New', in *Myth and the Polis*, eds. D. Pozzi and J. Wickersham (Ithaca, 1991), 121-4, sees Ajax as symbolic of Athens as savior of Greece but also as her oppressor. Bradshaw does not discuss Teucer's speech.

> had for its accusers, that they brought it from there in fear of the Persians and were keeping the common wealth in a safe place — this Pericles has destroyed, and Hellas thinks it is a victim of terrible hybris and is obviously governed by a tyrant, seeing us, with the money they are required to contribute for war, covering the city with gold and making her up like a woman on display, fitting her out with expensive gems and statues and temples costing thousands of talents'. Pericles then explained to the people that they did not owe a financial account to the allies, since they fought for them and kept the Persians away, when the allies did not pay a horse, a ship, a hoplite, but only money, which does not belong to those who give it, but to those who receive, as long as they provide the services for which they receive it. (*Pericles* 12)

Since the Parthenon was begun in 447 and the Treasurers of Athena made payments for the statue, this debate must have taken place not too long before — that is, in very much the period already suggested for the play.[24]

I would suggest that the drama opens itself to all these interpretations and that all were possible for the original audience. The political message is ambiguous because the political situation was not simple. Neither Thucydides son of Melesias nor Cimon opposed the naval empire. Indeed, Plutarch represents Cimon as its creator, seducing the allies into giving up their liberty:

> When the allies began paying tribute — not providing men and ships as they were ordered, but rather refusing to take part in campaigns, not wanting to make war at all, but desiring to farm and live peacefully (since the Persians were gone and causing no trouble), they did not man their ships or send men out — the other generals compelled them to do all this and made the empire burdensome and painful by accusing and punishing those who did not meet their obligations. Cimon took the opposite path when he campaigned. He did not force any of the Greeks, but took money and unmanned ships from those who were unwilling to campaign. He allowed them to be ensnared by leisure and take care of their private affairs, becoming farmers and businessmen instead of warriors under the influence of luxury and thoughtlessness, while he had many of the Athenians, group by group, embark and labor on campaign. In a little while, with the pay and money of the allies, he made them masters of those who gave to them. For as the allies became accustomed to fear and flatter the Athenians, who were continually at sea and always had their weapons in their hands and were supported and getting practice thanks to their own unwillingness to fight, they went from being allies to being subordinates and slaves without realizing it. (*Cimon* 11)

The biographical facts indicate that Sophocles was a patriotic Athenian, and he could hardly have served as Hellenotamias and general in the Samian War if he strongly objected to the Empire itself. Nothing in *Ajax* implies a profound criticism of Athens. The Spartan is utterly nasty, while the Salaminian sailors, while not heroic, are faithful and admirable. Nothing in Sophocles' life, however, suggests that he could not have been concerned that Athenian leadership was becoming oppressive, as Spartan leadership had been after the Persian Wars (at least in the foundation mythology of the Athenian Empire). By emphasizing the importance of fair treatment of one's allies, the play invites its spectators to worry that Athens could become like its enemies.[25]

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24 See R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford, 1973), 132-3.

25 Sophocles on this reading thus resembles one interpretation of Herodotus (for example, C. Fornara, *Herodotus: an Interpretive Essay* (Oxford, 1971), or D. Rosenbloom's reading of

The conclusion, however, largely moves away from the political themes of Teucer's conflict with the Atreidae. Odysseus' arguments to Agamemnon rest on familiar Greek ethics: justice towards the dead and the gods, recognizing the merit even of an enemy, listening to the wise advice of friends. This style of argument follows naturally from the moral of human weakness Odysseus drew from Ajax' situation at 121-126; Odysseus here evokes the entire tradition of traditional Greek thought about human limits. It also stands in sharp contrast with the chorus' description of the Odysseus who spreads rumor to the crowd in the parodos (148-153) and Ajax' imaginings of Odysseus at 379-391. There, the emphasis on Odysseus' cunning speech invites the spectator to assimilate this Odysseus to a contemporary politician. Here, however, Odysseus' speech is direct and public, and opposes precisely the envy with which the chorus was so concerned.

Agamemnon continues to think politically. When Agamemnon insists that it is not easy for a king to be pious, he clearly returns to the model of army-as-(undemocratic)-polis. He is assimilated to a stereotypical monarch, and the issue is not his authority, but how he uses it. Odysseus does not dispute Agamemnon's rightful power, but answers that even a king can easily honor a friend who speaks rightly; Agamemnon then echoes Menelaus' argument to Teucer by claiming that Odysseus should obey him. Odysseus, however, refers again to his friendship (1353). Again, Agamemnon shows his worry at appearing weak. Presumably the threat is double: Agamemnon would be allowing the burial of a man who had tried to kill him, and would be retracting an earlier decision. Odysseus does not dispute about whether Agamemnon should be concerned with appearances, but insists that he will seem, not cowardly, but just in the eyes of all Greeks. Throughout, Odysseus uses arguments that could apply both within and across the borders of a single polis, in a democracy, oligarchy, or tyranny. The play thus subordinates its political themes to more general ethical concerns. However the audience interprets the political resonances, Odysseus represents not a political system or policy, but a morality applicable to any.

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the internal tensions of the *Oresteia* in 'Myth, History, and Hegemony in Aeschylus', in *History, Tragedy, Theory* (above, note 11), 91-130.