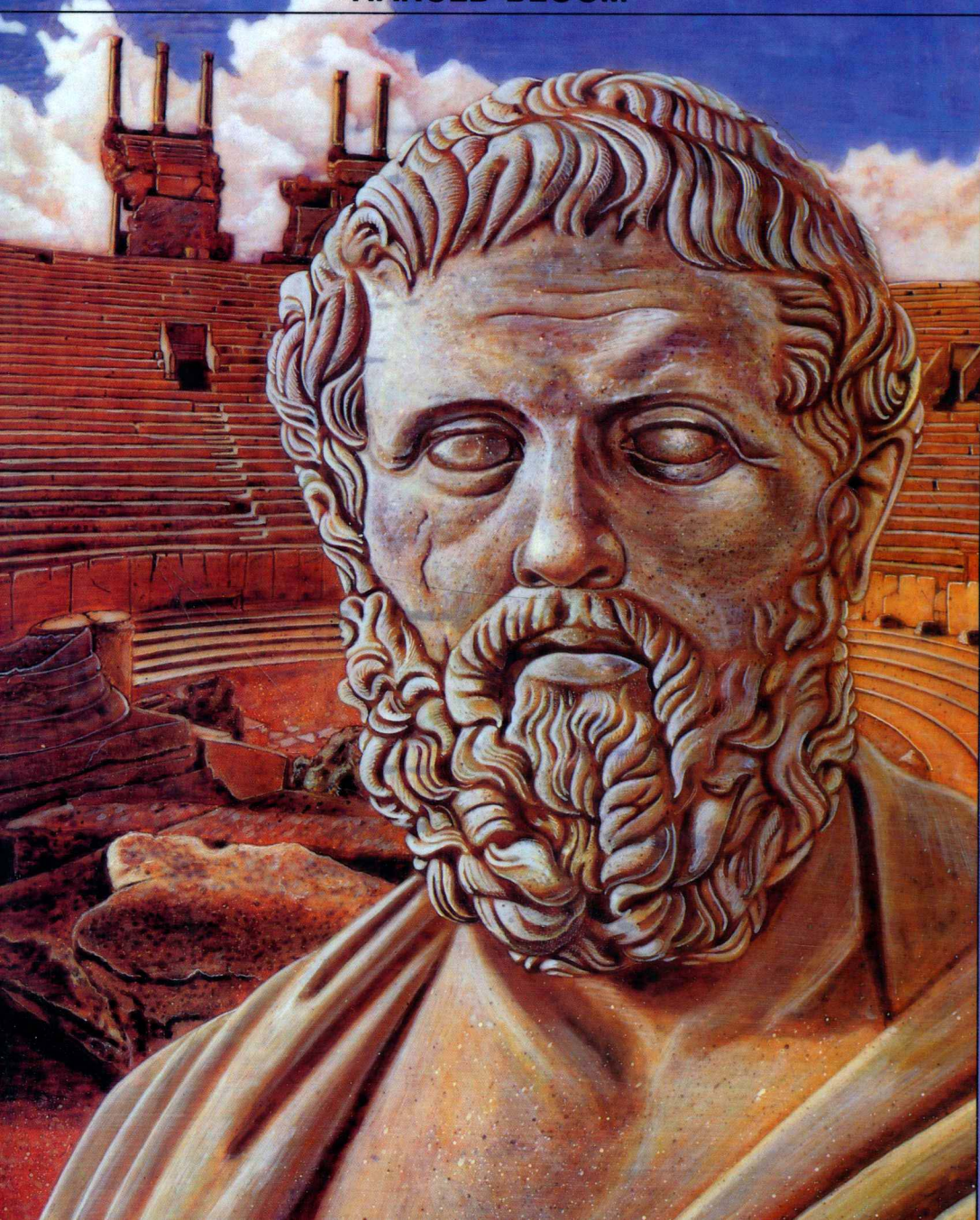


Modern Critical Views

SOPHOCLES

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



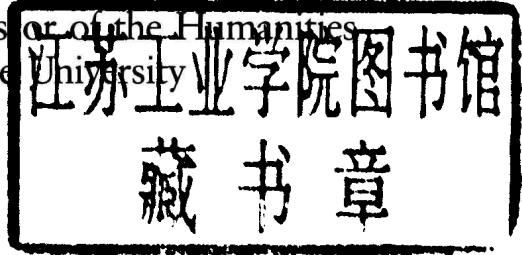
Modern Critical Views

SOPHOCLES

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities
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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical views of Sophocles. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Douglas Smith for his erudite assistance in editing this volume. My introduction centers upon *Oedipus the King*, and suggests that the drama's dialectical complaint against Apollo is also an ambivalent vision of the value of truth. Bernard M. W. Knox begins the chronological sequence of criticism by reading the *Ajax* as its protagonist's fulfillment, against time, of the old heroic code in which you die undaunted, forever defying your enemies: for Ajax, Odysseus in particular.

Sophocles' *Electra* is contrasted by John Jones to the *Oresteia* trilogy of Aeschylus, after which A. S. McDevitt centers upon the ode in praise of Athens that is one of the splendors of the *Oedipus Coloneus*. The *Trachiniae* is analyzed by Marsh McCall as another instance of the force achieved by the self-concentration of the Sophoclean hero, exemplified here by the harsh and furious Heracles.

Oedipus at Colonus returns in the study by Peter Burian, who emphasizes the hero's twin roles of suppliant and savior. *Ajax* is again the subject in W. B. Stanford's exegesis of the imagery of light and darkness in the play. The related image of blindness is explored throughout Sophocles by R. G. A. Buxton. R. P. Winnington-Ingram attempts to reconcile the notions of free will and determinism in reference to Sophocles' major tragic heroes.

Meredith Clarke Hoppin provides a comparative study of the Philoctetes myth in Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides. The *Antigone* is read by Charles Segal as a dialectic of "death and love, Hades and Dionysus," after which John Gould concludes this volume with an analysis of the language of the *Oedipus Rex*.

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Introduction

Whether there is a “tragic flaw,” a *hamartia*, in King Oedipus is uncertain, though I doubt it, as he is hardly a figure who shoots wide of the mark. Accuracy is implicit in his nature. We can be certain that he is free of that masterpiece of ambivalence—Freud’s Oedipal complex. In the Age of Freud, we are unsure what to do with a guiltless Oedipus, but that does appear to be the condition of Sophocles’ hero. We cannot read *Oedipus the King* as we read the *Iliad* of Homer, where the gods matter enormously. And even more, we know it is absurd to read *Oedipus* as though it were written by the Yahwist, or the authors of Jeremiah or of Job, let alone of the Gospels. We can complete our obstacle course by warning ourselves not to compound *Oedipus* with *Hamlet* or *Lear*. Homer and the Bible, Shakespeare and Freud, teach us only how not to read Sophocles.

When I was younger, I was persuaded by Cedric Whitman’s eloquent book on Sophocles to read *Oedipus* as a tragedy of “heroic humanism.” I am not so persuaded now, not because I am less attracted by a humanistic heroism, but because I am uncertain how such a stance allows for tragedy. William Blake’s humanism was more than heroic, being apocalyptic, but it too would not authorize tragedy. However the meaning of *Oedipus* is to be interpreted in our post-Nietzschean age, the play is surely tragedy, or the genre will lose coherence. E. R. Dodds, perhaps assimilating Sophocles to the *Iliad*, supposed that the tragedy of Oedipus honored the gods, without judging them to be benign or even just. Bernard Knox argues that the greatness of the gods and the greatness of Oedipus are irreconcilable, with tragedy the result of that schism. That reduces to the Hegelian view of tragedy as an agon between right and right, but Knox gives the preference to Oedipus, since the gods, being ever victorious, cannot be heroic. A less Homeric read-

ing than Dodds's, this seems to me too much our sense of heroism—Malraux perhaps, rather than Sophocles.

Freud charmingly attributed to Sophocles, as a precursor of psychoanalysis, the ability to have made possible a self-analysis for the playgoer. But then Freud called *Oedipus* an "immoral play," since the gods ordained incest and patricide. Oedipus therefore participates in our universal unconscious sense of guilt, but so do the gods. I sometimes wish that Freud had turned to Aeschylus instead, and given us the Prometheus complex rather than the Oedipus complex. Plato is Oedipal in regard to Homer, but Sophocles is not. I hardly think that Sophocles would have chastised Homer for impiety, but then, as I read it, the tragedy of Oedipus takes up a more skeptical stance than that of Plato, unless one interprets Plato as Montaigne wished to interpret him.

What does any discerning reader remember most vividly about *Oedipus the King*? Almost certainly, the answer must be the scene of the king's self-blinding, as narrated by the second messenger, here in David Grene's version:

By her own hand. The worst of what was done
you cannot know. You did not see the sight.
Yet in so far as I remember it
you'll hear the end of our unlucky queen.
When she came raging into the house she went
straight to her marriage bed, tearing her hair
with both her hands, and crying upon Laius
long dead—Do you remember, Laius,
that night long past which bred a child for us
to send you to your death and leave
a mother making children with her son?
And then she groaned and cursed the bed in which
she brought forth husband by her husband, children
by her own child, an infamous double bond.
How after that she died I do not know,—
for Oedipus distracted us from seeing.
He burst upon us shouting and we looked
to him as he paced frantically around,
begging us always: Give me a sword, I say,
to find this wife no wife, this mother's womb,
this field of double sowing whence I sprang
and where I sowed my children! As he raved
some god showed him the way—none of us there.

Bellowing terribly and led by some
 invisible guide he rushed on the two doors,—
 wrenching the hollow bolts out of their sockets,
 he charged inside. There, there, we saw his wife
 hanging, the twisted rope around her neck.
 When he saw her, he cried out fearfully
 and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay,
 poor woman, on the ground, what happened after,
 was terrible to see. He tore the brooches—
 the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—
 away from her and lifting them up high
 dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out
 such things as: they will never see the crime
 I have committed or had done upon me!
 Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on
 forbidden faces, do not recognize
 those whom you long for—with such imprecations
 he struck his eyes again and yet again
 with the brooches. And the bleeding eyeballs gushed
 and stained his beard—no sluggish oozing drops
 but a black rain and bloody hail poured down.
 So it has broken—and not on one head
 but troubles mixed for husband and for wife.
 The fortune of the days gone by was true
 good fortune—but today groans and destruction
 and death and shame—of all ills can be named
 not one is missing.

(ll. 1237–86)

The scene, too terrible for acting out, seems also too dreadful for representation in language. Oedipus, desiring to put a sword in the womb of Jocasta, is led by “some god” to where he can break through the two doors (I shudder as I remember Walt Whitman’s beautiful trope for watching a woman in childbirth, “I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors”). Fortunately finding Jocasta self-slain, lest he add the crime of matricide to patricide and incest, Oedipus, repeatedly stabbing his eyes with Jocasta’s brooches, passes judgment not so much upon seeing as upon the seen, and so upon the light by which we see. I interpret this as his protest against Apollo, who brings both the light and the plague. The Freudian trope of

blinding for castration seems to me less relevant here than the outcry against the god.

To protest Apollo is necessarily dialectical, since the pride and agility of the intellect of Oedipus, remorselessly searching out the truth, in some sense is also Apollo's. That must mean that the complaint is also against the nature of truth. In this vision of reality, you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you mad. What would make Oedipus free? Nothing that happens in this play, must be the answer, nor does it seem that becoming an oracular god later on makes you free either. If you cannot be free of the gods, then you cannot be made free, and even acting as though your daemon is your destiny will not help you.

The startling ignorance of Oedipus when the drama begins is the *given* of the play, and cannot be questioned or disallowed. Voltaire was scathing upon this, but the ignorance of the wise and the learned remains an ancient truth of psychology, and torments us every day. I surmise that this is the true force of Freud's Oedipus complex: not the unconscious sense of guilt, but the necessity of ignorance, lest the reality-principle destroy us. Nietzsche, rather than Freud, is the truest guide to *Oedipus the King*. We possess the highest art, the drama of Sophocles and of Shakespeare, lest we perish of the truth. That is not a Sophoclean irony, since Nietzsche said it not in praise of art, but so as to indicate the essential limitation of art. Sophoclean irony is more eloquent yet:

CREON: Do not seek to be master in everything,
for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your
life.

(*As Creon and Oedipus go out.*)

CHORUS: You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this
Oedipus,—
him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most
masterful;
not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot—
see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!
Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till
he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.
(ll. 1521–30)

BERNARD M. W. KNOX

The Ajax of Sophocles

The key to an understanding of this harsh and beautiful play is the great speech in which Ajax debates his course of action and explores the nature of man's life on earth (ll. 646–92). These lines are 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. They are the point from which this discussion starts and to which it will return, for in the play all the poetic and thematic threads which make up the stark pattern of the *Ajax* start from and run back to this speech. These magnificent, enigmatic lines, alternately serene and passionate, and placed almost dead center in the action, offer us the only moment of repose and reflection in a play which begins in monstrous violence and hatred and maintains that atmosphere almost unbroken to the end.

It is a puzzling play. Ever since scholars started to work on it, it has been criticized as faulty in structure, and the schoolmasterish remarks of the ancient scholiast on this point have often been echoed, though in more elegant and conciliatory terms, in the writings of modern critics. Apart from the structural problem, it is only too easy for the modern critic and reader to find the characters repellent: to see in Athena a fiendish divinity, in Ajax a brutalized warrior, in the Atreidae and Teucer undignified wranglers, and in Odysseus a cold self-seeker.

From *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater*. © 1979 by The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London. Originally published in *Classical Philology* 65 (1961).

In recent years, a host of new and more sympathetic critics have tried to rehabilitate the play; most influential among them is H. D. F. Kitto, who, working on the unassailable basis that Sophocles knew more about dramaturgy than both Schlegels and Tycho von Wilamowitz rolled into one, assumes that the play is a dramatic success and then attempts to explain why. In his best-known book (though he has modified the position considerably in his latest work on the subject), he found the solution of the difficulty in the importance of Odysseus, which he called the “keystone” of the play. Kitto’s chapter on the *Ajax* is so well written (and so welcome a relief after the self-satisfied strictures of nineteenth-century critics) that it is at first reading overwhelmingly persuasive, but when the reader changes books and gets back to Sophocles, his difficulties return. For Ajax, dead and alive, imposes his gigantic personality on every turn of the action, every speech. When he is not speaking himself, he is being talked about; there is only one subject discussed in this play, whether the speaker is Ajax, Athena, Odysseus, Tecmessa, the messenger, Teucer, Menelaus, or Agamemnon—and that subject is Ajax. Ajax is on stage in every scene, first alive, then dead. The rest of the characters follow him wherever he goes; Odysseus tracks him to his tent, and later Tecmessa and the chorus follow his tracks to the lonely place on the shore where he has killed himself. The hero’s death, which normally in Attic tragedy is described by a messenger who accompanies the body onstage, takes place before our eyes in the *Ajax*, and to make this possible Sophocles has recourse to the rare and difficult expedient of changing the scene; when Ajax moves, the whole play follows after him. Further, as Kitto indeed points out, the poetry of the play (and it contains some of Sophocles’ most magnificent lines) is all assigned to Ajax. Brutal and limited he may be, but there can be no doubt that Sophocles saw him as heroic. The lamentations of Tecmessa, Teucer, and the chorus express our own sense of a great loss. The tone of the speeches made over his body in the second half of the play emphasizes the fact that the world is a smaller, meaner place because of his death. The last half of the play shows us a world emptied of greatness; all that was great in the world lies there dead, impaled on that gigantic sword, while smaller men, with motives both good and bad, dispute over its burial. The unheroic tone of the end of the play (with its threats and boasts and personal insults) has often been criticized as an artistic failure; surely it is deliberate. Nothing else would make us feel what has happened. A heroic age has passed away, to be succeeded by one in which action is replaced by argument, stubbornness by compromise, defiance by acceptance. The heroic self-assertion of an Achilles, an Ajax, will never be seen again; the best this new world has to offer is the humane and compromising temper

of Odysseus, the worst the ruthless and cynical cruelty of the Atridae. But nothing like the greatness of the man who lies there dead.

The poetry of the play is in the speeches of Ajax, and there is one speech of Ajax which is Sophoclean poetry at its greatest: ἅπανθ' ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος. "All things long uncounted time brings forth from obscurity and buries once they have appeared." The opening lines of the speech raise the problem which the play as a whole explores: the existence of man in time and the changes which time brings. It is significant that the *Ajax*, contrary to Sophoclean practice as we know it from the extant plays, brings an Olympian god on stage, for the difference between men and gods is most sharply defined in their relationship to time—mortality and immortality are conditions of subjection to and independence of time.

This difference between man and the gods, the transitory and the permanent, is a theme which Sophocles returns to in his last play, where Oedipus, at Colonus, spells out for Theseus what the difference is. "Dearest son of Aegeus, only for the gods is there no old age or death. Everything else is confounded by all-powerful time." He goes on to describe the changes which time brings to all things human in terms strikingly reminiscent of lines written many years before, in the *Ajax*. The theme of man, the gods, and time is from first to last one of the main concerns of Sophoclean tragedy.

In the *Ajax*, this theme is developed through the exploration of one particular aspect of human activity, the working of an ethical code. This code was already a very old one in the fifth century B.C., and although more appropriate to the conditions of a heroic society, it was still recognized in democratic Athens as a valid guide to conduct. Τοὺς μὲν φίλους εὖ ποιεῖν, τοὺς δ' ἐχθροὺς κακῶς—to help your friends and harm your enemies: a simple, practical, natural rule. From the point of view of a Christian society it is a crude and cynical rule, but for all that, it is often followed. But whereas we today pay at least lip service to a higher ideal of conduct, the fifth-century Athenian accepted this simple code as a valid morality. It was a very old rule (a strong point in its favor for a people in whose language the word νέος, "new," had a "collateral notion of *unexpected, strange, untoward, evil*"); it seemed like sound common sense; and it had the authority of the poets, who were, for fifth-century Athens, the recognized formulators of ethical principles, the acknowledged legislators.

Plato's Socrates, who begins the great argument of the *Republic* by rejecting this formula as a definition of justice, denies that the poets could have said any such thing. "We shall fight them, you and I together," he says to Polemarchus, "—anyone who says that Simonides or Bias or Pittacus or any other of the wise and blessed men said it. . . . Do you know whose saying

I think this is, that justice consists of helping your friends and harming your enemies? I think it is a saying of Periander, or Perdiccas, or Xerxes or Ismenias the Theban or some other such man."

Plato, of course, when he tries to make this saying the exclusive property of a bloodthirsty Corinthian tyrant, a Macedonian barbarian, a Persian despot, or a Theban intriguer, is writing with his tongue in his cheek. For the maxim, "Help your friends, harm your enemies" stares out at us from the pages of the poets. It is to be found in Archilochus, in Solon, in Theognis, in Pindar, and was attributed to Simonides. It continued to be a rule of conduct universally accepted and admired in spite of Plato's rejection of it, and something very like it is rejected by Christ in the first century A.D.: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies."

This is of course *our* ideal of conduct, the ideal to which, in our better moments most of us try to rise. Even if, regrettably, we continue to live by the old rule, we have the vision of a higher ideal. But this was not the case in the Athens of Sophocles. The simple formula, "Help your friends, harm your enemies," was generally accepted, not just as hard-headed practical advice, but as a moral principle, a definition of justice, a formulation of the *arete*, the specific excellence, of man.

The *Ajax* of Sophocles examines the working of this code. It is a theme which springs naturally from the figure of Ajax as Sophocles found it already formed in saga and drama, the figure of a man of fierce impulse and action, whose hate for his enemies led him to attempt a monstrous act of violence and, when it failed, to kill himself.

Sophocles' treatment of this theme, however, reveals an attitude which differs from that of Christ and of Plato. It is thoroughly Sophoclean and fifth century; that is to say, it is at once intellectual and practical, and at the same time ironic and tragic. Christ's rejection of the way of the world (and the interpretation of the Mosaic law which was used to support it) is justified by a summons to a higher morality: "Love thine enemy. If ye love them which love you, what reward have ye?" Plato's rejection of the ancient maxim is based on its inadequacy as a definition of justice: the enemy you harm may be a just man, and in any case, even if he is unjust, harming him will only make him more so. But the Sophoclean presentation of the old code in action makes the comparatively simple point that it is unworkable. The objective may be good, but in the world in which we live, it is unattainable. The old morality is exposed as a failure in practice.

Τοὺς μὲν φίλους εὖ ποιεῖν, to do good to your friends—no one objects to that (though Christ rejects it as not enough); it is the other half of the

commandment, *τοὺς ἐχθροὺς κακῶς*, that raises problems. "To harm your enemies": this accepts and justifies hatred. The *Ajax* is full of hatred and enmity. The hatred of Ajax for Odysseus was proverbial; it is immortalized in one of the greatest passages of the *Odyssey*, and in Sophocles' play it is given full expression, together with his hatred for the Atridae, their hatred for him, and the hatred between them and Teucer. No other play of Sophocles contains so many bitter speeches; Ajax dies cursing his enemies (and his curses are repeated by Teucer at the end of the play), and after his death the venomous disputes between the Atridae and Teucer make the last half of the play a noisy, scurrilous quarrel to which only the last minute intervention of Odysseus restores some measure of dignity. The Greek words for enmity and hate (and there are many of them, with a great range of subtle distinctions) dominate the vocabulary of the play. "I see you," says Athena, addressing Odysseus, in the first lines of the play, "I see you always hunting for some occasion against your enemies." This prologue sets before us, with brilliant dramatic economy, three attitudes toward the traditional code, and, as is to be expected of the superb dramaturgy of Sophocles, they are not described but expressed in action.

The simplest attitude is that of Ajax, who has lived in this faith and is shortly to die in it. He represents the savagery of "harm your enemies" in an extreme form; he glories in the violence he is dispensing to the animals he takes for his enemies. He believes that he has killed the sons of Atreus, and is proud of it, he relishes in advance the pleasure he will feel in whipping Odysseus before killing him. When Athena urges him to spare the torture, he tells her sharply to go about her own business. He goes back to his butcher's work with evident gusto: *χωρῶ πρὸς ἔργον*—"back to work" (l. 116).

He is mad, of course, and the madness has been inflicted on him by Athena. But it consists only in his mistaking animals for men; the madness affects his vision more than his mind. All the verbs used by Athena make it clear that she is not producing the intention to murder the Achaean kings; she merely diverts, hinders, checks, limits, and encourages a force already in motion. The intent to torture and murder was present in Ajax sane; when he recovers from his delusions, his only regret is that his victims were sheep instead of men, his disgrace is that he failed in his murderous attempt. Ajax did not need to be driven mad to attempt to harm his enemies; once restored to sanity, he never for a moment doubts that his attempt was justified. We learn later from Tecmessa that he laughed loudly in the midst of his cruelties. This enjoyment of the shame and helplessness of his enemies is, of course, according to the old morality, his right and privilege. If it is right to harm

your enemies, there is no reason why you should not enjoy it. There is in fact every reason why you should.

There is a goddess on stage throughout this scene, and in her we are shown a divine attitude to the traditional morality. It is exactly the same, point for point, as that of Ajax. *Τοὺς ἐχθροὺς κακῶς*. Ajax is her enemy. As we learn later in the play, he has angered her by an insulting and contemptuous reply. She harms her enemy. She exposes him in his madness before his adversary Odysseus and lets him convict himself out of his own mouth. Athena mocks Ajax as he mocks *his* enemies, calling herself his "ally" and ironically accepting his insulting commands. She harms and mocks her enemy Ajax and helps her friend Odysseus, who in this scene emphasizes his devotion to her and is assured by the goddess of her continued favor. Athena is the traditional morality personified, in all its fierce simplicity.

The third figure on stage during the prologue, Odysseus, has come hunting his enemy. He is told by the goddess that Ajax intended to kill him, and then he hears Ajax insist on torturing the animal he takes to be Odysseus himself. Odysseus is given the mandate to inform the Achaeans of Ajax's criminal intentions, and so becomes the instrument of his enemy's fall. And he is invited by the goddess to rejoice in his enemy's disaster, to mock, to echo Ajax's laughter at the imagined sufferings of his enemies. Odysseus has every reason in the world to rejoice at the spectacle revealed to him by Athena, but he cannot do it. "I pity him," he says, "although he is my enemy." The authority of the ancient heroic code and the explicit invitation of the goddess both fail, overwhelmed by this sudden feeling of pity. Odysseus abandons the traditional morality at the moment of victory and exultation. He does so because he puts himself, in imagination, in his enemy's place, "considering not so much his case as my own," to use his own words. In the ruin of Ajax he sees, beyond the fall of a man who was and still is, his most dangerous enemy, a proof of the feeble and transitory condition of all men, himself included. "All of us who live are images, or weightless shadows." That the great Ajax has been reduced to this state of deluded impotence is no occasion for triumph for a fellow man, but rather a melancholy reminder of the instability and tragic frailty of all things human.

Of these three attitudes to the traditional morality, the most disturbing for the modern reader is that of the goddess. The audience in the theater of Dionysus had seen gods on stage before, but, as far as we can tell, they had seen nothing as vengeful and fierce as this Athena since Aeschylus put the Eumenides on stage; this Athena seems to derive from the same concept of divinity as that which later inspired the Aphrodite and Dionysus of Euripides. Her rigid adherence to the traditional code and the added refinement of

mockery of her victim seem all the more repellent by contrast with the enlightened attitude of Odysseus.

But we must remember that for Sophocles and his contemporaries, gods and men were not judged by the same standards. The Christian ideal, “be ye therefore perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect,” would have made little or no sense to a fifth-century Athenian, whose deepest religious conviction would have been most clearly expressed in opposite terms: “Do not act like a god.” Sophocles clearly admires the attitude of Odysseus, but we must not therefore assume that he criticizes the attitude of Athena. She is a goddess, and her conduct must be examined in a different light.

Her attitude is consistent. Odysseus, whom she helps and rewards, has always been her friend, and Ajax, whom she thwarts and mocks, is an enemy of fairly long standing. His insulting treatment of the goddess in the prologue is not an erratic phenomenon produced by his madness, for much earlier, in full control of his senses, he had insulted her in exactly the same way and in almost exactly the same words, as the messenger later tells us. By his “dreadful words which should never have been spoken” Ajax provoked the anger of Athena, which she satisfies in the mockery of the opening scene.

But her attitude is not only consistent, it is also just. Ajax deserves punishment not only because of his slaughter of the cattle (the common property of the Achaean army) and the men in charge of them (whom Ajax characteristically never even mentions), but also because the real objectives of his murderous onslaught were the sons of Atreus and Odysseus, the kings and commanders of the army. Athena in the prologue is a minister of justice. Her insistence, against the indignant and repeated protests of Odysseus, on exposing Ajax in his madness before his enemy is not merely vindictive: it is a necessary step in his condemnation. The proof of Ajax’s deeper guilt, his intention to murder the kings, must come from his own mouth before a witness. What Athena does is to prevent Ajax, by deluding his vision, from committing the great crime he had planned, and to reveal to Odysseus undeniable proof that the lesser crime he *has* committed would, but for her intervention, have been a slaughter of kings instead of animals. Surely this is the working of justice. The goddess thwarts and mocks her enemy, but it could also be said that she baffles and convicts a wrongdoer. The working of the fierce old code, in the action of the goddess, is the working of justice.

That she takes a merciless delight in his humiliation is, in terms of the accepted morality, natural and right; in theological terms it is at least logical. A strict conception of justice has no place for mercy, which might temper punishment and restrain exact retribution. That Athena, in addition to inflicting full punishment, also takes delight in the wrongdoer’s fall is, for our