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TO BEFRIEND OR NOT TO BEFRIEND?
A NOTE ON LINES 678-683 OF THE DECEPTION
SPEECH IN *AJAX*



The interpretation that is put forward in the present short note stems from the ascertainment that in Sophoclean *Ajax* one of the major thematic nuclei around which the tragedy is built is the question of how fragile and mutable the notion of ‘friend’ and ‘friendship’ (*philos* and *philia*) are.¹ These notions imply a network of stable human loyalties that are bound by ties of reciprocal favour and affection. In this tragedy the collapse of established human loyalties forms the backbone of the narrative, as is shown in the following sentences. *Ajax* opens with an attempted ‘harming friends’ coup² (the reversal of the well known maxim ‘helping friends and harming enemies’),³ when the protagonist sets out

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1. The word *philos* is much wider than what the English translation of the word implies. Friends in ancient Greece were first and foremost one’s family: immediate and extended family; secondly, one’s fellow-citizens. The third category approximates closely to modern conceptions of a personal friend; within this category fall political alliances and marital affiliations (Blundell (1989) 39-49; Belfiore (2000) 1-20; for restrictions on this view see Konstan (1996) 89, (1997) 53. Friendship is crucial to the social wellbeing of the persons involved. For the theme of friends and enemies as a connecting thread running through the entire play see Finglass (“*Ajax*” forthcoming in 2011, Brill, Leiden).
 2. In the course of the present paper it will be argued that the original friends of Ajax are his fellow comrades-in-arms and that the attack against them marks the breaking down of the notion of *philoï*. The same idea is put forward also elsewhere (Karakantza, *Classics@ 6*, 2010, see also *infra* n. 3), where the assimilation between Achilles and Ajax is suggested on the basis of this very reversal of human loyalties: Achilles, as Ajax, in his anger harms his friends (the Achaeans) and not his enemies (the Trojans).
 3. The classic study of this maxim in Sophocles is the book by Blundell (1989).

to kill his former *hetairoi*. The tragedy ends with a fierce debate over the ambiguity of the status of the dead Ajax; shall he be treated as a friend or as an enemy? Between the two, lies the exquisite and highly ambiguous statement of Ajax in his controversial deception speech again proclaiming a forceful reversal of the maxim (678-683):

ἐγὼ δ' ἐπίσταμαι γὰρ ἀρτίως ὅτι
 ὃ τ' ἐχθρὸς ἡμῖν ἐς τοσόνδ' ἐχθαρτέος,
 ὡς καὶ φιλήσων ἀῖθις, ἔς τε τὸν φίλον
 τοσαῦθ' ὑπορρῶν ὠφελεῖν βουλήσομαι,
 ὡς αἰὲν οὐ μενοῦντα· τοῖς πολλοῖσι γὰρ
 βροτῶν ἄπιστός ἐσθ' ἔταιρειάς λιμήν.⁴

(For I have lately learned that our enemy must be hated as one who will sometime become a friend, and in helping a friend I shall aim to assist him as one assists a man who will not remain a friend forever, since for most mortals the harbour of friendship cannot be trusted.)⁵

This statement of Ajax reinforces the bewilderment that the deception speech has provoked thus far among the scholars. I will not even attempt to summarize the debate on the matter,⁶ which is mainly

Interestingly, Herman (2006) 278 claims that the influence of the maxim “helping friends and harming enemies” upon Athenian behavior in classical times is negligible, something shown by the exercise of other qualities such as forgiveness, moderation and self-restraint. It is also evident in the forensic speeches of the fourth c. BCE that “lay claim to the principle of *not* harming enemies which is expected to be regarded as a virtue”. This, according to the author, marks a transition from the Homeric society to the Athenian classical city. However, we should bear in mind that in Attic tragedy the blurring between friends and enemies and the consequent reversal of the maxim entail a severe crisis, which is characteristic of this genre, as is argued elsewhere (Karakantza *ibid.*). At any rate, in Sophocles’ *Ajax* the debated maxim is restored when, at the end of the drama, Ajax is allowed burial, thus allotting him the treatment of a *philos*. See also Hesk (2003) 90–91 for relevant discussion on the matter.

4. Compare the very similar wording in Theognis: μήποτε τὸν κακὸν ἄνδρα φίλον ποιῆσθαι ἑταῖρον, / ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ φεύγειν ὥστε κακὸν λιμένα (Eleg. 1.113-114).
5. All translations of this Sophoclean tragedy are by Lloyd-Jones.
6. The deception speech is considered as “the single most controversial speech in this controversial author” (Crane [1990] 89), and “one of the greatest problems of Sophocles, and anything anyone says about it is bound to be controversial” (Taplin [1978] 128). For a summary of the problems of interpretation related to the deception

concerned about whether Ajax intended to deceive the internal audience or not. I will only state in broad-brush strokes two tendencies in the relevant scholarship. First, it has been contended that the deception speech is purposely deceitful throughout, aiming at the deception of Tecmessa and the Chorus,⁷ so that Ajax is left alone to commit suicide. Conversely, it has been argued that Ajax does not intend to deceive⁸ until verse 685 of the speech, a part which is often considered as a soliloquy.⁹ From this point onwards, a double-entendre passage (685-692) is introduced betraying, at this point, a change of mind.

My suggestion is that Ajax tried sincerely to come to terms with the mutability of human affairs which, in his speech, are seen as part of the general cycle of the constant change in nature; thus, he did not intend (nor care) to deceive. Let us follow his line of thought as it unfolds in the “deception speech”. According to the model of constant change, to which Ajax refers, the dread oath (*δεινὸς ὄρκος*, 649) and the unflinching mind (*περισκελεῖς φρένες*, 649) can be overcome (*ἀλίσκεται*, 648). Within this frame of thought, Ajax himself has been softened (*ἐθελώνθηρ στόμα*, 651), and, in consequence, his free, independent and hardened spirit will have to learn (*τὸ λοιπὸν εἰσόμμεσθα*, 666) to yield to the gods (*θεοῖς εἶκεν*, 666) and respect the Atreidae (*Ἀτρεΐδας σέβειν*, 667), since even the refractory things in nature yield to the necessity of recurrent change (as winter and night yield to summer and daylight) (670-673). Since this happens in humans and nature alike, *how would I not learn to sôphronein* (?) (*ἡμεῖς δὲ πῶς οὐ γνωσόμμεσθα σωφρονεῖν*; 677) Ajax wonders. This verse marks, to my mind, the turning point of his speech, since up to this moment he tries sincerely to see himself yielding to the

speech, as well as the various approaches put forward by scholars see Stanford (1963) *ad loc.* and Appendix D, and Garvie (1998) *ad loc.*; Winington-Ingram (1980) 46 n. 107, 47 n. 109; Blundell (1989) 83 n. 109; Crane (1990) 89 n. 1; Hesk (2003) 74-95; Lardinois (2006) 214 n. 3. See also Finglass *ad* 646-92 (Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries, forthcoming in 2011): “He (sc. Ajax) [...] deceives without actually lying, and conveys the impression that he will avoid suicide while never stating as much”.

7. Reinhardt (1979, 3rd ed. of the original 1947) 23, and many scholars thereafter: Sicherl (1977) 76 n. 35; Whitman (1951) 75; Segal (1981) 113; Blundell (1989) 83.
8. Knox (1979) 134-140; Heath (1987) 189; Hesk (a noble lie) (2003) 75.
9. Knox *ibid.*; Sicherl (1977) 92; Heath (1987) 188.

necessity of current events. To this question Ajax replies with verses 678-683 (quoted above) about the breaking down of human loyalties that implies the abrogation of the maxim ‘helping friends and harming enemies’. In order to learn how to *sôphronein*¹⁰ Ajax needs to renounce again his current state of loyalties, and to live in a world where the lines between friends and enemies are blurred and inter-changeable (682-683):

τοῖς πολλοῖσι γὰρ / βροτῶν ἄπιστός ἐσθ' ἔταιρειάς λιμήν.

since for most mortals, the harbour of friendship cannot be trusted.

Of course, this last verse, normally taken as referring to the Achaeans who betrayed Ajax, is also self referential. Ajax’s longtime friends (his fellow Achaeans) had become his enemies when they decided to allot the arms of Achilles to Odysseus;¹¹ and he, instead of *sôphronein* (show self-restraint, moderation, and discipline), treated them as enemies, despite their being his comrades in arms in the war against the Trojans, his *hetairoi*. Notwithstanding the injustice inflicted upon him, Ajax *could* have avoided crossing the line marking the boundary between friendship and enmity, if he had been moderate; but this was beyond him. So it was on these old friends that Ajax sought to wreak the most hideous revenge, described in bloody terms at the opening of the tragedy.

It is obvious that I do not refer to the notion of *philoï* in *Ajax* as Blundell in her book *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* does. In her book she considers as *philoï*, the persons who stand by Ajax at the moment of the crisis in his life and form the backdrop to the play, i.e. Tecmessa, the chorus, Teucer (82-83) and, in the second part of the tragedy, Odysseus. Even less so, do I align myself with the views of Belfiore, who in her book *Murder among Friends* interprets *Ajax* as the play that depicts the ultimate coup against one’s most intimate friend, i.e. your own self (113-116). When I refer to the collapse of the notion of Ajax’s *philoï* I do not mean the obvious group of his friends: his wife, son, brother and fellow-Salaminians, whom he considers as his friends

10. In tragedy, where a conflict occurs when the heroic individual encounters restrictions imposed by religion or the framework of polis, *sôphrosyne* takes up the sense of measure, and the reluctance to overstep boundaries (North [1966] 32).

11. Winnington-Ingram (1980) 53.

to the very end of his days; these loyalties are stable. On the contrary, and most importantly for the interpretation of the play, I refer to the group of his comrades-in-arms *that had been his friends until a day before* the opening of the tragedy. To my mind, it is very important to realise that the crisis in Ajax's life arises not when Ajax 'turns against his family'¹² and the Salaminians, because this tragedy is not about the relationship of Ajax with his wife or co-patriots. These relationships are here to intensify the overriding concern of the protagonist with his severed relationships with his former friends he sailed to Troy with. When these *hetairoi* see Ajax as an enemy, after the nocturnal attack against them, because Ajax treating them as enemies attempts to kill them, *then* the network of human loyalties, on which everybody depends, in time of war as in peace, collapses.

In the deception speech, I argue, Ajax assumes temporarily the intellectual and psychological position of someone who accepts the relativity and mutability of human loyalties. To my mind, Ajax 'rehearses' a speech which is 'politically correct' if he were indeed convinced to endorse the views of Tecmessa and the chorus. The fact that Ajax cannot endorse these ethics and become somebody else becomes clear when he pronounces this extraordinary reversal of the 'helping friends and harming enemies' maxim. When the audience (and the reader) come to this point of Ajax's speech, they know that this reversal cannot be taken at face value, because Ajax does not belong in such a world. He never renounced his attempted killing of the Achaeans, and consequently, he never thought of going back to restore his former loyalties, as the exhortation of Tecmessa and the chorus urged him to do.

Thus, I suggest that the deception speech should be read as follows. Ajax was urged to reconcile with his present enemies (his former friends), the Atreidai and Odysseus. He begins to deliberate sincerely on this possibility by pondering first on the changes of time, then on the necessity of obedience to political authorities, because even cosmic powers yield to the inevitable course of change; but when he tries to

12. If indeed he turns against his family (as Blundell puts it). His suicide does not aim at harming his family (in other words, he does not kill himself to harm them). The harm done comes as a byproduct of this action which is an inevitable course of action (in his mind and according to his *êthos*) after the deprivation of his *timê*.

apply this same mentality of mutability on himself, with the ‘harbor of the friendship’ speech, he cannot but recognize the unfeasibility of the enterprise. Ajax tried hard not to deceive the others, but to convince himself. In this sense, the deception speech is not a deception speech; it is a reflection on the ethical consequences implied in the question of the mutability of human loyalties.

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