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Staging the Impossible: Dramaturgical Challenges and Scenic Solutions in Sophocles' *Ajax*

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Abstract

Sophocles' *Ajax* constitutes an iconic work in the history of ancient drama, distinguished not only for its psychological dimension—as it depicts a major hero of the Trojan War emotionally and mentally devastated—but also for its unprecedented dramaturgical and technical innovations. Sophocles addressed these challenges in inspired ways, mobilizing the theatrical, architectural, and technical resources of his era. A study of this particular tragedy reveals that the playwright exploits, both scenically and dramaturgically, every element of fifth-century BCE theatrical convention, balancing a series of demands that required bold and original solutions. This article will attempt to analyze the play's three primary directorial challenges: the representation of an interior space via the *ekkyklema*, the change of scenic location mid-action—an unprecedented move for the period—and the even more audacious on-stage suicide of the hero.

Keywords: Ajax, Sophocles, ekkyklema, metastasis, epiparodos, suicide.

1. The Theatrical Structure in the Mid-Fifth Century BCE

In order to appreciate the unprecedented scenic undertaking of Sophocles for its time, it is first necessary to consider both the capabilities and the limitations of the Theatre of Dionysus in the mid-fifth century BCE. The dating of *Ajax* is itself problematic, since no surviving source records the exact year of its *didaskalia*. It is, however, generally regarded as the earliest extant tragedy of Sophocles, often placed chronologically close to *Antigone* in the mid-450s to 440s BCE¹, with the prevailing scholarly view maintaining that both plays were staged in the late 440s BCE². This decade coincided with the great “Periclean” building program, which transformed and developed the Theatre of Dionysus on the southern slope of the Acropolis, effectively shaping the dramaturgical developments of fifth-century BCE tragedy as well³. At the time when *Ajax* is presumed to have been performed, the theatrical structure was still in an early phase of construction. It consisted of the *orchestra*, the principal performance area of the chorus; the *theatron*, namely the spectators’ area furnished with wooden seating (*ikria*), probably arranged in a linear formation; and, increasingly central to dramatic performance, the *skēnē*, a wooden rectangular structure situated at the rear of the orchestra⁴. While up until 460 BCE the theater may not have possessed any scenic backdrop at all, two years later, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* appears to utilize the *skene*—a wooden, single-story, and perhaps non-permanent structure equipped with a single door. This development effectively separated the interior and exterior dramatic spaces, while its flat roof could readily serve as a performance area for the appearance of deities (*theologeion*), as the actors were able to ascend to it via a ladder propped against the rear of the building⁵. Coinciding almost entirely with the emergence and utilization of the *skene* in ancient theater, stage devices such as the *ekkyklema* likely made their appearance. The use of this device is directly linked to the existence of the *skene*, as its primary function and utility was to reveal to the audience events that had transpired within the interior space of the building represented by the stage. Thus, in accordance with the

¹ Finglass (2012) 59 · March (1991) 33 · Markantonatos (2012) 356.

² Munteanu (2012) 183 · Stanford (1963) 296.

³ Pickard-Cambridge (1946) 15, 266

⁴ Csapo (2007) 98 · Pickard-Cambridge (1946, 11-2), citing Aristoph. *Thesm.* l. 395, as well as other ancient sources, mentions the existence of “*ikria*”, the wooden seats intended for the spectators · Rehm (2002) 38 · Storey and Allan (2014) 10.

⁵ Dörpfeld and Reisch (1896) 32, 36 · Mikedaki (2005b, 189) states that the single door of the wooden *skene* was of sufficient width to allow for the passage of the *ekkyklema* · Paga (2016) 368 · Storey and Allan (2014) 28-9.

plot of each drama, it presented to the spectators the aftermath of violent indoor scenes which, by convention, were prohibited from being dramatized in full view of the audience⁶.

2. The Skene and the Mechanical Devices at Sophocles' Disposal

Although Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, maintains that *opsis* (spectacle) is not the proper concern of tragic poets, he nevertheless attributes the introduction of scenography to the innovations of Sophocles, while also praising the poet's ability—according to his own words—to confer *megethos* (grandeur) upon tragedy through his writing⁷. In antiquity, however, *skēnographia* referred specifically to the depiction of architectural elements in perspective, rather than to representational painting with realistic detail⁸. For *Ajax*, the scenic representation would have needed to depict the hero's tent, situated just outside the Achaean camp, presumably through painted panels affixed to the façade of the *skēnē*-building. Modern scholarship, however, tends to reject this view, arguing that the alteration or concealment of painted panels would have required several minutes, thereby disrupting the theatrical illusion⁹. It is far more likely that the spectators were oriented topographically through the poetic discourse of the character¹⁰, as well as through their prior knowledge of the myth that the poet was dramatizing. The identification of Ajax's tent could potentially have been achieved through the use of a mobile stage prop. His shield, which was highly distinctive and described in meticulous detail in the *Iliad*, could likely have functioned as such an object¹¹. Adopting the theory that stage props operate as markers delineating space and its symbolic meanings—and given the absence of evidence regarding the use of painted panels during the fifth century BCE¹²—one might hypothesize that Ajax's shield was positioned adjacent to the central door. In this manner, it would serve as a clear visual signifier, establishing the identity of the occupant of the tent¹³.

The presentation of the interior of the hero's tent posed yet another staging challenge for Sophocles, given that violent and atrocious acts in tragedy could not be performed in full view of the spectators; furthermore, the slaughter of the flock, resulting from Ajax's madness, has already been disclosed to the audience (ll. 219–21, 234–44, 296–300)¹⁴. In this instance, the *ekkyklema* provides the solution for the tragic poet. Tecmessa's declaration at line 346,

⁶ Hall (2010) 84 · Mikedaki (2005b) 188 · Papadopoulou (2020) 188.

⁷ Aristot. *Poet.* 1449a, 1450b.

⁸ Mikedaki (2005a, 125–6) and Small (2013, 111–3) both cite a passage by Polybius (incorporating the words of Timaeus), which draws a clear contrast between "real buildings" and those "depicted in scenography," the latter constituting a superficial and deceptive facade devoid of real substance · Rehm (2002) 18.

⁹ Finglass (2011) 13.

¹⁰ Chourmouziadis (1991) 51 · Marshall (2012) 197.

¹¹ Hom. *Il.* 6.219–223.

¹² Mikedaki (2015), 18–22.

¹³ Brockett and Hildy (2013) 34 · Pickard-Cambridge (1946) 123.

¹⁴ Cohen (1978) 28 · Garvie (1998) 153 · Stanford (1963) 100.

'ἰδοῦ, διοίγω' (behold, I open), makes it evident that she flings open the central door of the *skene*, whereupon the bloodstained interior setting is revealed aboard the *ekkyklema*, displaying the slaughtered animals surrounding the seated Ajax¹⁵. Earlier scholars do not endorse the use of the *ekkyklema* for exposing the interior of Ajax's tent, maintaining instead that opening the doors was sufficient for the audience to view the inner space of the *skene*¹⁶. Such a mechanism, however, would have been inadequate to render the aftermath of Ajax's frenzy visible; due to the architectural design of the theatre, the entirety of the interior would not be visible from certain vantage points of the *koilon*, even with the central door wide open¹⁷. Moreover, at l. 369, he dismisses Tecmessa from his presence, saying 'οὐκ ἔκτός;' (out of here!), a phrase that eloquently demonstrates that the scene is set in an interior space, whereas at the conclusion of the episode (ll. 579, 593), he respectively demands that the door be shut and that she departs¹⁸. It is evident that the employment of the *ekkyklema* would have been virtually imperative at this juncture of the tragedy; Sophocles essentially exposes the dishonour and despair of a great hero, whose subsequent desperate act of suicide could only be justified if he were displayed to the audience utterly devastated¹⁹.

In the modern era, stage directing can employ numerous technical means—even technology itself—to present interior scenes, concealed thoughts, or actions unfolding in another dimension. In ancient Greek theatre, however, the scenic resources at the poets' disposal were circumscribed and relied heavily on theatrical convention to convey, to the maximum extent possible, the sense of an enclosed space and the scenes taking place within it. In an open-air venue with a distinctly religious character, such as the ancient theatrical structure, theatrical conventions were indispensable for the dramatist to present an action inherently intended to unfold indoors. Voices and cries heard from within were capable of imparting the sensation of events occurring inside the *skene*, while simultaneously creating an immediate acoustic communication between the invisible interior and the visible exterior²⁰. Sophocles, in *Ajax*, employs these narrative methods, allowing the hero's words to be heard from inside his tent; subsequently, however, he makes exceptional use of the *ekkyklema* to present him within his scenic space (ll. 348–595). In doing so, the playwright resolves the objective difficulty of

¹⁵ Finglass (2011) 241 · Garland (2019) 79–80. Liapis (2015) 124–5 notes, in fact, that this constitutes a unique case in surviving tragic poetry, as a character on stage opens the central door of the building themselves; typically, the door is opened from within the *skene* by anonymous servants or stage assistants · Marshall (2012) 199 · Rehm (2002) 127 · Segal (1995) 24.

¹⁶ Dörpfeld and Reisch (1896) 183, 236, 245. Lesky (1987) 319 leaves open the possibility of using the *ekkyklema* in these specific lines · Pickard-Cambridge (1946) 109–10.

¹⁷ Blume (1989) 87 · Brockett and Hildy (2013) 35 · Garvie (1998) 157–8 · Gogos and Petrakou (2012) 108 · Mikedaki (2005b) 188–9 · Moretti (2019) 117.

¹⁸ Chourmouziadis (1991) 65 · Liapis (2015) 129 · Rehm (2002) 346, n. 49.

¹⁹ Taplin (1978) 108 characterizes this image as a 'gory nature morte' (bloody still life), which captures the magnitude of the hero's ruin with shocking and absolute immediacy.

²⁰ Di Benedetto and Medda (2022) 62.

rendering the aftermath of the hero's madness visible, thereby advancing the plot and fundamentally justifying a course of action that appears to be the only path forward for his devastated tragic hero.

3. The Shift of Dramatic Space – Metastasis

According to Pollux, the concept of *metastasis* (chorus departure) in ancient drama is an exceptionally rare theatrical convention, during which the chorus completely vacates the *orchestra*, leaving the scenic space empty during the performance; its subsequent reappearance on stage is termed *epiparodos* (chorus re-entrance)²¹. Although *metastasis* is not a frequent phenomenon in tragedy, it is encountered in other surviving tragedies as well, serving to resolve dramaturgical, narrative, or staging difficulties²².

In *Ajax*, Sophocles—aiming to vacate the stage and proceed to the pivotal episode of the hero's suicide—divides the chorus into two hemichoria upon Tecmessa's command immediately following Calchas' prophecy delivered by the messenger. He empties the scenic space at line 814 by utilizing both *parodoi* of the theatre, leaving the *orchestra* vacant²³. In this manner, the dramatic space is radically transformed; the stage ceases to represent Ajax's tent, transforming instead into a deserted location near the shore, a brushwood-covered area clearly implied at line 892, where the hero enters, followed by the chorus and Tecmessa after his suicide²⁴. The *epiparodos* (the re-entrance of the chorus into the scenic space) occurs as the two hemichoria enter the *orchestra* from different *parodoi*—one arriving from the west and the other returning from the east—having failed to locate Ajax²⁵. The audience is already prepared for this isolated setting by lines 657–9, in which Ajax, during his 'deception' monologue, declares his intention to go to a deserted place near the sea to bury his sword²⁶. The precise manner in which this deserted landscape was represented is yet another subject that has occupied scholarship, eliciting conflicting views and debates. Although the majority of scholars concur regarding the transformation of the dramatic and scenic space from line 815 onwards,

²¹ Poll. *Onom.* 4.108 · Di Benedetto and Medda (2022) 247–8 · Jebb (1896) 127, ad v. 813.

²² Esposito (2019) 119 · Lesky (1987) 310. Liapis (2013) 245–6 refers to the tragedies featuring *metastasis*, defining the reasons it is required: Aesch. *Eum.* 231 (change of scene from Delphi to Athens, 235ff.); Soph. *Aj.* 814 (Ajax's suicide must take place on an otherwise empty stage, 815ff.); Eur. *Hel.* 385 (Menelaus' entrance monologue in 386ff., in which he identifies himself, must not be heard by anyone else); Eur. *Alc.* 746 (the chorus would not have allowed the news of Alcestis' death to be broken to Heracles); Eur. *Rh.* 558 (the chorus need to wake up the next watch, 560ff., but in real life this should have been done by one or two watchmen only, not by the entire guard). See also Scullion (1994) 113–4 · Chourmouziadis (1991) 36.

²³ Blume (2004) 118 · Liapis (2015) 132.

²⁴ Mills (1980) 130 · Jebb (1896) 127, ad v. 813.

²⁵ Finglass (2011) 389–90.

²⁶ Dörpfeld and Reisch (1896) 287 · Esposito (2019) 119 · Finglass (2011) 12 · Gardiner (1979) 12 · Martinelli (2015) 211 · Scullion (1994) 116.

research proposes distinct methods through which this transition was achieved. The installation of a simple screen or a painted canvas, placed parallel to the central door of the *skene* and depicting a grove, has been supported by a segment of scholarship; they argue that it sufficed to function as a dramatic marker for the change of scene and would be sufficiently useful to conceal Ajax's corpse²⁷. According to others, the *epiparodos* of the chorus's hemichoria and their subsequent convergence in the *orchestra* were enough to signal the change of space, as their encounter demonstrates that the action is unfolding in a location distinct from Ajax's hut²⁸. Another alternative approach posits that while the dramatic space shifts, the scenic space does not change entirely; rather, the action is simply transferred from the centre of the stage—where Ajax's tent stood—to the periphery of the scenic area, where stage properties representing a brushwood-covered grove had been positioned from the very outset²⁹. According to others, the *skene* structure could seamlessly represent a forest or a deserted location without any additional scenery, relying solely on the power of the text, which was capable of guiding the audience's imagination; the only technical device employed was the swift and complete evacuation of the stage³⁰. Fundamentally, Sophocles did not need to introduce any movable stage property, painted panel, or screen; instead, the desolate landscape was fashioned by the tragic hero's own words, projecting the personal isolation he experiences through his speech and defining the vacant *orchestra* as the utterly solitary setting of his magnificent exit³¹.

Furthermore, the temporary departure of the chorus (*metastasis*) at this particular juncture, serves a dual dramaturgical purpose. Sophocles exploits this convention to realistically justify Ajax's relocation to a deserted setting to end his life, while simultaneously lifting the constraint of having witnesses present. Consequently, his final speech (ll. 815–65) assumes the form of an entirely solitary interior monologue—a phenomenon exceptionally unusual by the standards of ancient theatre, where the continuous presence of the Chorus was the norm³². Therefore, this is not merely a technical detail but a substantial dramaturgical element that imparts gravity to the impending act, unequivocally signifying both the desolation of the landscape and the hero's psychological state. The *metastasis* of the chorus aims not only

²⁷ Ferrari (2015) 113 · Gardiner (1979) 12 · Garvie (1998) 203 · Pickard-Cambridge (1946) 49 · Stanford (1963) 165.

²⁸ Liapis (2015) 132, 134.

²⁹ Blume (2004) 118 · Heath and Okell (2007) 372 · Scullion (1994) 93.

³⁰ Arnott (1989) 26, 140, 144 · Hall (2010) 87 · Storey and Allan (2014) 41 · Taplin (1978) 16, 41-2.

³¹ Garrison (1995) 47, 49, 51 · Musurillo (1967) 21 · Segal (1999) 115. Stanford (1963) 172 emphasizes that these invocations of the natural landscape not only delineate the setting but simultaneously express the hero's absolute solitude, demonstrating his need to commune with the divine forces residing in nature, since he has been completely severed from human society. Also Chourmouziadis (1991) 22–5, notes that the mere mention of a name, even without additional locational markers, sufficed to function as an "invisible scenography" for the fifth-century BCE spectator, as such settings were already familiar from lyric, epic, and dramatic poetry predominantly as mythical sites of action.

³² Burian (1997) 199 employs the term 'soliloquy', which precisely captures Ajax's 'solitary monologue' shortly before his suicide.

to vacate the stage for a shift in dramatic space, but also to expose the psyche of a hero who has been severed from his broader social environment and feels utterly isolated. Ultimately, Sophocles employs this device for both staging and dramaturgical reasons, structurally framing and, in a sense, necessitating the horrific and stark act of suicide.

4. The Sophoclean Transcendence of Theatrical Conventions

Among the most obscure aspects of *Ajax* is the staging of the hero's suicide. Even today, it remains an enigmatic element in scholarship, with numerous theories put forward regarding the representation of this act of self-destruction before the fifth-century BCE Athenian audience. The difficulty stems from the conflict between two fundamental and stringent theatrical constraints governing the scenic mechanics of ancient Greek theatre. On the one hand, there is the traditional convention that avoided the depiction of bloodshed on stage; on the other hand, the strict 'three-actor rule' necessitated that the actor portraying Ajax slip away silently, only to reappear later in the role of Teucer, thereby leaving a dummy in place of the corpse³³.

At this juncture, owing to the complexity of reconstructing the suicide scene, an attempt will be made to present the scholars' theories chronologically by means of a timeline; this aims to demonstrate how research evolved, ultimately deriving staging cues from Sophocles' poetic text itself. Earlier commentators resolved the problem by proposing the deployment of the *ekkyklema* in this scene as well, arguing that a screen with painted bushes was mounted upon the platform, behind which Ajax fell upon his sword and subsequently escaped backstage³⁴. Modern scholarship has challenged these theories, relying primarily on the fact that the *ekkyklema* was utilized to reveal interior spaces—such as the interior of palaces or residences—and it would be incongruous for it to represent forests or deserted shores, especially in the absence of a line foreshadowing the opening of the *skene's* central door³⁵. Another segment of scholarship has proposed the presence of natural or artificial bushes on stage, where the actor would have the opportunity to conceal himself by falling behind them; alternatively, it has been argued that these bushes were situated at the periphery of the stage, allowing the actor to

³³ Blume (2004) 118 · Fletcher (2013) 214, n. 44 · Garland (2019) 83 · Liapis (2015) 145 · Marshall (2012) 189 · Mills (1980) 129 · Most (2015) 8.

³⁴ Ferrari (2015) 112–3, Finglass (2011) 378, and Mills (1981) 129 refer to earlier studies, such as those by Lobeck (1866), Bethe (1896), Reinhardt (1947), and Webster (1956/1970), which argued that the *ekkyklema* was indispensable for the suicide scene.

³⁵ Finglass (2011) 379 · Lesky (1987) 319 · Scullion (1994) 108. Stanford (1963) 174, citing the scholar P. Arnott, underscores that there is no equivalent paradigm in ancient tragedy where the *ekkyklema* is employed to conceal a character from the audience's sight. Taplin (1977) 443 provides characteristic examples from other tragedies (Soph. *Aj.* 344; Soph. *El.* 1458ff.; Eur. *Hipp.* 808; Eur. *Herc.* 1028), reinforcing his argument regarding the presence of lines that essentially announce the deployment of the *ekkyklema*.

withdraw there in order to proceed with the suicide unseen by the audience³⁶. The refutation of the argument regarding the existence of bushes was based on the pronounced amphitheatrical slope of the Theatre of Dionysus, which would allegedly shatter the theatrical illusion; spectators seated in the higher or lateral tiers could easily observe the actor moving backstage after the suicide and replacing himself with a stage dummy³⁷. However, such a hypothesis may not hold weight, given that during the mid-fifth century BCE, the *cavea* (koilon) of the Theatre of Dionysus is conjectured to have been rectilinear, maintaining a frontal alignment with the *orchestra* and the *skene*. Consequently, in the event that bushes were utilized, the actor could have been sufficiently concealed from the audience's sight³⁸.

In stark contrast to all these theories, alternative views have posited that the central door of the *skene* structure could have served a useful purpose, enabling Ajax to proceed with his suicide while simultaneously facilitating the replacement of the actor with a stage dummy. Concurrently, this theatrical device avoided violating the convention against on-stage violence by transferring the horrific act of self-destruction to the interior of the *skene*. According to this hypothesis, the actor, having secured the sword inside the stage structure in a position visible to the audience, stands at the threshold of the central door to deliver his monologue; he then throws himself upon the blade, with the doors closing abruptly during his fall to conceal him and leave the act of suicide unseen—or, even more simply, he walks into the *skene* and the doors close behind him³⁹. These arguments have faced strong refutation and substantial counterarguments for two fundamental reasons: first, the hero's departure behind closed doors would neutralize the dramatic tension, resulting in an anti-climactic outcome; second, since the setting represented a deserted forest, opening and closing doors would be entirely incompatible with a landscape deemed isolated, thereby shattering the scenic illusion⁴⁰.

Since the 1980s, scholarship has shifted its focus towards textual stagecraft, placing emphasis on Sophocles' poetic work itself; by scrutinizing the verses, researchers have sought implicit staging directions embedded within the tragic dialogue to argue that the poet defied the

³⁶ Garvie (1998) 204 · Heath and Okell (2007) 373 · Pathmanathan (1965) 13 · Rehm (2002) · Stanford (1963) 174 support the view of an "invisible suicide", emphasizing that this would render the replacement of the actor by a stage dummy far more convenient.

³⁷ Ferrari (2015) 112 · Finglass (2011) 378 · Gardiner (1979) 10.

³⁸ Modern archaeological and philological research agrees that the layout of the *cavea* (*koilon*) was not a perfect semicircle, but rather rectilinear, trapezoidal, or slightly elliptical. In the Theatre of Dionysus, the *cavea* was bounded by straight lines at the sides. This "rectilinear" design provided the audience with a more frontal view of the stage, which was crucial for the visual and acoustic perception of the actors' masks. Numerous researchers support this frontal relationship between the spectators and the orchestra during the mid-5th century BCE. Arnott (1962) 13; Csapo (2009) 99; Gebhard (1974) 434; Meineck (2013) 169, n. 32; Paga (2016) 37; Storey and Allan (2014) 26.

³⁹ Arnott (1962) 132–3 · Gardiner (1979) 11 · Martinelli (2015) 214–5 and n. 21.

⁴⁰ Finglass (2011) 378 · Mills (1980) 129–30. Scullion (1994) 108, 111 points out that, following the transformation of the setting into a deserted forest, the presence of closing doors is "entirely unnatural" for the new environment; therefore, it cannot be argued that Ajax exits through a door of the *skene*.

convention against depicting violence, ultimately delivering a theatrical surprise unprecedented for his era. The theory of visible suicide has been championed by numerous scholars and found enthusiastic supporters, who are captivated by Sophocles' daring venture to present an act on stage that was horrific—not only by the standards of the theatre but also for contemporary Athenian society⁴¹. The tragic poet appears to prime the audience for a conventional theatrical death, which would subsequently be announced via a messenger speech—doing so twice: first at line 582, shortly before the hero is left alone on stage, and again at lines 691–2, as he departs for the shore. Ultimately, however, he executes an unexpected reversal, offering the spectators a magnificent theatrical spectacle through the visible suicide of the hero⁴². The very progression of the dramatic action demanded a climax that the audience would witness firsthand rather than a resolution they would merely have to imagine; this necessity is further reinforced by the play's vocabulary, as Sophocles persistently employs words indicating that the hero is exposed 'in plain sight'—such as *periphane* (περιφανῆ), *periphanos* (περιφανῶς), and *periphantos* (περίφαντος). It would be highly contradictory to prime the spectators for such a visible event, only for the poet to abort it at the last moment by concealing the action⁴³. The visible suicide is further evidenced by the deictic phrases '*tode phasgano*' (τῷδε φασγάνῳ, l. 834) and '*tode egchos*' (τόδε ἔγχος, l. 907), which attest to the physical presence of the planted sword before the audience—an object that dominates the scenic space⁴⁴, transforming it almost into an autonomous 'character'⁴⁵. The sword acquires the persona of an executioner in an act that now constitutes a heroic death rather than a common suicide; since it was Hector's sword, Ajax does not plunge it into his body with his own hand, but having fixed it firmly in the ground, throws himself upon it. By this means, he evades the traditional penalty reserved for a suicide victim, shifting the agency of his death onto the object itself⁴⁶.

The greatest staging problem regarding the visible suicide, however, was the actor's need to slip away unseen in order to return as Teucer—in accordance with the inviolable three-

⁴¹ Parker (1983) 42, in his seminal book *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), identifies suicide as a source of extra pollution compared to ordinary death—a notion stemming from society's intense moral aversion to this horrific act. The suicide victim was considered defiled and was penalized through the denial of burial or even the amputation of the hand that committed the impious deed. Furthermore, the objects employed in the suicide were likewise deemed contaminated.

⁴² Mills (1980) 120–30.

⁴³ Esposito (2019) 119 · Seale (1982) 165, 179 n.47.

⁴⁴ Liapis (2015) 141 · Taplin (1978) 85–6.

⁴⁵ Mueller (2016) 17, 19, 29 argues that the noun *sphageus* (σφαγεύς), which Ajax uses to characterize the sword, is conventionally attributed exclusively to persons; this usage reveals how the hero now perceives the weapon as his personal executioner.

⁴⁶ Brook (2018) 60–1 · Garrison (1995) 52 · Svenbro (2001) 117–20 argues that through the agency of the sword, Sophocles stages a "non-reflexive suicide." Ajax is transformed into a mere victim and the sword into the perpetrator-murderer; in order to resolve the immense ritual and legal problem that a conscious act of self-destruction would pose for the ancient Athenian audience.

actor rule—while simultaneously leaving a dummy in his place⁴⁷. Scholars argue that lines 915–6, in which Tecmessa states that she will cover Ajax’s corpse with a long shroud, function as an implicit stage direction; as the fabric is held open in her hands, acting as a momentary theatrical curtain, it provides the actor with the necessary window of time to slip into the *skene* and position the dummy in his place⁴⁸. Naturally, for such an endeavor to be successful, execution would have to be rapid; this could only be achieved if the suicide occurred in close proximity to the central door of the *skene*, with Ajax’s lifeless body falling inward or onto the threshold while the door remained open⁴⁹.

Although it remains exceedingly difficult for scholarship to reach a definitive conclusion regarding the manner in which Sophocles staged Ajax’s suicide, the majority of theories developed over nearly two centuries converge on the fact that the tragic hero’s act of self-destruction was executed in full view of the audience, thereby defying a fundamental rule of ancient Greek theatre and shattering the conventions of dramatic poetry. The moment of the suicide is not merely a sensational device of Sophoclean dramaturgy; rather, it constitutes the climax of the tragedy—the ultimate result of the hero’s degradation, which subsequently triggers further consequences, namely the denial of burial by the Atreidae. It would therefore be structurally listless and scenically indifferent for Ajax to commit suicide inside the *skene*, only for his death to be announced through a messenger speech. Both the *metastasis*—with the change of scene and the empty *orchestra*—and the absence of a messenger, but even more so the *epiparodos* of the chorus and the discovery of the corpse by Tecmessa, accentuate and reinforce the argument for a suicide performed in plain sight.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt that Sophocles’ *Ajax* is a tragedy that defies the norms of its era and breaches the theatrical conventions of fifth-century BCE dramatic poetry. It is distinctly a drama which, while treating the myth of a major Trojan War hero, profoundly impacts its modern audience through the spectacle of the great warrior’s downfall, his psychological collapse, his suicide, and, ultimately, the struggle for his burial and heroization. The scenic staging of the play, given the means available to tragic poets of the Classical period, appears almost insurmountable; indeed, the religious, theatrical, and staging conventions of ancient

⁴⁷ Blume (2004) 118 · Stanford (1963) 186.

⁴⁸ Esposito (2019) 122 · Liapis (2015) 147 n. 69, 148 n. 70 adds that this act of covering is not merely formal but serves a practical purpose; within these few seconds, the actor slips into the *skene* and the dummy is positioned. The success of this stratagem is finalized later (l. 1003), when Teucer orders the corpse to be uncovered so he may look upon it, creating another powerful visual impression · Mills (1980) 133 · Taplin (1978) 189 n. 5.

⁴⁹ Ferrari (2015) 118 · Martinelli (2015) 214 n.18.

Greek theatre seem to render its direction unfeasible. Yet, Sophocles, with his unparalleled poetic talent and scenic resourcefulness, manages to innovate once again, exploiting every technical detail at his disposal to represent the unthinkable. By utilizing the *ekkyklema*, he exposes the interior of Ajax's tent—bloodstained and littered with the carcasses of slaughtered animals—before the audience, succeeding in provoking a performance shock at the sight of a shattered and humiliated hero. Through this device, he foreshadows the end of a great warrior, bringing about the requisite *catharsis* through the horrific act of self-destruction and establishing a contradiction unique in ancient Greek tragedy. Suicide appears to be the only path for Ajax to restore his compromised dignity; and while this act is executed within an empty *orchestra* and concealed from the other characters of the play, it is staged live before the astonished eyes of thousands of spectators, stunning the contemporary Athenian audience. Sophocles generates an unprecedented theatrical tension within a myth well-known to the Athenians, through a daring venture and a scenic action without historical precedent. Indubitably, through the astute deployment of theatrical means and his sublime poetic diction, Sophocles achieves a dramaturgical feat, captivating his audience by essentially staging the impossible.

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