ON TEACHING SOPHOCLES’ AJAX:
SÔPHROSUNÊ, HUBRIS, AND THE CHARACTER OF AJAX

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This past year, Sophocles’ Ajax was chosen as a prescribed text for the 2005 VCE Classical Societies and Cultures. It was an interesting choice, especially since the set text for the previous few years was Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus (which, incidentally, still remains a prescribed text for VCE English). The OT is a hard act to follow; and even if it weren’t, the Ajax is not easy to sell on its own merits to secondary school students. The main character kills himself halfway through the action, for a reason that does not always resonate with modern young readers. It is also easy to get lost in questions of realism and production (e.g., is Ajax lying in his ‘deception speech’? How does he stab himself on stage, and yet not be noticed for so long by a chorus that is supposedly hunting for him?), rather than devote time to discussing the play’s overall message or relevance to 21st century Australian teenagers. And there is relevance; after all, fear of rejection by our peers is a universal anxiety, and one that many teens can relate to. Many secondary schools can be as face-to-face a microcosm as the Greek army camped outside Troy; both are places where deeply emotional bonds of friendship and animosity can develop very rapidly, with seemingly long-lasting tenacity.

However, when it comes to writing exam essays on tragedy, many students over-generalise and present reductionist interpretations of what they have read. This is not terribly surprising, since students have only so much time to say something brilliant about ancient literature in an examination. But it becomes tedious to read over and over again how Greek tragedy is about a human being’s tragic flaw, or about how gods punish those who refuse to live in moderation, or how tragedy shows how miserable women’s lives were in the ancient world. Even in my university subjects, I occasionally find students arguing that all of Greek tragedy is about the punishment of hubris, which they argue is pride/arrogance and the chief ‘tragic flaw’ of every protagonist. I always feel a little sad when students believe they are constructing an argument, when in fact they are making sweeping (and often wrong) generalisations, instead of giving me a more nuanced reading—the kind that would make it clear that they have actually read the text and engaged with it.

This article, then, proposes to demystify some of the generalisations often made about Sophocles’ Ajax, and argue instead that upon closer inspection these generalisations are quite false. Since we teach our students to be aware of ancient Greek concepts like sôphrosunê and hubris, let us be clear on what they really mean. We all know it’s a shame that we have to read these plays in translation; but what an article like this can do is show where and how these Greek terms actually appear in the text of the Ajax, and how this can lead to a nuanced—less reductionist—reading of the play. The result of tracing two Greek words—sôphrôn (the root of that buzzword sôphrosunê) and hubris—in the text will, I hope, be surprising. Contrary to traditional readings of sôphrosunê (and its lack) and hubris as illustrative of the ‘tragic hero of Ajax’, these words instead emphasise Odysseus’ radical realisation that

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1 This paper is based on a talk I gave on Sophocles’ Ajax to secondary students at a ‘Schools’ Day’ held on 10 September 2005 for students revising for VCE Classical Societies and Cultures. It was sponsored by the Classical Association of Victoria, and the University of Melbourne’s School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology (AHCCA). My thanks to organiser Nick Vlahogiannis for inviting me to give the talk.
he can feel pity and sympathy for his dead enemy, and that there is a place for forgiveness in a world of hate.

I. The Structure of the Play

To begin with a reminder about what happens in this play: the Ajax essentially has a tripartite structure. First, the Prologue (lines 1-133) reads like a short and sweet miniature drama. It is orchestrated by Athena, who is both playwright and director; and she puts on a show for her captive audience Odysseus, who can’t see her. She does this by directing the (unwilling) actor that she has under her control, Ajax, who can see her, and who performs her script. Athena has driven Ajax mad, so that he has captured some sheep that he thinks are his enemies (Agamemnon, Menelaus and Odysseus), and he tortures them. In a tragic-comic moment, Ajax exits his tent and enters the stage (91) to greet Athena and boast of the vengeance he has finally exacted on his enemies. It is tragic because we know the man is under a spell, but comic because Ajax is being made a fool of, and we imagine some poor tortured sheep bleating in his tent. Odysseus responds—just like a real audience in a theatre—by feeling pity for the character he sees (121f.), and thereby reflecting on his own human condition (Odysseus says, ‘I think of him, yet also of myself’, 124). Moreover, there is a quick and dirty moral to this miniature drama, which Athena delivers for us all (131-33): that a man’s fortune can swing from high to low in one day; that the gods love those are sôphrôn, and loath those who are wicked.²

The second part of the play (lines 134-865) puts the sane and rational Ajax on display and toys with the audience’s expectations of his myth: when and how and why will Ajax kill himself, and how will all these specific aspects of the story add up to an overall message? Sophocles’ version of the story will be different from all other versions;³ and he decides that his Ajax has a dilemma: what can he do with the whole Greek army laughing at him? If he stays, he will endure mockery and shame. If he goes home, he will be branded a coward and a deserter. If he kills himself, his concubine and child will suffer, but he (or rather the memory of him) will suffer the reproach for it (or so argues Tecmessa, 500ff.).

Notice that Tecmessa is the only (mortal) woman in this play. She is a very interesting addition to the story; as a woman who has had to endure slavery and the loss of all her family (lines 485-491, 515-519), she knows all about endurance. Her experience is paradigmatic for what Ajax now has to suffer, namely, the loss of what he holds dearest (i.e., his good name). It may be instructive for students to ask, how useful is Tecmessa’s advice to Ajax? What might he have learned if he weren’t so eager to dismiss her advice because she’s a woman (528-529)? As Mark Griffith put it in his recent article on Antigone: ‘Sometimes tragic women’s words will be misheard, or heard in a particular way, or not heard at all, precisely because all that is heard, or noticed, is a “woman’s” voice.’⁴ Ignoring Tecmessa is also in

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² For a nuanced reading of the Prologue and its relation to metafictional representation and the theme of sôphrosunê, see Gregory W. Dobrov, Figures of Play: Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics (Oxford 2001), 57-69 = Chapter 4: ‘Aias: Sophokles’ Aias, Madness, and the Show Within’.

³ There is a good summary of earlier versions of the Ajax myth (specifically Homer, and Pindar’s Nemean 8) can be found at Golder & Pevear (n.7 below), 3-8.

keeping with the play’s insistence on status. When engaged in a debate, the Greek warriors (Ajax included) tend to look at a speaker’s social status rather than the content of his or her speech; and if the speaker is deemed to lack authority (Tecmessa because she is a woman, Teucer because he is half-Trojan and his mother was a slave), his or her words are listened to warily or even discounted, however rightly they might have been argued.

The second part of the play also includes the famous ‘deception speech’ (644-92) in which it appears that Ajax has decided not to kill himself; and the messenger speech (719ff.) about Ajax’s ‘atheism’. This Messenger reports some odd information about a prophecy by Calchas that Ajax will determine his future on this day. The Messenger also relates how Calchas repeated some stories about how Ajax had offended the gods when he left Salamis, by boasting that he did not need divine aid in fighting the Trojans (766ff.); and how Ajax actually insulted Athena to her face, telling her to leave him alone and go help the other Greek warriors. Yet as damaging as this information might be to our opinion of Ajax, it is related in such a third-hand way (the Messenger says that Calchas said that Ajax said…) that it amounts to little more than gossip. But it is enough to throw Tecmessa and the Chorus into panic, and they flee the stage, allowing Ajax to enter once more, deliver his dying monologue (815-65), and kill himself on the sword he was given by Hector.

But of course, the play doesn’t end here; in fact, it is little more than half over. The third section is a post-Ajax section, which is perhaps the most important in fleshing out the message of the drama. Teucer (Ajax’s half-brother, in some translations spelled ‘Teukros’) arrives (974); so do Menelaus (1047-1160) and Agamemnon (1226-1373), who mock Ajax’s corpse now that he’s dead (don’t forget that they are fully aware he tried to kill them) and intend to leave Ajax unburied. But Odysseus, whom everyone agrees was Ajax’s worst enemy, enters at 1315 and actually persuades Agamemnon to allow Ajax’s burial (1332ff.).

How is this last action possible? What moral lesson has Odysseus learned and is now trying to teach? Essentially, it is what he learned at the beginning: we are all human; and even though it was Greek custom and common sense to help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies, in the face of death one should be kind even to one’s enemies. Sophocles shows us how truly unheroic, and therefore pitiful, the situation is. It is never easy to watch a man kill himself over something for which he might have found a different solution. But in Ajax’s world—or rather, in his world of thinking—he convinced himself that there was no other way out but death. No one in this play considers praising Ajax for a noble death, or for the good fortune of being dead; instead, the characters debate how they ought to react to the death of an enemy. In some ways, the last part of the play is the most crucial, since it raises important ethical questions: how do we respond ethically to the death of an enemy? Do we repay evil for evil, or try to find some good? Odysseus seems to learn that when an enemy dies, we should put aside our anger in the face of a death that could have been ours; we can even learn to feel sympathy and pity for those we hate; and doing so teaches us humility. Agamemnon and Menelaus do not learn this; they are more interested in perpetuating their grudge, their anger, and their power.

II. Sôphrosunê

The moral of the Ajax can be brought into larger focus by looking at the occurrence of those key Greek words we always teach to our students. First, sôphrosunê (and its related ad-
jective sôphrôn, verb sôphronein, and adverb sôphronôs) is usually associated with the idea of moderation; but it can have a much wider range of meanings in Greek literature. In the Odyssey, Telemachus has the sôphrosunê not to reveal his father Odysseus’ secret plans (23.30), which implies discretion. For politicians, being sôphrôn can involve wise precaution, like the Coryreans who (according to Thucydides 1.32.4) did not make alliances with other cities because doing so might involve them in risks of their allies’ choosing. In philosophy, sôphrosunê can mean self-control against passions for food or sex or excessive pleasures (e.g., Plato Republic 430d). For women, being sôphrôn invariably refers to chastity and sexual fidelity to one’s husband (e.g., Euripides Hippolytus 413).

However, in the Ajax, being sôphrôn most often refers to ‘knowing one’s place’, and by extension ‘being reasonable or moderate’. This is not limited to the Ajax, nor to male heroes like Ajax. One can compare Euripides’ Children of Heracles (also known as the Heracleidae), in which a young virgin (a daughter of Heracles often called ‘Makaria’) leaves the protection of a shrine, comes on stage and volunteers to be sacrificed to the goddess Persephone so that the Athenians will win victory in a battle being fought on behalf of her family. But she apologises for appearing unchaperoned before a group of men (in this case, her guardian Iolaus, King Demophon of Athens, and the chorus of old men from Marathon) by saying:

Makaria: Strangers, please don’t think my coming out is brashness.
This is the first thing I ask,
since, for a woman, silence and sôphronein
are the best thing, as well as quietly staying indoors.
But when I heard your groans, Iolaus,
I came out.

(Euripides Heracleidae 474-79)

Given the context in which sôphronein (i.e., ‘to be sôphrôn’, or, to ‘have sôphrosunê’) is invoked in this instance, it carries with it both the meaning of female chastity (appropriate for a young girl) and ‘knowing one’s place’. Specifically, Makaria in ordinary circumstances would know to remain indoors and keep silent; but the extraordinariness of the present situation (namely, she has overheard talk of a war being fought on her and her siblings’ behalf) requires her to come outdoors and find out what’s going on. Similarly in the Ajax, being sôphrôn involves knowing one’s place in the social system; but whereas the Euripidean scene explores a virgin’s place in a male-dominated society and an upcoming war that requires her ritual murder, Sophocles’ Ajax explores a soldier’s place in the equally male-dominated microcosm of a frustrated army that has been camped outside the walls of Troy for ten years.

Many textbook analyses of Sophocles argue that Ajax is the character who lacks sôphrosunê. This interpretation has been in circulation for a long time; in 1964, Bernard Knox argued that all Sophoclean protagonists possess what he called ‘the heroic temper’, characterised by stubbornness and lack of self-control:

What the [Sophoclean] hero is really asked to do, the demand behind the appeal to reason and emotion, the advice to reflect and be persuaded is—to yield, eikein. . . . The hero will not listen, but he hears enough to know that he is under
attack. And his reaction is violent and swift. The role of those who try to advise him is not easy.5

This approach to tragedy has remained in fashion for decades. In the new *Cambridge Translations from Greek Drama* series (2001), translator and commentator Shomit Dutta writes:

Athena stresses the precarious nature of human life and the gods’ insistence on man’s humility and self-control (*sôphrosynê*). *Sôphrosynê* is a key concept in tragedy. Tragic figures often meet with catastrophe for want of self-control, or because they do not know their place as mortals.6

On the surface, this analysis of the play is not surprising; after all, Ajax planned to murder his comrades, and (if we believe Calchas’ recollections as reported by the Messenger) Ajax boasted that he could defeat Troy without the help of the gods, and even insulted Athena by name. One might argue that the play demonstrates how this lack of *sôphrosunê* or moderation leads to Ajax’s suicide, or perhaps is even epitomised by his suicide, the rashest of all actions.

I, however, would disagree; the lack of *sôphrosunê* is not exclusive to Ajax, but instead characterises almost everyone in this play; or rather, *sôphrosunê* is that kind of commodity that everyone values and recognises, but never quite possesses. So, for example, in the Prologue at lines 132f., Athena says the gods love those who are *sôphrôn*, but hate the proud:

*Athena*: τούς δὲ σώφρονας
θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακούς.

The gods love **goodness**, and abhor all that is evil. [E.F.Watling]

Know that the gods love **men of steady sense** and hate the proud. [John Moore]

The gods are fond of **those/with self-control**, but those without they loathe. [Shomit Dutta]

The gods favor **wise restraint/in men** and hate transgressors. [Herbert Golder & Richard Pevear]7

This might seem to indicate that Ajax, the man Athena has driven mad, is the example of just such a proud man who lacks *sôphrosunê*. But bear in mind the context of this line: Athena is telling Odysseus about the power of the gods, and how they can make a man’s fortunes rise or fall (127-33).

*Athena*: τοιαῦτα τοῖνυ εἰσορὸν ὑπέρκοπον
μηδὲν ποτ’ εἰπῆς αὐτὸς εἰς θεοὺς ἔπος.


6 Dutta (see n.7 below), 10.

7 I quote here from four popular English translations of the play: (1) E.F. Watling (1953), Penguin Classics; (2) John Moore (1957), in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore’s *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, University of Chicago Press. These first two translations are the ones recommended for the VCE. I have also included (3) Shomit Dutta (2001), *Cambridge Translations from Greek Drama*, edited by John Harrison and Judith Affleck, Cambridge University Press, and (4) Herbert Golder & Richard Pevear (1999), *The Greek Tragedy in New Translations*, edited by Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro, Oxford University Press.
Therefore beware of uttering blasphemy/against the gods; beware of pride, puffed up/by strength of substance. Know that all things mortal/hang in the scales; one day can tilt them up/or down. The gods love goodness, and abhor/all that is evil. [Watling]

Look well at this, and speak no towering word/yourself against the gods, nor walk too grandly/because your hand is weightier than another’s/or your great wealth deeper founded. One short day/inclines the balance of all human things/to sink or rise again. Know that the gods/love men of steady sense and hate the proud. [Moore]

And now that you have looked upon such things,/never speak out against the gods yourself/or swell with pride if you surpass another’s or wealth heaps higher/around you. One day can lift up and bring down all human things./ The gods favor wise restraint/in men and hate transgressors. [Dutta]

Consider him well, then, and never/allow yourself to speak arrogant/words against the gods/or feel proud if your hand strikes harder/than another’s or wealth heaps higher/around you. One day can lift up and bring down all human things./ The gods favor wise restraint/in men and hate transgressors. [Golder & Pevear]

The goddess’s statement regarding those who are sôphrôn is less about Ajax, and more of a warning to Odysseus; namely, Athena will not give Odysseus further protection if he does not change his ways and ‘learn his place’—that is, recognise humility and his own humanity. Notice how Athena eggs Odysseus on to mock Ajax in his mad state (78ff.), but Odysseus refuses and only feels pity. This is exactly the lesson that Athena wants her captive audience member to learn: that one sign of being sôphrôn is the ability to empathise even with those we think we hate.

In the next scene, Ajax himself uses the term sôphronein, but as part of a jibe at his concubine Tecmessa. She has been pleading with him not to contemplate suicide; at line 586, he orders her not to question him, and says that it would be best to sôphronein:

**Ajax:** μη’ κρίνε, μη’ ξέταζε: σοφρονεὶν καλὸν.

Ask me no questions. **Possess yourself in patience.** [Watling]

Don’t probe and question! It becomes you to submit. [Moore]

Don’t judge or question me. Show self-control! [Dutta]

Stop questioning and prying! **Wise restraint** is best. [Golder & Pevear]
In the context, *sôphronein* essentially means ‘to know one’s place’, which for a woman in an army camp would be observing silence when her husband tells her to (as Watling’s translation emphasises). But perhaps the comment is ironic; who’s the more *sôphrôn*, Tecmessa, or the frustrated Ajax? Or, in Dutta’s words, ‘Who is most lacking in self-control: Ajax or Tecmessa?’

Soon afterwards, in his so-called ‘deception speech’, Ajax admits that he has learned *sôphronein*, i.e., he has learned to obey Agamemnon and Menelaus because they are the stronger. Just as winter recedes to summer, and night yields to day, and you can’t fight Mother Nature, Ajax has ‘learned his place’ (677):

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\text{Ajax: } \text{ημείς δὲ πῶς ώ γνωσόμεσθα σωφρονεῖν;}
\]

Must we not learn this **self-discipline**? I think we must. [Watling]

Shall I not learn **place and wisdom**? [Moore]

How, then, can we refuse to **know our place**? [Dutta]

Then how shall we not learn **wise restraint**? [Golder & Pevear]

But again, this might be ironic. Ajax implies that the society of the army camp equates *sôphrosunê* with obedience to one’s commanders. Perhaps Ajax is actually trying to deceive his stage audience with his speech (that is, to make them think he has given up his suicide plans, even though he hasn’t). If so, then Ajax is really telling us that he thinks the opposite: that in a world where the definition of *sôphrosunê* is blind obedience to commanders who treat a man unjustly, Ajax would rather die. So rather than simply showing us that Ajax lacks *sôphrosunê*, Sophocles in this speech suggests that the common definition of *sôphrosunê* is flawed, and Ajax is trying to move beyond it.

After Ajax’s death, Menelaus uses the adverbial *sôphronôs* to describe an army that is ‘well’ ordered by the use of fear and control (1075f.):

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\text{Menelaus: } \text{οὗτ' ἀν στρατός γε σωφρόνως ἀρχοίτ' ἔτι, μηδὲν φόβου πρόβλημα μηδ' σιδοὺς ἔχον.}
\]

There is…no **order**/in any camp that is not fenced about/with discipline and respect. [Watling]

No army/without its shield of fear or reverence can be **well** governed. [Moore]

Nor can an army be **sensibly** led/without a curtain of fear and respect. [Dutta]

In the same way, an army cannot/be governed **wisely** without/a strong bulwark of fear and respect. [Golder & Pevear]

Once again, the concept of *sôphrôn* may be used here ironically; if this is the definition of what it means to be *sôphrôn* (i.e., one establishes order through tyrannical power), then something is seriously wrong with the Greek army.

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8 Dutta (n.7 above), 42, ad 586.
The final two instances of sôphrosunê occur in the scene between Agamemnon and Teucer at the play’s end; but it is best to postpone discussion of the concept of ‘knowing one’s place’ in that passage until we have dealt with the other buzzword in this play, hubris. The two concepts go together like salt and pepper; or, as Jon Hesk puts it, ‘In archaic Greek poetry (especially Theognis and Solon), elite classical prose and the democratic oratory of Athens, hubris is often explicitly or implicitly opposed to sôphrosunê.’ It’s hard to talk about one without the other.

III. Hubris

The amount of scholarship out there about hubris outnumbers even that about sôphrosunê; and the older, more traditional scholarship insists that hubris (and its related verb hubrizein, and the noun hubristês, or ‘one who commits hubris’) is the key to understanding the ‘tragic hero’ of Greek drama—that hubris is insolence or pride, and it is because of this ethical flaw in character that a tragic hero meets his or her downfall. Dictionaries don’t help, either; the American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition (2000) defines hubris as ‘overbearing pride or presumption; arrogance’. Well, I’m sorry, but this is all just wrong. We must remind our students that dictionaries are not authoritative sources, but are in fact hopelessly subjective.

When it comes to the Ajax, many commentators still get it wrong. As recently as 2001, Shomit Dutta writes:

Earlier, Athena expressed the inescapable principle, underlying most of tragedy, that the arrogant or excessive must be brought down and made to suffer [...]. Here, Calchas repeats the principle (758-61) and, at a moment when the audience must be wondering what Ajax is doing, we are given two examples of his past hubris (762-9 and 770-5). Calchas’ evidence of Ajax’s past hubris suggests that it is an inherent character trait. His crime may therefore be seen as a symptom of his character.

Herbert Golder, writing in 1999, argues something similar: ‘Speaking the familiar language of Greek morality, the messenger describes Aias as a man of hybris—an “outsized body” untamed by human thoughts.’ Even in cyberspace (where many of our students sadly do their research), a cheap website like enotes.com has the effrontery to summarise the play thus: ‘The hero of the play, Ajax, illustrates the uncompromising nature of the noble warrior; yet at the same time, he also represents the failings of excess pride, or hubris.’ Students will also find misleading lecture notes on-line, such as those by William Johnson at the University of Cincinnati. His website on the Ajax makes the interesting claim: ‘Clearly, the self-reliant man of action can be too self-reliant, too dependent on his own actions; and thus fall into hubris, that state wherein a man forgets his limitations, forgets that as a mortal he needs the help of the gods.’ But these are lecture notes, not an actual lecture, and it is not clear how Johnson

10 Jon Hesk, Sophocles: Ajax (London 2003), 141.
11 Dutta (n.7 above), 56.
12 Golder and Pevear (n.7 above), 16.
TEACHING SOPHOCLES’ AJAX

gods.’ But these are lecture notes, not an actual lecture, and it is not clear how Johnson arrives at this particular definition of *hubris.*

There are flaws with these interpretations. First of all, the Greek word *hubris* is, properly speaking, a kind of outrage one commits against someone else, whether verbal, or physical; in fact, *hubris* was used as a Greek legal term for rape (e.g., in Aeschines’ *Against Timarchos*). More crucially, the concept that *hubris* means insolence or pride is quite inappropriate for the *Ajax* and simply does not match the Greek text. If one looks carefully at the use of the Greek word *hubris* in the *Ajax*, one discovers that it is not actually employed in the sense of a flaw particular to Ajax. *Hubris* is undeniably an important theme in the play, but refers to the cycle of violence and anger among the Greek warriors (the very thing that Odysseus rejects in the end), or the political aspirations of the sons of Atreus, and not to Ajax’s moral character.

Instances of *hubris* are many in the *Ajax*, and I am not the first to elucidate them. Three scholars in the early 1990s were also fascinated by the precise context of *hubris* in the play. J.A.S. Evans (1991) argued that the play is a tragedy of *hubris*; Ajax is the victim of his own code of honour, since he acts faithfully according to behaviours whose consequences he misjudges. Alex Garvie in 1992 observed that *hubris* is a term that describes the evil that one character enacts against another, yet it is never used to qualify Ajax’s attitude towards the gods. In contrast, Helen Gasti (also in 1992) argued that Ajax is in fact characterised by *hubris*, but that this *hubris* is a soldier-like, warlike behaviour inspired by the heroic values of the past; this behaviour is incompatible with the co-operative system of values represented by Odysseus, and is thus considered hubristic or intolerable. One must add to this list the very recent book by Jon Hesk (2003), who devotes an entire section of the chapter ‘Criticism and Reception’ to the question, ‘Does Ajax commit *hubris*?’ He argues that although Ajax’s arrogant attitude towards Athena might amount to religious *hubris*, ‘we need not conclude that his acts of self-assertion in relation to other mortals are tantamount to *hubris*…. [nor] does it follow that this is a negative aspect of the hero.’

*Hubris* is indeed a concept under much debate in this play. It is first invoked by the chorus of soldiers from Salamis in their first entrance, when they relate how the whole army is talking about Ajax’s mad spree. They describe the *hubris* of the Greeks against Ajax, namely, their malice and insulting of Ajax’s name (lines 151-53 and 196f.):

''Chorus: καὶ πᾶς ὁ κλώων τοῦ λέξαντος χαίρει μᾶλλον τοῖς σοῖς ἄχεσιν καθυβρίζων.

And the fun grows with the telling/from mouth to mouth/the mocking laughter rises against you. [Watling]

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18 Hesk (n.10 above), 141-48.
19 Hesk (n.10 above), 148.
And each new hearer/more than the teller relishes his chance/to insult at your distress. [Moore]
Those who listen/delight in mocking your distress/more than those who tell. [Dutta]
Each one/takes more pleasure in the tale, cursing your pain with outrageous laughter. [Golder & Pevear]

εὐθὺς δ᾿ ὑβρίς ὀδ᾿ ἀτάρβητα
ὁρμᾶτ’ ἐν εὐσανέμοις βάσσας.

Malice and hatred/walk unhindered in open country… [Watling]
And your enemies’ bold outrage/freshens through all the glades … [Moore]
Your enemies’ insolence/rushes on undaunted through/the airy glades... [Dutta]
Enemy arrogance is fanned to flame/by a high wind in the wooded valleys.
   [Golder & Pevear]

Significantly, it is the gossiping Greeks who have hubris, not Ajax. Of course, the chorus is not exactly a disinterested party; Ajax is their captain and compatriot, and they are loyal to him. But isn’t it significant that, just moments after we witnessed a mad Ajax admitting he was planning to kill Agamemnon and Menelaus, the first mention of the word hubris does not describe Ajax, but instead the malice of his comrades?

Soon afterwards, Tecmessa relates what Ajax was like in his maddened state, whipping sheep and thinking he was paying hubris to his enemies (304):

Tecmessa: ὅσην κατ᾿ αὐτῶν ὑβριν ἐκτείσατ’ ἱὼν.

...about the trick he had served them in this escapade. [Watling]
...how he’d paid them... [Moore]
... the vengeance he had wreaked upon them. [Dutta]
... the revenge he claimed he had taken. [Golder & Pevear]

Here the semantics of hubris are even less ethical, since it refers to the physical violence Ajax was exerting on these sheep (with a whip or some such thing), not some abstract notion of insolence or pride. A moment later, when Ajax comes out of the tent, he laments that he is being hubris—-that is, the Greeks are outraging him with their gossip (367):

Ajax: οἴμοι γέλωτος, οἶον ὑβρίσθην ἄρα.

Laugh, laugh at his shame! [Watling]
What a mockery I have come to! What indignity! [Moore]
Oi moi! How laughable! How humiliating! [Dutta]
Oh, the laughter! the outrage I’ve suffered! [Golder & Pevear]

Once again, it is the Greeks, not Ajax, who are showing hubris. The same is the case when Ajax speaks to Euryssaces; he assures the boy that even though he (Ajax) is being laughed at, none of the Greeks in the future will offer hubris to his son with insults (560f.):
TEACHING SOPHOCLES’ AJAX

Ajax: οὔτοι σ’ Ἀχαιῶν, οἶδα, μὴ τις ὑβρίση
stụgnɔ江山 λῴβας...

There’s not a Greek will dare to lift a finger/to hurt or shame you… [Watling]
The Greeks will not offer you outrage or hatefully insult you… [Moore]
I know that none of the Greeks will abuse you with spiteful insults… [Dutta]
The Greeks/will not dare to harm or insult you… [Golder & Pevear]

Later, after Ajax is dead and the chorus men find his body, they assume that Odysseus will be the first to ephubrizein (i.e., ‘show hubris in’) his heart (956):

Chorus: ἥ ῥα κελαινώπαν θυμόν ἐφυβρίζει πολύτλας ἄνηρ.

The ‘much-enduring’ man/will laugh to his black heart’s content… [Watling]
That waiting, laboring man, how he insults in his black heart! [Moore].
I am sure in his black heart the ‘much-suffering hero’ gloats… [Dutta]
What outrage that much-enduring man commits in his black heart! [Golder & Pevear]

It is significant that the chorus men associate Odysseus with the offering of hubris to Ajax’s body, and that this is connected to laughter in the following line (957, where Odysseus literally ‘will laugh at (our) maddening pains’). That Odysseus should offer hubris to Ajax is a reasonable expectation (after all, Odysseus was the intended victim of Ajax’s violence—his hubris—and one expects enemies to repay evil for evil in Greek ethics), but it is precisely what will not happen in this play.

Interestingly, most invocations of the term hubris specifically in connection with Ajax occur after he is dead, and emanate from the mouths of the very leaders who treated Ajax unjustly in the first place. When Menelaus shows up, he reminds us (yet again) how Ajax was driven mad, and the gods drove away Ajax’s hubris from its intended target (1060f.):

Menelaus: νῦν δ’ ἐνήλλαξέν θεός
tὴν τοῦδ’ ὑβρίν πρός μῆλα καὶ ποίμνας πέσειν.

But, as it happened, the god drew off the assault, so that it fell upon our sheep and cattle. [Watling]
But God changed/ his criminal heart to fall on sheep and cattle. [Moore]
But as things are, a god/deflected his assault onto our sheep and cattle. [Dutta]
As it happened, the god turned his outrage on shepherds/and sheep. [Golder & Pevear]

Even though Menelaus speaks of Ajax’s hubris, the term does not refer to insolence or pride, but the violence that Ajax was planning to exert on his enemies. Menelaus ends his speech (1067-92) with a lengthy discourse on how fear of authority gives the army its cohesion (the same speech in which the adverb sōphronos was used above). It ends with taunting Ajax as a hubristēs, ‘committer of hubris’:

23
Menelaus: We couldn’t rule him while he lived; but dead,
Say what you will, we’ll keep him
in subjection
Under our hands; he never in his
life
Obeyed a word of mine. When
common men
Dare to defy the powers set over
them,
They show their evil nature. There
is no law
In a city where there is no fear, no
order
In any camp that is not fenced
about
With discipline and respect. The
strongest man

Must be prepared to fall, it may be,
at a touch
Of small mischance. In fear and modesty
He has the surest shield; where licence reigns,
And insolence, the ship of state is doomed.
However fair her course at first, to plunge
To bottomless disaster. Fear, I say,
Should have its proper place; let us not think
That if we please ourselves we can escape
Paying the price of pleasure with our pains.
Our turn will come. This was a man once
proud
And full of fire; now I’m the one to boast.
And this I warn you: take no hand or part
In burying him; for if you do, your grave
Will soon be ready for you.
TEACHING SOPHOCLES’ AJAX

CHORUS: Sir, your precepts
Are true and wise; but should you not beware

MENELAUS: So long as he lived,
he never would heed our words.
Never. And yet it’s a poor common soldier
That feels no duty to obey his betters.
Laws will never be rightly kept in a city
That knows no fear of reverence, and no army
Without its shield of fear can be well governed.
And even if a man rears a huge frame,
He had better know how small a cause can throw him.
When a man is moved by wholesome fear and shame,
You may know that combination makes for safety;
But insubordination and the rule
Of do-as-you-like invariably, mark my words,

Of outrage on the dead?

Sooner or later drive a city on
Before the gale into the sea’s gulf.
Enact, I say, some salutary fear:
And let’s not think we can do just what we please.
And then, when we grow vexatious, pay no fees.
There’s turnabout in these things. A while ago
He was the hot aggressor; now it’s I
Who entertain large ideas. And I give you notice,
Don’t bury him. For you may find, if you do,
That you’re apt to take a tombward fall yourself.

CHORUS: Menelaus, these are fine principles you’ve upreared;
Don’t shame them now by outrage to the dead.

MENELAUS: We could not control him when he was alive,
But now he is dead we shall rule him with a firm hand,
Whether you like it or not. While he lived
He never listened to a word I said.
It is a mark of evil when a common man
Will not heed those in charge of him.
The laws of state can never function freely,
Not unless fear is properly in place.

Nor can an army be sensibly led
Without a curtain of fear and respect.
A man must realise, however strong he is,
That he may fall to the gentlest of blows.
If he maintains a sense of fear and shame,
Be sure that such a man will remain safe.
But where insolence and licence are rife,
Such a state, though sailing smoothly at first,
Will one day plummet to the very depths.  
So let me see fear in its rightful place,  
And let us not hope to act as we please  
Without later paying the price in pain.  
These things go by turns. In the past this man  
Blazed with disrespect. Now it’s my turn to be proud.  
Therefore I warn you, do not bury him, in case  
By doing so you earn yourself a grave.

CHORUS: Menelaus, you have set out wise principles,  
But do not yourself show disrespect to the dead.

[Dutta]

MENELAOS: I grant you, we failed to control him  
when he was alive, but he’s dead now,  
and like it or not we will have our way with him. At no time, so long  
as the breath was in him, would he ever obey me.  
Indeed, it’s a mark of baseness in a man from the ranks to deny the need for obedience.  
Can laws keep the city on a prosperous course if no one fears them?  
In the same way, an army cannot be governed wisely without a strong bulwark of fear and respect.  
For however large a man grows, he must bear in mind that one small defect can bring him down.  
Where fear and shame come together in a man, they act to preserve him.  
But where there is wantonness and licence, the city, though she be speeding before a fair wind, will plunge to destruction. Fear is the cornerstone of all order, I say. We should not take pleasure and deny pain equal measure.  
One comes on the other’s heels. Not long ago this man blazed with insolence. Now it is I who have big ideas, so I warn you: if you dig a grave for him, you yourselves may fall into it.

CHORUS: Menelaos, you have spoken wisely of restraint. Do not outrage the dead.

[Golder & Pevear]

There is much to discuss in this exchange. Menelaus’ argument that an army or the state’s capacity to be ruled sôphronôs is dependent on the obedience of subordinates to their superiors (1069-78) is not unusual in Greek thought; equally normative is the notion that fear (phobos and deos) and shame (aidôs), all of which share shades of meaning with the English word respect, for those in power is what keeps society in order. For example, decades after the Ajax, Plato in the first book of his Republic recounts one of Socrates’ famous dialogues that likely took place during Sophocles’ lifetime (in fact, Sophocles is mentioned in passing as an old man at 329b). In this dialogue, Plato has the character Thrasymachus defend the somewhat cynical (but apparently plausible) argument that ‘justice’ is nothing more than the will of the stronger, the desires of persons in power (Republic 343b-344c). He even goes so far as
to suggest that a subject serves the interest of his ruler, but does so to his own injury; thus justice always operates to the advantage of the ruler, not the subject (343c). Even though the character of Socrates eventually proves Thrasymanus wrong, the Republic goes on to engage with ethical and moral issues of political power, the necessity of obedience to power, and the obligations of those who rule. So Menelaus’ arguments do seem to reflect common Greek social questions (even anxieties) about power relationships in the state. However, what makes Menelaus’ understanding of power in the Ajax problematic is the fact that it is laced with disturbingly aristocratic values regarding class. Tragedy was composed for a democratic Athens, at a religious festival when Athens was on display both to its citizens and to foreign guests, and at a time when the Athenians attributed their ever increasing success in controlling Greek affairs to the superiority of their democratic constitution. This democracy was structured on the equal participation of Athenian men in the government and bureaucracy, and based on selection by random lot rather than by wealth or family connections (or, for that matter, merit). In tragedy, mythical characters from a heroic past often express aristocratic sentiments in order to signal the darker, less attractive side of their character. Menelaus’ speech has buzzwords for a fifth-century Athenian audience. He speaks of the démotês (1071), which is translated variously as ‘common man’, ‘poor common soldier’, and ‘man from the ranks’, but is clearly derived from the word démos, that artificial unit of political mapping that is the root of ‘democracy’. Menelaus’ insistence that the démotês shows his evil side if he dares to disobey his betters (1091f.) might make sense in the immediate context of a potentially unruly army outside the walls of Troy, but would surely have been a politically charged—dare we say politically incorrect?—statement to make in front of a democratic Athenian audience.

How does hubris fit into Menelaus’ speech? In his political understanding, hubris is the opposite of fear and respect, and thus inimical to order. Specifically, in line 1081, he pairs ‘to commit hubris’ (hubristein) with ‘to do what one wants’ (dran ha bouleitai, which Watling, Dutta, and Golder & Pevear all translate as ‘licence’), and claims that they will cause the ship of state to sink. In keeping with this notion of licence, Menelaus says that we cannot live for pleasure only, but must take pain as well. His observation is very similar in sentiment to the moral of Athena’s speech in the Prologue, namely, that a man’s fortunes can change in one day; the scales can go up or down (131f.). It is thus no surprise that Menelaus is now reminded of Ajax, whom he invokes as an exemplum of this kind of reversal of fortune. But once again, Menelaus’ words are rhetorically charged. He says (1088) that Ajax was just recently a hubristês (‘committer of hubris’) who was aithôn (‘blazing’, ‘on fire’), but that now it is Menelaus’ turn to mega phronein (‘thing big’, ‘be proud’). I think Watling is wrong to give hubristês the connotation of ‘proud’ in his translation, ‘This was a man once proud/And full of fire; now I’m the one to boast.’ This is because the semantics of pride are more appropriate to Menelaus’ mega phronein than to Ajax as hubristês. Ajax’s hubris is, once again, not some abstract insolence or pride, but rather his singular violent attempt to kill his superiors. This is consistent with the way in which Menelaus’ statement makes a sharp contrast between the past and the present. Ajax a moment ago was committing an act of violence against his superiors, the very activity (combined with licence) that can sink the ship of state; but now it is Menelaus’ turn to be proud. The latter comment is an odd one; mega phronein (‘thing big’, ‘be proud’) usually has negative connotations in Greek tragedy. The locus classicus is line 6

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20 A similar point is made at Dutta (n.7 above), 78 ad 1071; Dutta further observes that Menelaus, king of Sparta, might represent fifth-century Sparta’s monarchical constitution.
of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, where the goddess Aphrodite informs her audience that she overthrows those who are wont to *mega phronein* against her. In Hippolytus’ case, *mega phronein* manifests itself in verbal abuse of the goddess of love and a virginal devotion to Artemis that is highly unusual for an adolescent male. Yet in the *Ajax*, Menelaus tries to give *mega phronein* a positive spin; his ability to ‘think big’—which, like Hippolytus’ experience, chiefly involves the verbal abuse of an enemy—is a privilege he has won at the expense of the man who tried to kill him.

When Menelaus ends his speech with the command that Ajax’s body not be buried, it amounts to threatening Teucer with death if he attempts to do so (1089f.). The chorus men are not impressed, and they turn the word *hubristês* back on Menelaus, essentially warning him that although his words might sound wise, it would be an act of *hubris* to leave a soldier’s body unburied (1091f.). Likewise, Teucer will have none of Menelaus’ abuse, and rebuts Menelaus’ main argument; even if Menelaus’ political ideas are correct, Ajax was by no means his subordinate, since Ajax sailed to Troy of his own free will and in command of his own men (1099-1101).

On the next two occasions when *hubris* is invoked, it refers to language, first as part of Teucer’s retort to Menelaus (1150f.):

> *Teucer:* ἔγω δὲ γ’ ἀνδρ’ ὀπωσα μορίας πλέων,  
> ὦς ἐν κακοῖς ύβριζε τοῖς τῶν πέλας.

I have seen a fool/*mocking* his friends’ misfortunes. [Watling]
And I once saw a man inflated with foolishness/*who insulted* the misfortunes of his neighbors. [Moore]
Well, I once saw a man full of folly/*who gloated over* others in distress. [Dutta]
I, too, saw a man once, full/of his own stupidity, *who insulted* his neighbors in their grief. [Golder & Pevear]

And then, in Agamemnon’s furious outburst that Teucer (a man with no social status) is committing *hubris* by talking back (1257-59); this is combined with a command that Teucer show *sôphrosunê*:

> *Agamemnon:* ὦς ἄνδρος σοφος τοις ὄντος, ἀλλ’ ἥδη σκιᾶς,  
> θαρσάω ύβριζεις κάζελευθεροφοιμεῖς,  
> οὐ σωφρονήσεις;

[Unless you] curb that *insolent* tongue which wags so freely/about a man that’s dead and done with. Come,/behave yourself. [Watling]
That man is dead, now—just a shadow,/and yet you seem to count on *him* to pro-  
> tect/ your *sauciness*! I say, *learn moderation*! [Moore]
You boldly/insult us with a ready tongue, even though/this man is no more, but already a ghost./*Have you no sense*? [Dutta]
Behind all this *outrage* and loud talk,/what is there? A man who’s no more/than a shadow!/Know your place, Teukros. [Golder & Pevear]
All these translations are a bit odd, since there is disagreement on the precise grammatical role of ‘a man no longer existing, but already a shadow (skia)’, which is a participial clause in the genitive. Watling takes this clause as the object of the verb exeleutherostomeis (‘you speak freely about X’), so that the clause refers to Ajax. The verb hubrizeis (‘you commit hu-bris’) is translated with the adjective insolent attached to a noun tongue that is invented by Watling to flesh out the verb exeleutherostomeis. Moore also takes the participial clause as referring to Ajax (‘That man is dead now—just a shadow’), but in contrast takes it as the semantic object of tharsôn (‘taking courage’, ‘being bold’, ‘counting on’), with the resulting weird translation, ‘yet you seem to count on him to protect your sauciness’ [or, literally, ‘you commit hubris and speak freely, counting on a man no longer existing, but already a shadow’].

Dutta takes the participial clause as a concessive genitive absolute: ‘even though this man is no more, but already a ghost’. Of all the translations, this one is the most literal with hubrizeis, which is rendered, ‘you insult us’. In Golder and Pevear’s translation, there is an interesting play on the ambiguity of who exactly is the shadow, Ajax or Teucer. Despite the extremely odd translation, ‘Behind all this outrage and loud talk, what is there?’ (the Greek statement has been changed in English into a rhetorical question), the sentence fragment ‘A man who’s no more than a shadow!’ does allow for multiple readings in the same way that the Greek participial clause does. Is Agamemnon saying that Ajax is a shadow because he is dead, or that Teucer is no more than a shadow because of his social status, or both? Neither man, of course, is aware that Agamemnon is repeating a statement Odysseus had made earlier in the Prologue. As a result of seeing the mad Ajax, Odysseus came to the realisation that all men are nothing more than an empty ‘shadow’ (skia, 126). Agamemnon is unknowingly recycling Odysseus’ sentiments, and is simultaneously unaware that the original point of those words was to observe that the ‘shadow’ could apply to any man: Ajax, Teucer, or even Agamemnon himself.

Whatever the translation, in both passages (1150f. and 1257-59) hubris is equated with verbal abuse, either mocking (as at 151-53, when the Greeks were showing hubris to Ajax), or implying a speech that goes beyond acceptable social limits. Just as Menelaus paired hubris with ‘do-as-you-like’ as the kind of licence that sinks the ship of state, Agamemnon taunts Teucer in 1258 with hubrizeis (‘you commit hubris’) and exeleutherostomeis (‘you speak very freely’). The verb exeleutherostomeis is simply the intensive prefix ex- added to the verb eleutherostomein, ‘to speak freely’, ‘to say what one likes’. This verb is used in only two other places in extant tragedy: Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound 182, where the daughters of Ocean tell Prometheus that he is too bold in his manner and is speaking freely ‘to excess’ (agan); and Euripides’ Andromache 153, where Menelaus’ daughter Hermione announces that her dowry is rich enough (and thus her status in the household secure enough) that she can ‘speak freely’, i.e. say whatever she likes to her husband’s concubine in the presence of a female chorus of sticky-beak neighbours. In all these instances, ‘speaking freely’ has a negative connation and is associated with excess, such as the abundant wealth which gives Hermione confidence to bring her household’s dirty laundry out into the open, or Prometheus’ bold resistance against Zeus, or (in the case of the Ajax) Teucer’s perceived presumption to bandy words with the sons of Atreus.

Agamemnon considers it a presumption, of course, because of Teucer’s social status. Agamemnon is making a not-so-subtle pun on words; eleutherostomein is a combination of eleutheros, ‘of free status’ (as opposed to a slave), and stomein, ‘to talk’. Eleutheros is pre-
ciscely what Teucer is not, since his mother is a Trojan slave; hence Agamemnon’s jibe at 1259 about sôphronein, or Teucer’s ‘knowing his place’ (which Watling and Moore translate with the semantics of good behaviour or showing sense, which I think is less on the mark). To add insult to injury, in the very next lines Agamemnon suggests that a freeborn man be brought in to speak on Teucer’s behalf (1259-61), and that furthermore he can’t understand Teucer’s ‘barbarian tongue’ (1262f.). However, the soldiers of the chorus find Agamemnon’s behaviour equally lacking in sôphrosunê, and they speak to both men when they make the play’s last invocation of the word sôphronein (1264):

\[\text{Chorus: eîθ' ύμίν ὁμοῖοι νοῦς γένοιτο σωφρονεῖν.}\]

You should both become more reasonable. [Watling]
I wish you both might learn a moderate mind! [Moore]
May you both have the sense to show restraint. [Dutta]
You both should listen to reason. [Golder & Pevear]

At the end of a speech all about how Teucer should know his place, the chorus shift the semantics of sôphronein to something more general: being moderate, which is precisely the kind of general comment most choruses make because moderation is usually needed at such junctures.

All this emphasis on Teucer’s mixed ethnicity seems calculated to serve a few purposes: it raises fears about how Ajax’s son Eurysaces might be treated in the future, given that the boy’s mother Tecmessa is a slave; it allows Teucer to take the sons of Atreus down a peg by airing the dirty laundry of their family tree (Agamemnon’s paternal grandfather was a Phrygian, and Agamemnon’s mother was a Cretan who was put to death for her adultery, 1291-97); and most importantly, it allows for further evaluation of who exactly is committing hubris, and what hubris is. Is Teucer really committing hubris by speaking freely? Or is Agamemnon’s and Menelaus’ insistence on aristocratic order out of place? Eleutherostomein and the concept of ‘speaking freely’ surely have semantic connections with parrhêsia, ‘freedom of speech’, more specifically the privilege to address the Athenian assembly. In Euripides’ Hippolytus, parrhêsia is so highly valued that Phaedra would rather kill herself and claim that she had been raped, rather than admit to adulterous thoughts and run the risk of ruining not only her reputation, but the reputation of her sons, who would be deprived of parrhêsia if there was a scandal regarding their mother’s chastity (Hipp. 419-25). Even though the verb eleutherostomein in tragedy is not used explicitly in a political context, the adjective eleutherostomos (‘of a free mouth’) is used politically at Aeschylus’ Suppliants 948. The King of Argos tells the Herald from Egypt that the suppliant women will be given protection; this is not inscribed on tablets or printed on the folds of books, but instead the Herald hears it clearly ex eleutherostomou glossês, ‘from a tongue of a free mouth’, or in H.W. Smyth’s translation, ‘from free-spoken lips’. In this case at least, the ‘free mouth’ refers not to glibness of tongue or confidence derived from wealth, stubbornness, or even bad manners; since a king utters these words, the ‘free mouth’ surely refers to the free status of the speaker, and the privileges of power. It is possible, therefore, that when Agamemnon chides Teucer for hu-brizein and eleutherostomein in the same breath, he is dangerously close to offending the democratically minded Athenian audience, for whom speaking freely was a right and a privilege, not an act of hubris.
Finally, at the play’s resolution, when Odysseus has persuaded Agamemnon to allow Ajax’s body to be buried, an astounded Teucer reflects on how Odysseus (contrary to expectation) did not allow others to offer *hubris* to (*ephubrizein*) Ajax’s corpse (1383-85):

*Teucer:* τούτω γάρ ἄνω ἔχθισσας Ἀργείων ἄνήρ
μόνος παρέστης χερσὶν, οὐδ’ ἐπεὶς παρόν
θανόντι τῶδε ζών ἐφυβρίσασι μεγα.

You were my brother’s bitterest enemy;/yet here you have stood alone in his defense,/refusing to be a party to gross *outrage*/offered by the living to the dead. [Watling]

For though you hated him worst of the Argives,/you alone came to help, and did not wish,/because you lived, to *outrage* him in death. [Moore]

Of all the Greeks you were his greatest enemy,/yet you alone came to his aid. You did not dare, as one of the living, to *stand and wrong* the dead. [Dutta]

The man he most hated was the one man/of all the Greeks who stood by him,/and would not endure while he lived/to see *outrage* done to the dead. [Golder & Pevear]

The point of all this is that *hubris* is not insolence or pride or some tragic flaw associated with the character of Ajax. Instead, *hubris* in this play appears in association with insults, outrage, mockery, or violence. It is true that Ajax intended an act of *hubris* (i.e., violence) on his enemies; but it is also *hubris* for the Greeks to mock Ajax. To complicate matters, the sons of Atreus have their own understanding of *hubris* based on aristocratic notions of superiors and subordinates, freeborn men and half-castes; but this understanding is constantly undercut and is likely to have sounded politically incorrect in front of a fifth-century democratic Athenian audience. In the end, the ultimate *hubris* would be to leave Ajax’s body unburied. This is where Odysseus’ experience is central to the play; he learns an important lesson from Ajax’s suicide: that there is a place for *forgiveness*. Even in an army camp where the leaders assume that *sôphrosunê* derives from obedience, and everyone is capable of committing *hubris* against each other by mocking their enemies even when they are dead, Odysseus argues for a better action: to let go of anger against your enemy when he is defeated, and to forgive.

IV. The Character of Ajax

*Interviewer:* Do you think she can be justified in killing her own children?

*Maya:* Wrong question, BBC. Ask the right question. Ask what desperation brought her to kill what she loved most in the world.

*A Dream of Passion*

In Jules’ Dassin’s 1978 film *A Dream of Passion*, a Greek film star named Maya (played by Melina Mercouri) learns how to perform the role of Medea by interviewing an American woman, Brenda Collins (played by Ellen Burstyn) who was imprisoned for murdering her children after her husband abandoned her. In the scene quoted above, Maya is at a party doing a mock interview for the BBC. The interviewer specifically asks Maya about Brenda Collins, but the question is really about the character of Medea as well. Through her visits with
Brenda, Maya has learned that Euripides’ tragedy has the most dramatic power when we stop asking whether Medea was justified in killing her children, and ask instead what drove her to kill the persons she loved most.

What does Euripides’ Medea have to do with Sophocles’ Ajax? The two plays have a couple of things in common: a man (Jason, Ajax) who loves his son(s), a woman (Medea, Tecmessa) whose social status is precariously dependent on her relationship with her husband, and protagonists who attempt murders of revenge. But more to the point, both plays force us to empathise with those extraordinary circumstances that drive men and women to rash actions. Agamemnon calls Ajax a hubristês; but what sort of hubristês was he? On the one hand, no one denies that Ajax attempted to murder his fellow warriors Odysseus and the sons of Atreus. Can we, the audience, condone the fact that he tried to commit murder? Probably not; but as in the case of the Medea, it is less important to decide whether Ajax was justified in trying to murder Agamemnon, Menelaus and Odysseus, or even whether Ajax was justified in committing suicide; it is more important to understand what drove him to those rash actions.

Ah, but what if your students ask, ‘Doesn’t the play show that Ajax was fated to die?’? Sophocles always stacks the deck to give the impression that the life of mortals is predestined. In this case, he gives us Athena, who in her Prologue is responsible for Ajax’s madness in the first place, and furthermore hints that a man’s fortune can change in one day (131f.); Ajax’s musings on his Greek name Aias sounding like aiëi (‘alas!’), meaning that he has been doomed since birth (430ff.); Calchas’ prophecy that this day brings either life or death to Ajax (802); Teucer’s story of the exchange of gifts with Hector (1024ff.), with the result that Ajax killed himself with Hector’s accursed sword. It all adds up to an aura of predestination; but perhaps Sophocles is really showing how humans have a tendency to blame things on fate, when in fact fate does not exist. Human choices determine events, but we find consolation after the fact in blaming something beyond our control.

So, on the one hand, we may be meant to appreciate the series of events and choices that lead to a character’s ruin; whether Ajax is right in trying to kill his comrades or himself is less relevant. On the other hand, tragic heroes who are driven to commit rash actions do not do so in a vacuum, and the Greek playwrights were masters at subtly compelling their audience to engage with these heroes at ethical levels that could prove disturbing even whilst they might be empowering. Euripides’ Medea once again is instructive. Despite the fact that she kills her own children, not to mention King Creon of Corinth and his unnamed daughter, Medea nonetheless even today resonates powerfully with readers (particularly feminist ones) who see in Medea a model of the abused woman who fights back against the patriarchal oppression whose embodiment is Jason. The play’s chorus of women offers Medea a solid female solidarity through much of the play, thus adding to the potential for reading Medea as a positive, almost liberating, character. The fact that the chorus women change their minds in mid-play often does not alter the opinion of most young readers, who even when they get to university idolise Medea as the woman who wouldn’t take any more and fought back, yet in so doing sacrificed what was dearest to her. Similarly, it might be possible to read Ajax as an empowering hero, despite his attempt at murder. If Menelaus’ and Agamemnon’s arguments represent the aristocratic and anti-democratic power structure of the Greek army, as well as that

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power structure’s anxieties about the common man’s dangerous capacity for ruining everything, then Ajax may be something of a democratic hero who fights back against the tyranny whose embodiment is the sons of Atreus. As Jon Hesk observes (bearing in mind that Menelaus calls Ajax a hubristês, and Agamemnon accuses Teucer of hubris in speaking freely): ‘Ajax and Teucer may both, and in their different ways, embody the kind of hubristic behaviour which, while transgressive in societal or legal terms, is sometimes necessary in the face of tyranny and injustice.’

Perhaps the chorus men agree; at the very least, they raise the question, Who exactly is committing hubris here? As in the Medea, the chorus of the Ajax is a character in its own right, with its own highly charged opinions that can influence how a theatre audience or a reader understands the action. The chorus of the Ajax, composed of soldiers loyal to Ajax, calls Menelaus himself a hubristês (1092) when he threatens Teucer with death if he attempts to bury his brother.

Ultimately, what do we ‘feel’ about Ajax, and is it worth ‘feeling’ anything? Students often talk about whether they ‘like’ the characters they read; and if they don’t ‘like’ them, they worry that they haven’t read the play correctly. Perhaps looking for likeable characters in tragedy (as if they were soap operas) is not a useful approach. I do think Sophocles tries to make his audience feel both empathy and sympathy for Ajax, by allowing him to act out pathetic moments. Ajax’s insistence that he speak with his son Euryptasia surely highlights his love for his son (although, interestingly, the speech, 545-78, is less about Euryptasia than about the torment Ajax is going through); and Ajax’s suicide speech, too, resonates with the anxieties and self-esteem issues of the Everyman. But Sophocles is not too interested in giving Ajax ‘redeemable qualities’. Even though the ancients said that Sophocles could create a character in half a line, it was not his project to invent a psychologically/ethically consistent ‘character’ in the modern sense. Ajax, Menelaus, Agamemnon and Teucer are more like ‘functions’ in a narrative about friends and enemies. For me, the play is about a moment in the Trojan War when the Greeks, who should be allies and friends to each other, become so involved in their own rivalry with each other that a man commits suicide; yet the suicide is the catalyst for one man’s (Odysseus’) revelation that things must change; and significantly, the leaders in power (Agamemnon and Menelaus) do not have the same revelation. In such a plot, Ajax happens to be the man whose death teaches Odysseus a valuable ethical lesson. Ajax is the Greek who is driven by hate and jealousy to attempt to kill his comrades; but when he fails, he is so overwhelmed by shame (but not guilt) and the fear of being laughed at, that he kills himself. And like most Greek men in tragedy, Ajax refuses to be persuaded by appeals to emotion, or by a woman’s arguments.

Even such a functional reading of the play can still have relevance for readers today. This is because the crisis of the plot is a universal one. We have all been in situations where people who should be our peers become our rivals, and our fear of embarrassment or losing face in front of them can drive us to desperate actions. This can happen as easily in the schoolroom or the workplace as it did in the army camp outside Troy. All of us have also had to deal with structures of authority that demand our obedience, whether in relationships with a partner, in families, in peer groups, or in society. Often we allow ourselves to participate in the very structures that actually oppress us; we are told to be ‘sensible’, when in fact being ‘sensible’

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22 Hesk (n.10 above), 148.
amounts either to being unethical or to being used. Occasionally we feel like fighting back, and occasionally we do. If Ajax has one ‘redeemable’ quality, it is arguably his ability to question the definition of sôphrosunê, which in the Greek army of the Trojan War seems to mean obedience to the tyrannical leaders; but it is unfortunate for Ajax that his way of resisting this definition is ultimately self-defeating, and only one person (Odysseus, rather than the leaders themselves) is moved by it.

Appendix

SOPHOCLES’ AJAX - TWO GREEK WORDS

(1) SOPHROSYNE – being sophron

ATHENA (131-132, to Odysseus):
The gods love goodness, and all abhor what is evil. [E.F.Watling]
Know that the gods love men of steady sense and hate the proud. [John Moore]
[Literally, ‘the gods love those who are sophron...’]

AJAX (586, to Tecmessa):
Ask me no questions. Possess yourself in patience. [E.F.Watling]
Don’t probe and question! It becomes you to submit. [John Moore]
[Literally, ‘It would be good (for you) to be sophron’]

AJAX (678 – in his ‘deception’ speech):
Must we not learn this self-discipline? I think we must. [E.F.Watling]
Shall I not learn place and wisdom? [Moore]
[Literally, ...’learn to be sophron’]

MENELAUS (1076):
There is no order in any camp that is not fenced about with discipline and respect. [Watling]
No army without its shield of fear or reverence can be well governed. [Moore]
[Literally, ‘it would not be governed in a sophron manner...’]

AGAMEMNON (1260, to Teucer):
Come, behave yourself. [E.F.Watling]
I say, learn moderation! [John Moore]
[Literally, ‘Be sophron!”]

CHORUS (1265):
You should both become more reasonable. [E.F.Watling]
I wish you both might learn a moderate mind! [John Moore]
[Literally, ...‘that you both be sophron’]
TEACHING SOPHOCLES’ AJAX

(2) HUBRIS

hubristes (one who commits hubris); hubrisein (to commit hubris)

CHORUS (153, about Ajax)
…the mocking laughter rises against you. [E.F. Watling]
…each new hearer relishes his chance to insult at your distress. [John Moore]
[Literally, ‘committing hubris against’]

CHORUS (196, about Ajax):
Malice and hatred walk unhindered... [Watling]
...your enemies’ bold outrage freshens [John Moore]
[ Literally, ‘your enemies’ hubris...’]

TECMESSA (304, describing Ajax):
...about the trick he had served them in this escapade. [EF Watling]
...how he’d paid them, Odyseeus and the sons of Atreus. [John Moore]
[ Literally, ‘he paid hubris...’]

AJAX (367, of himself):
Laugh, laugh at his shame!  [Watling]
What a mockery I have come to!  What indignity!  [Moore]
[ Literally, How I am hubrised!’ (or, “How hubris is committed against me!”)]

AJAX (560, to Eurysaces):
There’s not a Greek will dare to lift a finger to hurt or shame you. [Watling]
The Greeks will not offer you outrage or hatefully insult you. [Moore]
[ Literally, ‘no one would commit hubris...’]

CHORUS (956, speaking of Odysseus):
The ‘much-enduring’ man will laugh to his black heart’s content [Watling]
That waiting, labouring man, how he insults in his black heart!  [Moore]
[ Literally, ‘he commits hubris in his heart’]

MENELAUS (1061, speaking of Ajax):
The god drew off the assault, so that it fell upon our sheep and cattle. [Watling]
But God changed his criminal heart to fall on sheep and cattle. [Moore]
[ Literally, ‘this man’s hubris’]

MENELAUS (1081, to Teucer):
Where licence reigns, and insolence, the ship of state is doomed. [E.F.Watling]
But insubordination, and the rule of do-as-you-like invariably, mark my words...  [Moore]
[ Literally, ‘where committing hubris is what is done...’]
MENELAUS (1088, pointing to Ajax):
This was a man once proud and full of fire; now I’m the one to boast. [Watling]
A while ago he was the hot aggressor; now it’s I who entertain large ideas. [Moore]
[Literal, ‘this man was a committer of hubris’ (hubristes)]

CHORUS: (1092, to Menelaus):
Should you not beware of outrage on the dead? [EF Watling]
Don’t shame them now by outrage to the dead. [John Moore]
[Literal, ‘...being a committer of hubris (hubristes) on the dead’]

TEUCER (1150, to Menelaus):
I have seen a fool, mocking his friends’ misfortune. [Watling]
I once saw a man inflated with foolishness, who insulted the misfortunes of his neighbours. [Moore]
[Literal, ‘he committed hubris’]

AGAMEMNON (1259, to Teucer):
...unless your curb that insolent tongue... [EF Watling]
Your sauciness! [John Moore]
[Literal, ‘You are committing hubris!”]

TEUCER (1385, to Odysseus):
You have stood alone in his defence, refusing to be a party to gross outrage offered by the living to the dead. [Watling]
You alone came to help, and did not wish, because you lived, to outrage him in death. [Moore]
[Literal, ‘to offer hubris’]