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Sea Imagery in Sophocles' Ajax

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The sea occupies a special place in Sophocles' *Ajax*,¹ no less on account of the drama's setting and the protagonist's place of origin – two factual points of reference, which are, however, not bereft of emotional implications. Troy and Salamis / Greece are, quite naturally, treated as charged landscapes, viewed not only in opposition to but also in conjunction with one another – in past, present, and future.

The sea's significance is, nonetheless, not confined to that spatial aspect. Sea imagery (and water imagery, more loosely) regularly finds its way into the characters' rhetoric, whether when they depict their distinct predicament and shifting emotional state – primarily up to Ajax's suicide – or when they debate (ostensibly) universal and timeless moral norms – mostly with respect to Ajax's posthumous fate. In both fields, and for all the nuances involved, the characters exploit and 'appropriate' a familiar range of the sea's diverse attributes; by its very nature the sea may be – and in the play is treated as – both boundless and restrictive; both proverbially still and *par excellence* restless; a liberating, lifesaving or self-preserving entity, as well as a perilous or a downright destructive one.

On account of these versatile traits, sea imagery relates to the ideas of permanence, continuity or stability versus those of fluidity, unpredictability or precariousness – ideas that occupy a special place in the drama, whether they refer to mental states, values, judgments, and beliefs or courses of action. These antithetical states are actually presumed to embrace and variously affect both the animate and the inanimate world.

Regardless of their particular function or texture in particular contexts, the sea and the water element are consistently associated with unrealized possibilities, erroneous estimations, and unattainable, frustrated or reversed expectations.² Thus, as will be shown below, the relevant passages ultimately, if subtly, contribute to the heightening of the suspense with respect to the play's two main, *par excellence* suspenseful, crises – Ajax's suicide and Ajax's burial.

I will now outline the utilization of sea imagery in the play, before paying close attention to particular passages. The sea holds a pragmatic relevance to Ajax's and

¹ The edition used here is that of H. Lloyd-Jones and N. Wilson 1990.

² About the broader element of surprise in the play (primarily with respect to its staging but also with respect to its adaptation of the traditional story) see Heath and O'Kell 2007: 363-380.

his men's status as participants in a major military expedition, primarily signifying their long-lasting separation from their homeland and from their blissful life therein (597-608). The sea forms the 'boundary' between Troy and Greece (460-1) and constitutes a basic part of the landscape in which the drama is set – outside Ajax's tent, located by the ships of the Achaeans (3 [σκηνᾶϊς ... ναυτικᾶϊς], 190 [ἐφάλοις κλισίαις], 460 [ναυλόχους ... ἔδρας]). These are the very ships that the hero had once defended and saved, as Teucer recalls (1273-82). Ajax's tent is stationed at the camp's outer edge (4 [τάξιν ἐσχάτην]), i.e. at the border between sea and land – 'the inhabited, formed space of men' in the words of Segal, who views the particular location as suggestive of the hero's 'liminality' or marginality.³ On the other hand, the tent's location might precisely testify to Ajax's commonly recognized status as the bulwark of the army – hence, to his prominent 'communal' role.⁴

The sea is not only a prominent feature of the Troad but also of Ajax's and his men's homeland, the 'sea-girt' island of Salamis (134-5, τῆς ἀμφιρύτου / Σαλαμῖνος; 597, ἀλίπλακτος); the Chorus of Salaminian sailors are repeatedly defined by their maritime skill or activity (201, 349, 357) – which also binds them with the Athenian *dēmos* / audience.⁵ Throughout the play, Troy and Salamis are recurrently, and quite expectedly, contrasted by virtue of their status as a *par excellence* hostile and a *par excellence* beloved place, respectively; yet, they are also brought together or assimilated, in the context of the wider reversals or contradictions of the motif of friendship and enmity that pervade the drama.⁶

Alongside these factual, topographical aspects, sea imagery comes up in most of the characters' reflections and deliberations. The sea and kindred elements (springs, rivers, streams) are spoken of not only as impersonal features of the natural landscape but also as charged parts of the cultural landscape or as virtually personified agents that intersect with human life. This is all the more true for Ajax, whose relationship with the sea appears to be the most 'individualised' and the most conceptual(ised) or abstract one. The hero's relevant rhetoric forms a part of his ongoing struggle not only to pinpoint but also to communicate his new or changing position / identity – in his group and in the broader scheme of things – following a radical disturbance of the normal state of affairs.

Prior to his unforeseen plight – the failure to obtain Achilles' arms and, more crucially, his deranged attack on his comrades – Ajax had been fostering an amicable, both self-validating and community-oriented, relationship with the aquatic

³ Segal 1981: 122.

⁴ Just like the similar location of Achilles' tent. See *Il.* 8.224-6, 11.7-9; Quint. Smyrn. 5.211-14.

⁵ For various aspects of the sailors' conceptual relation to the Athenians see Gardiner 1987: 74-78; Barker 2009: 309-324; Murnaghan 2011: 245-267; Rose 2012: 253-261.

⁶ See especially Blundell 1989: 60-105.

world, whether at Salamis or at Troy. Addressed by his people as the one who ‘holds the throne of wave-washed Salamis by the sea’ (134-5), the hero has been nurtured by the Trojan springs and rivers for long (862-3), and he has triumphed on the shores of the Troad (1273-82).

The slaughtering of the cattle marks the decisive turning-point; upon realizing what he has done, Ajax exploits the sea’s versatile nature to reflect his own upheaval – in quite poetic terms.⁷ The hero first visualises himself being violently cut off from the (human and natural) environment by a sweeping wave (351-3). Later, however, he turns to the sea as a channel that could allegedly enable his reintegration into society (654-6, 674-5). This is a means of rescue that both sounds and turns out to be deeply ambiguous.⁸

The varied or shifting ways in which Ajax perceives and relates to the world around him have a decisive bearing on his people’s relevant stance. The Chorus in particular associate the sea with their concrete state and lot; depending on how they interpret their master’s distinct (re)actions and stated intentions, the sailors employ sea imagery in connection with their tangible fears (251-2) or wishes (245-50, 1216-22) – regarding their very survival, rather than more abstract concerns – which remain unrealized and unattainable, respectively. The only time the men express their exuberant optimism and confidence (by also involving the sea), they turn out to be terribly belied (695, 702-5). As a result, the sea retains some ‘unreachable’ or ‘unresponsive’ quality that enforces their feeling of isolation, insecurity, and recurring frustration, and that simultaneously heightens the audience’s anticipation.

The other characters, be they Ajax’s friends or enemies, allude to the sea or to water’s elusive quality in the context of their debating strategy and in association with broader moral imperatives pertaining to the twofold crisis (suicide / burial), rather than their particular emotional state or immediate reactions. Tecmessa, Teucer, and Menelaus (attempt to) link the sea’s or the water’s generic qualities with the workings of human relationships and dispositions in generalizing terms (through gnomic statements, *fables*, trite metaphors).

Ajax’s closest family members, Tecmessa and Teucer, who find themselves in a seriously adverse and risky position,⁹ strive to persuade those in charge (Ajax and

⁷ For Ajax’s lyric and the elevated, as well as ambiguous or even cryptic, language see Buxton 2006: 13-23; Lardinois 2006: 213-223; Nooter 2012: 213-214.

⁸ Ajax’s suicide is, of course, the subject of varying, much discussed interpretations (in relation to crucial aspects of the heroic code, the institution of hero-cult etc.). What interests us here is the way in which the hero associates the sea with his condition or course of action (and the way in which his words are interpreted by his audience).

⁹ And who are anyway ‘marginal(ised)’ due to their very origin and status (a barbarian concubine and a semi-barbarian bastard son).

the Atreids, respectively) to grant them some fundamental ‘rights’. Despite working towards different goals, Tecmessa and Teucer struggle to secure that gratitude (*charis*) does not ‘flow away’ (522-4, 1266-67), but ‘flow away’ it does – at least on behalf of their interlocutors at the time. In the former case (Tecmessa’s pleas), this ‘flowing away’ of *charis* corresponds to Ajax’s death, which comes as an unexpected blow to his people – in the light of the hero’s alleged change of mind in the second *episode*. In the latter case (Teucer’s claims), the ‘flowing away’ of *charis* corresponds to the dishonouring of Ajax’s corpse, which is averted in a quite unexpected way – for both the spectators and the internal audience.

At the other end of the spectrum, Menelaus resorts to generic sea imagery while attempting to indict or refute his rivals and assert both his moral and his ‘formal’ authority. For one thing, Menelaus uses a trite sea metaphor in order to highlight Ajax’s *hubristic* nature (1081-83) and, hence, validate his own controversial decision to prohibit the hero’s burial. On top of that, he employs a *fable* involving the sea in order to suppress dissent – that is, to silence Teucer, his contestant in the *agōn* (1142-46). Both of his attempts are unsuccessful. Menelaus’ fervent admonitions and threats against the brothers are not realized and even manifestly fail to intimidate or affect his opponent – as well as Odysseus himself, Ajax’s major former enemy.

1. Ajax’s spontaneous, unsettling response to the crisis: the inescapable ‘wave of troubles’ and the (deranged?) urge for death.

Even before Ajax’s appearance on stage, his thoroughly confused people articulate their intense foreboding, partly by alluding to the sea. In the first *kommos*, in which Tecmessa and the Chorus piece together the clues about Ajax’s unsettling night attack, the sailors use a nautical metaphor to depict the dreadful threats that the leaders of the army are speeding against them (251-2, *τοίας ἐρέσσουσιν ἀπειλᾶς δικρατεῖς Ἀτρεΐδαι / καθ’ ἡμῶν*).¹⁰ The alternative means of escape which they momentarily consider are nonviable – either to steal away on foot or to do what they know best, i.e. take their seat upon the rowers’ bench and hastily set sail (245-50).

Ajax himself does not seem to be able to offer a reassuring alternative. His first reaction after realizing that he has killed the herds instead of his enemies – and that he has thus been irreversibly disgraced – is weeping. In his *kommos* with Tecmessa and the Chorus, who continue to be at a loss as to whether their master is sane or still mad / sick, the hero laments the terrible wave that rapidly whirls around him, brought on by a lethal storm (351-3, *ἴδεσθέ μ’ οἶόν ἄρτι κῦ- / μα φοινίας ὑπὸ ζάλης / ἀμφίδρομον κυκλεῖται*;¹¹ cf. 206-7, 257-8). That wave is both literal (the blood of the

¹⁰ For metaphorical uses of the verb *ἐρέσσω* (‘row’, ‘put in quick motion’, ‘ply’) cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 854-6; Soph. *Ant.* 158.

¹¹ Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 665.

slaughtered animals) and metaphorical (Ajax's own frenzy and humiliation).¹² It is also a wave that his people are emphatically called to witness,¹³ even though they cannot do anything to ward it off – other than kill their lord on the spot, as Ajax requests (361); this is, of course, a non-option. The sailors actually (and mistakenly) take the hero's reference to the 'the turbulent sea of his troubles' and his urge to be killed as clear indications that he has not, in fact, come to his senses (354-5).

Finding himself totally cut off from his peers (friends and enemies), not only in Troy but also at Salamis, across the Aegean,¹⁴ Ajax accordingly concludes his song with a string of loaded, lyric apostrophes to nature (412-27) – the roaring straits of the sea (πόροι ἀλίρροθοι), the caves and meadows by the shore (πάραλά τ' ἄντρα καὶ νέμος ἐπάκτιον), and Scamander's neighbouring streams (ὦ Σκαμάνδριοι / γείτονες ῥοαί). The hero mentions these landmarks only in conjunction with his alienation (εὔφρονες Ἀργείοις)¹⁵ and his wish or determination to dissociate himself from them, i.e. to terminate his life; the Troad will never see him again while he still breathes (416-17, 421-2). In his prayer before the suicide indeed, the hero bids farewell to the Trojan plains, springs, and rivers (the last elements that he addresses); Ajax now defines these elements as his long-term nurturers (863, ὦ τροφῆς ἐμοί), which have not only detained (414-15, πολὺν πολὺν με δαρὸν τε δὴ / κατείχεται ἄμφι Τροίαν χρόνον) but also sustained him for a long time, substituting, in some sense, his homeland and family.¹⁶

2. Ajax's sober, 'reassuring' response to the crisis: the cleansing sea, the roaring sea, and the deceptive haven of companionship.

In Ajax's so-called 'deception speech' (646-92),¹⁷ however, the sea comes in as a channel that might provide the hero with a means of rescue – both literally and

¹² See Finglass 2011: 242. For the conventional use of storm imagery in descriptions of madness and derangement cf. e.g. Eur. *Her.* 1091-93; Eur. *Or.* 279. See further Padel 1992: 91-92.

¹³ For the intricate workings and central significance of sight / vision / shame in the play see Heath 1987: 180-181; Cairns 1993: 231; Williams 1993: 85; Gill 1996: 206-207; Lawrence 2005: 21-22. See also the next Footnote (about Telamon).

¹⁴ See 460-4, where a more composed Ajax rejects the possibility of sailing back to his ancestral palace outright, on the grounds of the debilitating shame he would feel when facing his father. The Aegean 'pathway' cannot be of any service.

¹⁵ Lloyd-Jones and Wilson read *κακόφρονες* ('malevolent'); the reading *εὔφρονες*, however, strengthens the idea of Ajax's profound isolation and conscious separation from his peers. See Renehan 1992: 344-346; Garvie 1998: 164.

¹⁶ Cf. 849 (τῆ τε δυστήνω τροφῶ) about his mother; more indirectly 861 (κλειναί τ' Ἀθῆναι, καὶ τὸ σύντροφον γένος) about Salamis / Athens.

¹⁷ Conflicting interpretations of the obvious ambiguous tone and content of that famous speech have been rigorously discussed. See the summary of scholarly views in Garvie 1998: 184-186; Finglass 2011: 328-329.

figuratively; the speech, therefore, greatly relieves the internal audience (the Chorus and Tecmessa) and at the same time complicates the spectators' expectations. On the one hand, Ajax is intent on utilising the 'standard', eternal purificatory attributes of sea water; on the other hand, he has allegedly decided to assimilate himself to the ever-changing elements of the natural world, including the sea. Both expectations, at least as perceived by his people, will soon be frustrated.

Ajax first announces that he will go to the bathing-place and the meadows by the shore so that he may purge his defilements, i.e. the blood of the slaughtered animals, and escape Athena's heavy wrath (654-6, *ἀλλ' εἴμι πρὸς τε λουτρά καὶ παρακτίους / λειμῶνας, ὡς ἂν λύμαθ' ἀγνίσας ἐμὰ / μῆνιν βαρεῖαν ἐξαλύξωμαι θεᾶς*).¹⁸ This quite practical redeeming act will supposedly take place in solitude, unseen by anyone (cf. 351-3).

Even more strikingly, in the public arena, Ajax appears determined to change his attitude and behaviour in accordance with the rule of alteration that governs the natural world. The hero has just learned that he should relate flexibly to friends and enemies, since these attributes are by no means fixed. On top of that, he has learned how to yield to his superiors, just like winter gives way to summer and night gives way to day, and just like the groaning sea is eventually put to rest after having been stirred by strong winds (674-5, *δεινῶν τ' ἄημα πνευμάτων ἐκοίμισε / στένοντα πόντον*).¹⁹ Sleep itself, however, does not last forever, as Ajax goes on to relate (675-6) – hence, we may deduce, the sea is not expected to be eternally quiet and still.

Alteration and change in the natural world are indeed presumed to be periodical, mutual, and perpetual, governed by the principle of equality,²⁰ whereas human relationships (in the hero's mind) appear to be random (678-82) and at the same time hierarchical (667-8). This is a likely marker that Ajax's stated realizations and decisions, the analogy of his predicament with what happens in nature, cannot be taken as genuine or coherent,²¹ as is also suggested by his concluding gnomic statement.

Ajax's newly understood shiftiness of human relationships and the deriving need for adaptability are rounded off with a maritime metaphor; for most mortals, the hero

¹⁸ See Beaulieu 2016: 226, Footnote 17. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 1.312-14; Eur. *IT* 1191-93. For the ambiguity of the hero's purification see suggestively Currie 2012: 333-334; Knox 1979: 134-135 about the common connection (in Sophocles) of the word *λουτρά* with burial preparations – the washing of the corpse (e.g. Soph. *Aj.* 1405; Soph. *Ant.* 901, 1201).

¹⁹ For the groaning sea cf. Eur. *Her.* 861. For the calm sea as being asleep cf. Simon. 38.22; Hom. *Il.* 5.524.

²⁰ Cf. Eur. *Phoen.* 541-8, as well as Heracl. fr. 94 D-K; Anaxim. fr. 12 B D-K.

²¹ See also Kyriakou 2011: 208-214.

‘concedes’, the haven of friendship is untrustworthy (682-3, *τοῖς πολλοῖσι γὰρ / βροτῶν ἄπιστός ἔσθ’ ἑταιρείας λιμῆν*).²² The focus is here shifted to a natural feature that is intended to offer shelter from the inhospitable sea itself. The water element is ultimately equated with human dispositions; both of them are fluid and, therefore, unreliable, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous. However, whilst nature may provide some protection or ‘respite’ from nature itself, so to speak (sea / haven), human conventions seem to be inadequate to do so. Segal concludes that for Ajax, as for Achilles in the *Iliad*, ‘the vast, unlimited sea is the appropriate setting for communion with the permanence that the human world cannot give’.²³ Nevertheless, the sea is itself treated as shifty and liable to variation; what is juxtaposed here is the (possible) means of protection from the precariousness of both the natural and the human universe, rather than the realms themselves.

Ajax’s maxim about the treacherous nature of friendship echoes, and is partly confirmed by Tecmessa’s and Teucer’s relevant concerns or realizations; both of them also use language associated with water and flowing when appealing to basic interpersonal duties, which are precisely expected to be ‘solid’ and eternally valid. One such imperative is the reciprocation of *charis* (‘favour’, ‘goodwill’) – one of the play’s key themes.²⁴ While trying to protect their interests and / or Ajax himself, both Tecmessa and Teucer moralize about how gratitude should not seep away (*ἀπορρεῖ* [523]; *διαρρεῖ* [1267]) – and both of them are, largely, if not wholly in Tecmessa’s case, unsuccessful.²⁵

Tecmessa’s and Teucer’s sentiments are quite similar, even though each of them naturally lays the stress on different aspects of *charis*. While struggling to persuade Ajax not to abandon her, Tecmessa relies on the pleasure that she has long offered him as a concubine and mother of his son (491-3, 520-2). Tecmessa underscores the importance of the reciprocation of *charis* as a prerequisite for nobility, *εὐγένεια* (522-4, *χάρις χάριν γὰρ ἔστιν ἢ τίκτους’ αἰεῖ / ὅτου δ’ ἀπορρεῖ μνηστῆς εὖ πεπονθότος, / οὐκ ἂν γένοιτ’ ἔθ’ οὗτος εὐγενῆς ἀνήρ*); this is her response to Ajax’s previous definition of the same ideal (479-80). Teucer, on the other hand, bases his demand for burial on his brother’s indispensable services during the war (1268-89), while bringing to the fore the (generic) gratitude and respect owed to the valiant dead (1266-67, *φεῦ τοῦ θανόντος ὡς ταχεῖα τις βροτοῦ / χάρις διαρρεῖ καὶ προδοῦσ’ ἀλίσκεται*) – as does Odysseus (1354-55).

²² Cf. Theog. 113-14 (*μήποτε τὸν κακὸν ἄνδρα φίλον ποιεῖσθαι ἑταῖρον, / ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ φεύγειν ὥστε κακὸν λιμένα*).

²³ Segal 1981: 122.

²⁴ The reason for which Ajax set out to kill his comrades in the first place is his conviction that they manifestly failed to repay him for his services. For violations of the principle of reciprocity in Attic tragedy see more broadly Belfiore 2000.

²⁵ Cf. the woman’s bitter realization following the hero’s suicide, i.e. that she has been cast out of the favour that she once had with him (807-8, *καὶ τῆς παλαιᾶς χάριτος ἐκβεβλημένη*).

For the time being, Ajax's 'deception speech' gladdens his people immensely; the sailors in the second ode no longer treat the sea as a channel to which they would have to rush, contrary to normal expectations, in order to be rescued (245-50) or as an entity that would annihilate them (251-2); instead, they treat the sea as a 'point of entry' that might bring them hope and deliverance in the form of propitious, divine company. The gods to whom the Chorus pray (Pan and Apollo) are primarily associated with music, healing, and light, but they are also believed to have a special bond with the sea. The sailors call Pan 'sea-roaming' (695, ὦ Πάν Πάν ἀλίπλαγκτε)²⁶ and pray that the Delian Apollo might arrive and join them in their ecstatic dance by stepping over the Icarian sea (702-5).

Their joy, however, is short-lived – as is their hope that the universe of the sea would somehow contribute to their rescue. While desperately searching for Ajax in the so-called *epiparodos*, the sailors are forced to extend their appeal to the natural and human environment of the Troad – inimical though it may be under normal circumstances. Their appeals, of course, go unanswered; neither the fishermen, 'the toiling sons of the sea' (879-80, τίς ἄν φιλοπόνων / ἀλιαδᾶν),²⁷ nor the streams of the Bosphorus (881-4, ἦ ῥυτᾶν / Βοσπορίων ποταμῶν; cf. 412-14, 862-3) are able to help them.

After they find out that their lord has killed himself, thereby leaving them unprotected, the sailors are not only reseeded by great fear about the future but also revert to lamenting their long-lasting adversities and risks, brought on by war (third *stasimon* (1185-222)). The nourishing rivers and springs of the Troad which Ajax evoked immediately before his suicide (862-3) are here replaced by the heavy dew that constantly wets the men's hair (1207-8, ἀεὶ πυκινὰς δρόσοις / τεγγόμενος κόμας), within the broader picture of dire hardship and deprivation of all markers of a civilized life. Now that the sailors have, on top of everything else, lost their physical protection and shelter (ἦν μοι / προβολὰ / ... θούριος Αἴας), all that they can do is wish that they might miraculously find themselves sailing beneath the sheltering plateau of Sounion (1216-22 (πόντω / πρόβλημ' ἀλίκλυστον); cf. 245-50), close to sacred Athens and Salamis – i.e. close to their former safety and comfort.

3. Ajax's burial: the ship on stormy seas.

Meanwhile, and against the background of the Chorus' 'self-absorbed' moaning and

²⁶ For Pan's association with the island of Psyttaleia, off Salamis, see Aesch. *Pers.* 448-9; Theocr. 5.14 (where the god is called 'god of the seashore' [τὸν Πᾶνα τὸν ἄκτιον]).

²⁷ The adjective *ἀλιαδᾶν* occurs only here, while the reference to their 'sleepless hunting' (ἔχων ἀϋπνοῦς ἄγρας) reinforces the drama's rich and complex hunting imagery. See Jouanna 1977: 168-186; Detienne and Vernant 1978: 44; Segal 1981: 123-124, who contrasts the fishermen's normal, productive hunting with Ajax's distorted, murderous one.

longing, the urgent issue of Ajax's burial dominates the scene. The heated debates between Teucer and the Atreids explore issues of power, authority, and dissent – bound up as they are with the broader tension between the individual and the collective. In this context, Menelaus twice employs clichéd sea imagery as a means for bringing to light his opponents' (Ajax's and Teucer's) anti-social, hazardous, and unacceptable attitude. The sea is spoken of either as an impersonal symbol of peril and ruin or as a 'chastiser', with reference to the idea of individual unwise daring or transgression that inevitably ends up harming the community. In both cases, however, Menelaus' rhetoric comes across as rather trite and fruitless – and certainly biased, even if some of his sentiments may sound legitimate enough in their own right.²⁸

First, in order to denounce Ajax's insolent attitude, which allegedly defined the hero throughout his life, and underline the need for discipline (*σωφροσύνη*) for the observance of social order, Menelaus employs the common metaphor of the ship of state; if the citizens disobey their leaders (1071-72)²⁹ and act as they please, totally unrestrained by fear and respect (*δέος, φόβος, αἰδώς*), the state will eventually sink into the depths, even if she had been running on fair winds for some time (1081-83, *ὅπου δ' ὑβρίζειν δρᾶν θ' ἄ βούλεται παρῆ / ταύτην νόμιζε τήν πόλιν χρόνῳ ποτέ / ἐξ ούριων δραμοῦσαν εἰς βυθὸν πεσεῖν*).³⁰

The sea metaphor aims at making a quite vivid point about Ajax's alleged dangerousness and marginality; shortly later, however, it is indirectly 'answered' and undermined by Teucer's stress on his brother's tangible success in the very domain of the sea – a vital service to the entire army. As Teucer indignantly reminds Agamemnon, Ajax was the one who defended the Achaeans from Hector's fiery attack on the ships (1273-82).

When Menelaus' moralistic statements and questioning of Ajax's overall worthiness clearly fail to convince or 'teach sense' to Teucer, the former narrows his focus down to his contestant's impudent conduct during the very *agōn* – which is expected to get him into trouble, sooner or later. Resorting to a *fable* involving risky sea travel, Menelaus parallels Teucer to a bold-tongued man who once goaded sailors into setting sail during wintertime; yet, when the storm broke out, all that this man could do was hide beneath his cloak and let the crew trample on him (1142-46, *ναύτας ἐφορμήσαντα χειμῶνος τὸ πλεῖν ... / πατεῖν παρεῖχε τῷ θέλοντι ναυτίλων*). Unlike Menelaus' previous metaphor, the *fable* puts the spotlight on the idea of individual

²⁸ Such as the beneficial social role of shame / respect and fear. Cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 517-25, 696-703; Soph. *Ant.* 672-80.

²⁹ Menelaus actually calls Ajax a *δημότης* ('a commoner'), a clearly demeaning and inappropriate characterization given both the latter's heroic status and his special bond with the city of Athens. See Heath 1987: 200; Hesk 2003: 111.

³⁰ Cf. Alc. fr. 6 (Voigt); Soph. *Ant.* 162-3, 189-90.

punishment and humiliation brought on by a self-inflicted crisis – loosely associated with the sea. The bottom line is that a fierce storm might soon ‘quench’ Teucer’s shouting (1147-49).

Teucer is not at all affected by this cautionary tale and will not be silenced, not even in the general’s presence; he instead replies by employing a (simpler) *fable* himself,³¹ while the *agōn* as a whole is not resolved in any way. What is evident is that Menelaus’ rhetoric, including his sea-related associations, proves to be ineffectual. Both his treatment of Ajax as an unruly commoner – who would cause the ship of state to sink – and his treatment of Teucer as a ‘bully’ – who would disgracefully cower when finding himself on stormy seas or have his voice ‘extinguished’ – are found to be lacking in credibility or validity, and fail to have any substantial impact.

To conclude, the sea in Sophocles’ *Ajax* forms a fixed feature of the landscape, which pragmatically separates but also connects the *par excellence* charged landscapes of Troy and Greece (Athens, Salamis). At the same time, it constitutes a basic part of the drama’s setting – of the Achaeans’ ‘life’ in the Troad and of ‘the theatre of war’.

More intriguingly, in both parts of the play, marked by Ajax’s suicide, the sea comes in as an entity that both partakes in and mirrors a set of conditions that essentially determine the characters’ interrelationships, interaction, and very lot – namely those of permanence, normality, and stability, on the one hand, and change, flux or subversion, on the other. Whether seen as a refuge / ally or as an enemy / annihilator, the sea and the water element end up being recurrently attached to expectations or estimations that turn out to be misleading or irrelevant, unattained or downright false. Thus, aside from enriching the play’s visual universe, sea imagery contributes to the building up of the suspense with respect to the drama’s two tantalising issues, Ajax’s suicide and his corpse’s fate.

³¹ On the use of *fables* in literature see more generally West 1978: 204-205; van Dijk 1997.

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Secondary Literature

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