

An unfit hero: Sophocles' Ajax and the hero's position in the polis.

Sophocles' *Ajax* investigates the well known story of Ajax's suicide after the unfair contest for the arms of Achilles (the ultimate token of heroism), which were awarded to Odysseus and not –as expected- to Ajax. The opening of the Sophoklean tragedy presents to the audience Ajax, exhausted from mental turmoil, who slaughtered cattle in place of the Atreidai, Odysseus and his comrades. His hero's honour has been deeply hurt twice: first by the unfairness of the contest, second by the tragic ridicule of his revenge. Ajax, rated first among the Achaeans after Achilles by Homer, realizes profoundly and irrevocably that he does not belong in a world where heroic virtue (*arête*) is not unquestioningly rewarded but is instead deviously and opportunistically manipulated by the leaders of the *polis*. The *polis* in the Trojan expedition is represented by the army, political authority by the Atreidai and Odysseus. Sophocles states indirectly that the system of moral values from the bygone Homeric era needs radical transformation to be accommodated into the 5th c. *polis* and that the Homeric hero –both offspring and pillar of that system- has to be crushed. Yet, through an intriguing reversal, the dead hero is reintegrated into the *polis* and acquires great political significance as one of the ten eponymous heroes of the Kleisthenes tribe system of the Athenian city-state.