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978-1-107-00307-1 - Sophocles: Ajax

Edited With Introduction, Translation and Commentary by P. J. Finglass

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

## 1 DATE

Sophocles was probably born in the early 490s<sup>1</sup> and died in late 406.<sup>2</sup> Eusebius dates his first production to 470; the Parian Marble puts his first victory in 468.<sup>3</sup> An anecdote in Plutarch describes how Cimon and his fellow generals awarded the first prize in 468 to Sophocles, who was producing for the first time.<sup>4</sup> But since the anecdote contains some fictitious material,<sup>5</sup> Scullion (2002) 87–90 argues that the detail that Sophocles was competing for the first time could also have been made up, with the intention of making Aeschylus' loss more biting. He argues that Sophocles could have competed in, say, 477 at the age of 19 (assuming a birth year of 496), which may be the age at which Aristophanes first produced a play on his own behalf; Eupolis is said to have competed at seventeen.<sup>6</sup> If we insist on tragic comparanda, Aeschylus first competed at around twenty-five, Euripides at thirty;<sup>7</sup> if Sophocles first competed at the same age

<sup>1</sup> Our sources offer the following dates: 498/7 Parian Marble (*TrGF* IV T B 3; he died in 406/5 aged 92), 497/6 Parian Marble (*ibid.* Hc 33; he won his first victory in 469/8 aged 28), 495/4 *Life* (A 1.2), 488–485 *Suda* (A 2).

<sup>2</sup> References to Sophocles in Aristophanes' *Frogs* indicate that he died shortly before its performance in January 405 (see Dover's edition, pp. 7–9, and Sommerstein's, pp. 20–1). This fits with later sources (Parian Marble (*TrGF* IV T B 3), Hypothesis to *Oedipus Coloneus* (*ibid.* He 41), Diodorus Siculus (*ibid.* P 85)) which give the date as 406/5 (i.e. roughly between June 406 and June 405). C. Müller (1995) = (1999b) 196–214 does not convince me that his death occurred in Elaphebolion (i.e. late March/early April) 406.

<sup>3</sup> *TrGF* IV T Hc 32ab and 33 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Plut. *Cimon* 8.7–8 (*TrGF* IV T Hc 36): πρώτην . . . διδασκαλίαν τοῦ Σοφοκλέους ἐτι νέου καθέντος.

<sup>5</sup> It states that Aeschylus took umbrage at his loss and went to Sicily, where he died: this was ten years before his victory with the *Oresteia* in 458, and some time after his original visit to Sicily in the 470s.

<sup>6</sup> See respectively Scullion (2002) 100 and Eupolis test. 1 *PCG*.

<sup>7</sup> Scullion (2002) 100 n. 55 lists the testimonia.

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as Aeschylus, his inaugural tetralogy would have been produced between 473 and 471. Such considerations make Eusebius' date of 470 attractive, but we cannot rule out the possibility of earlier participation. This leaves eight different decades in which the first performance of *Ajax* could fall.

We can begin by ruling out a very early date, since our play requires a skene building. This was in use for Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in 458, but is not required for his *Persae* (472), *Septem* (467), or *Supplices* (470s/460s); hence it was probably introduced some time after 467 and before 458.<sup>8</sup> Hence *Ajax* cannot be earlier than 466.

More specific datings usually rely on comparisons with the other six surviving tragedies. Of these, only two can be dated with certainty: hypotheses reveal that *Philoctetes* was produced in 409, *Oedipus at Colonus* posthumously in 401. *Electra* must be after 458, the date of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*; so probably is *Trachiniae*, since it alludes to *Agamemnon* in an apparently meaningful way (see Easterling's commentary, pp. 21–2). We have no fixed point for *Oedipus Rex*.<sup>9</sup> There are good stylistic grounds for assuming that *Electra* is relatively late (see my edition, p. 1); *Trachiniae* is

<sup>8</sup> Wilamowitz (1886) 606–13 = (1935–72) I 156–63 first makes this point; see further Taplin (1977) 452–9, Sommerstein (2010b) 17–18.

<sup>9</sup> Dicaearchus (fr. 80 Wehrli = *TrGF* IV T Hd 39) tells us that *Oedipus Rex* was defeated by Philocles. He was competing between 424 and 411, since Aristophanes satirises him during that time (*Vesp.* 461–2, *Av.* 281–3, *Thesm.* 168). His son, the tragedian Morsimus, is satirised between 424 and 406 (*Eq.* 400–1, *Pax* 802, *Ran.* 151). If Morsimus was at least 20, say, in 424, his birth was in 444 or earlier; if his father was twenty at the time of his birth, then Philocles could not have been born later than 464. Since he is competing in 411, we can assume that his birth was no earlier than 500. Moreover, Philocles was the son of Aeschylus' sister. If Aeschylus was born in about 525 (see Sommerstein's Loeb, I p. ix), a sister of his might have been fertile as late as, say, 470, but a date somewhere around 490 would seem more probable. It is thus plausible for Philocles to have been competing as early as the 460s; his career would then be almost coterminous with Sophocles', and so his defeat of *Oedipus Tyrannus* does not help to date the play. (Sommerstein (2010b) 13–14 suggests that Philocles lived c. 480–405 and Morsimus c. 450–400.)

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usually thought to be relatively early, and *Oedipus Rex* somewhere in the middle, but I am not aware of a fully-argued statement of the case for either.

The hypothesis to *Antigone*, which is attributed to Aristophanes of Byzantium, states that it was the thirty-second play.<sup>10</sup> The list which generated this figure was not alphabetical, but could have been chronological. If so, it suggests a date in the 450s, on the assumption that Sophocles' plays were spaced evenly throughout his career.<sup>11</sup> Such an assumption, however, is unsafe if Sophocles' dramatic career followed a similar path to that of Euripides, who seems to have produced proportionately more plays towards the end of his life.<sup>12</sup> Both playwrights were presumably more in demand once their reputations were established; and neither suffered diminution of creative powers in old age. The introduction of dramatic competitions at the Lenaea will have provided the opportunity for more productions than in the playwrights' early years.<sup>13</sup> The safer assumption seems to

<sup>10</sup> λέλεκται δὲ τὸ δράμα τοῦτο τριακοστὸν δεύτερον (Pearson's edn). Numbers are particularly subject to textual corruption; we must hope that this is accurate.

<sup>11</sup> If we assume 123 plays by Sophocles (see Sommerstein (2011)), *Antigone* would date to 453 if Sophocles first competed in 468, or 459 if his first competition was in 477.

<sup>12</sup> Euripides first competed in 455, and died in 407/6. The Alexandrian scholars knew of 92 plays by Euripides; 81 titles have reached us. Of these, we have more or less reliable dates for some 60, of which some 45 come from the last twenty years of his life. Assuming an even distribution of plays we would expect only 38 of the 92 from this period. At least some of the 32 plays without a date are likely to have come from this period too, which amplifies the discrepancy. (This information is most conveniently available in the Loeb by Collard and Cropp, 1 xi-xii, xxix-xxxii. AHS drew my attention to these remarkable figures. MLW suggests that 'because of the growing importance of reading and writing in the later fifth century, playwrights took increasing pains to preserve their texts'.)

<sup>13</sup> No explicit testimony associates either with this festival. Bergk (1879) 298 speculatively explains the discrepancy between different reckonings of the total number of Sophocles' victories (24 in the *Suda*, 18 in Apollodorus and Diod. Sic. 13.103; see Test. Hg *TrGF*) by assuming that he won six times at the Lenaea.

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be that Sophocles did write proportionally more plays as he got older, which would probably mean that *Antigone* dates from the 440s.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, let us consider how we might date *Ajax* more precisely.

(i) and (ii) *Interlinear hiatus* and *antilabe*. These two stylometric criteria are best considered together. The following table expresses for each play *a* as a percentage of *b*, where *a* is the percentage of all trimeters ending with hiatus which do not end with a pause, and *b* is the percentage of all trimeters which do not end with a pause.<sup>15</sup> ('All trimeters' in the previous sentence excludes trimeters ending with speaker change.)

<i>Tr.</i>	22.1
<i>Ant.</i>	33.6
<i>Aj.</i>	33.6
<i>OR</i>	39.5
<i>El.</i>	40.6
<i>OC</i>	53.9
<i>Phil.</i>	57.7

The data show that a trimeter ending with hiatus in *Trachiniae* is much more likely than other trimeters in that play to

<sup>14</sup> I disregard the story in the hypothesis that Sophocles' generalship in 441/0 was the result of acclaim for *Antigone*. Scullion (2002) 85–6 rightly sees the sentiments expressed in lines 175–7 (cited by Dem. 19.246–8 as a model of statesmanlike expression) as the reason for the association of the play with this episode in the poet's life.

<sup>15</sup> Figures are from Stinton (1990) 367, a corrected version of *id.* (1977c) 71. Harrison (1941) and (1943) first notes the phenomenon; Stinton (1977c) 68–70 = (1990) 364–6 refines his methodology. Harrison and Stinton use Pearson's edition for their calculations; textual changes since his edition will have altered the figures slightly, though not enough to make them unreliable. The figure for *Trachiniae*, however, may be even less than that given by Stinton, since several of its instances of interlinear hiatus without pause are plausible candidates for emendation on other grounds (see Davies's commentary, pp. 270–2; in the third line of p. 270, for 'more' read 'less'). See Battezzato (2001) = (2008) 103–38 for further discussion and modification of Stinton's approach.

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be followed by a pause. Elsewhere, this tendency is less pronounced. In other words, Sophocles is strict in accompanying most instances of interlinear hiatus in *Trachiniae* with a syntactic pause between the trimeters, so that the clash of vowels is mollified.

The second table gives figures for *antilabe*, or occurrence of speaker change in spoken iambic trimeters at any point except at the end of the trimeter. In the first column I give the number of instances of *antilabe* in a play, then the total number of speaker changes, then the former expressed as a percentage of the latter.<sup>16</sup>

<i>Ant.</i>	0	222	0.0
<i>Tr.</i>	2	199	1.0
<i>OR</i>	10	378	2.6
<i>Aj.</i>	8	214	3.7
<i>El.</i>	16	295	5.4
<i>Phil.</i>	37	325	11.4
<i>OC</i>	44	340	12.9

A similar pattern emerges in both tables. The two highest numbers, by some distance, belong to the two latest plays (although the highest figure for interlinear hiatus goes to the second-last play), while *Antigone*, which is probably forty or fifty years older, has a considerably lower figure. *Electra*, usually taken to be the third latest play on stylistic grounds, has the third highest figure each time; *Trachiniae*, often taken to be an early play, is ranked lowest and second-lowest. There is no obvious literary reason why Sophocles should have chosen to admit interlinear hiatus without pause more freely in some plays than in others. Rather, these data arise from a slow change of compositional

<sup>16</sup> Figures are my own, from my own editions for *Aj.* and *El.*, and Ll-J/W's text for the rest. I include only spoken trimeters, not lyric trimeters or any tetrameters. I do not include *extra metrum* exclamations when totalling speaker changes. I count speaker changes, not trimeters containing speaker changes: so *Phil.* 753 contains four changes of speaker, of which three are counted as instances of *antilabe*.

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style. *Antilabe*, by contrast, is used as a literary device, generally to convey excitement or agitation. But since all seven plays contain copious amounts of such emotion, divergences in the quantity of *antilabe* cannot be put down to the different qualities of the individual dramas. They too must rather reflect the unconscious development of Sophocles' stylistic practice.<sup>17</sup>

The limited data suggest that Sophocles made more use of both hiatus and *antilabe* over time.<sup>18</sup> But we do not have enough fixed points to establish whether these were relatively gradual changes,<sup>19</sup> or subject to sudden lurches in either direction. The latter seems more plausible, seeing that the pairs *Trachiniae/Antigone*, *Ajax/Oedipus Rex*, and *Philoctetes/Oedipus Coloneus* appear in different orders in the two lists, and the difference in each of these pairs for the *antilabe* figures is statistically trivial. This makes it harder to use the data to set parameters on an individual drama such as *Ajax*. We can be fairly confident that it was not one of Sophocles' last plays: say, not after 420. A more precise dating would require us to decide whether to give greater weight to the data involving hiatus (which suggest an early play) or *antilabe* (pointing to a somewhat later date). I am inclined to prefer the former. The smaller amount of *antilabe* in *Oedipus Rex* compared with *Ajax*, as a proportion of all speaker change found in trimeters (*OR* has 33 changes of speaker for every hundred trimeters, *Aj.* only 22), reflects the greater density of speaker

<sup>17</sup> Kitto (1939) 178–83 (approved by Stinton (1977c) 72 = (1990) 368) attacks the use of *antilabe* as a criterion for dating. Believing that it is a stylistic device aimed at creating particular kinds of dramatic excitement (p. 179), he argues that a drama employing fewer of these kinds of excitement will have fewer *antilabai*. But Kitto's putative taxonomy of excitement, according to which certain sorts of emotion merit *antilabe*, and some not, involves special pleading. For example, he argues that while *Antigone* does contain 'dramatic excitement' (p. 180), it is not 'sharp or palpitating' enough to merit this stylistic feature.

<sup>18</sup> Wolff p. 137 first pointed this out for *antilabe*.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. resolution rates in the Euripidean trimeter, on which see my *Electra*, p. 2 n. 2.

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change in the trimeters of the former play.<sup>20</sup> So even though *OR* has more instances of *antilabe* than *Aj.*, the comparative rarity of speaker change in the latter (caused by the greater number of long speeches and monologues) ensures that its percentage figure is lower. Moreover, *OR* arguably shows greater maturity in its handling of *antilabe*, since it is found there not just in blocks (626–9, 1173–6), as in *Ajax* (591–4, 981–5), but also in single lines (676, 1120).<sup>21</sup>

I tentatively conclude that figures for hiatus, not those for *antilabe*, give the more reliable information for *Ajax*; and that these indicate a fairly early play, perhaps from roughly the same time as *Antigone*. The absence of *antilabe* from *Antigone*, and its near absence from *Trachiniae*, suggest that these plays are earlier than *Ajax*. But the data will not bear much weight, and it remains possible that *Ajax* is earliest of the three.

(iii) The form of the parodos, recited choral anapaests followed by choral lyric, is paralleled by Aeschylus' *Persae* (472), *Supplices* (470s/460s: see Scullion (2002) 90–101), and *Agamemnon* (458), but nowhere else in Sophocles. The nearest parallel occurs in the *Antigone* parodos, which interweaves lyric and anapaestic stanzas. This might have been a feature of earlier tragedy.<sup>22</sup>

(iv) The transitional choral anapaests at 1163–7 can be paralleled four times in Aeschylus, and, approximately, by a passage in *Antigone* (n.), which may suggest an early feature.<sup>23</sup> Euripides uses it in 431 in *Med.* 759–63, however, so caution is in order. Was

<sup>20</sup> My calculations are based on the Oxford Classical Text for each play, accepting the deletions printed there, but without supplying lines where a lacuna is marked.

<sup>21</sup> Individual lines of *antilabe* are also found at *Tr.* 409, 418, and so do not on their own indicate a later date. But the combination of both in the same play (as in *El.*, *Phil.*, and *OC*) may be significant.

<sup>22</sup> Schneidewin<sup>2</sup> p. 29 first identifies the significance of the phenomenon; Campbell makes the comparison with *Antigone* (11 6; cf. 1 452).

<sup>23</sup> Wolff<sup>1</sup> p. 137 first notes this.

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this an archaism on Euripides' part, or did the feature remain in regular use in the 430s?

(v) Also relevant may be the use of the third actor, a device first attested in the *Oresteia* in 458.<sup>24</sup> In *Agamemnon*, no scene contains three speaking actors (three are on stage at 783–974, but Cassandra is mute); in *Choephoroi*, one scene requires a third actor (where Pylades, elsewhere played by a mute, speaks at 900–2); *Eumenides* requires three actors for the trial scene (566–777), but there is no 'three-cornered' dialogue. All Sophocles' plays have at least one scene with three actors, but three characters engage in conversation only in *OR*, *El.*, *Phil.*, and *OC*. Hence the tentative hypothesis that *Aj.*, *Ant.*, and *Tr.* represent an earlier stage in the use of this technique, and so were written before the other four.<sup>25</sup>

That is not to argue that the handling of the third actor was unsophisticated, in either Aeschylus<sup>26</sup> or the three Sophoclean plays identified above. In the opening scene of *Ajax*, for example, Athena interacts first with Odysseus, then Ajax, then Odysseus. There is no 'three-cornered' interaction, but there are good reasons for that in terms of plot (any interaction between Ajax and Odysseus would have been at the point of a sword) and dramatic technique (Athena's different treatment of the two men is striking; so too is Odysseus' later reaction to the dialogue which he witnesses). Similarly effective refusals to engage in 'three-cornered' dialogue are found in *Antigone* and *Trachiniae*.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> According to Arist. *Poet.* 1449a18–19, Sophocles was responsible for introducing the third actor. This is probably an inference from the introduction of the third actor during the period that both Sophocles and Aeschylus were competing (cf. A. Brown (1984) 15 n. 21). (The deletion of this passage by Else (1939), (1957) 166–8, 174–9, approved by Brown (1984) 1–8, seems insufficiently motivated.)

<sup>25</sup> Schneidewin<sup>2</sup> p. 29 first makes the point; cf. Heinz (1937) 273–7, Schwinge (1962) 73–5.

<sup>26</sup> Knox (1972) 107–24 = (1979) 41–52 demonstrates Aeschylus' skill in handling the device in the first two plays of the *Oresteia*.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Griffith on *Ant.* 526–81 ('Ismene engages separately with both Ant<igone> and Kreon, while direct interaction between Ant<igone>



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Nevertheless, it is remarkable that these three plays all exploit the absence of contact between a trio of actors, but show no interest in the possibilities offered by three-cornered dialogue which are exploited by the other four.

Moreover, there is perhaps a place in *Ajax* where the absence of three-cornered dialogue is unusual on strictly literary grounds. Odysseus enters at 1316, but the conversation is between him and Agamemnon until the latter's exit at 1373; Teucer and Odysseus speak only when Agamemnon is gone. Agamemnon's desire to ignore Teucer is understandable. Odysseus' is less so, since he sets out to be polite to both sides; he may be represented as focussing his attention on the person whose mind he needs to change. But Teucer's silence cannot be so readily explained on the basis of character: elsewhere he is never slow to speak. My subjective response is that Sophocles would have handled this scene differently later in his career.<sup>28</sup> If I am right, the absence of three-cornered dialogue here is not the result of a carefully chosen policy, but a reflex of the default mode of composition for such scenes at this period.

(vi) Other chronological criteria are not helpful and merit only brief mention. The prominence of epic vocabulary is no indication of an early date: such lexical choices are adequately motivated by the subject matter. The frequency of resolutions, so important for the dating of Euripides' works, does not yield useful data for Sophocles.<sup>29</sup> Attempts to tie the production of *Ajax* to historical events or personalities are arbitrary.<sup>30</sup> Other

and Kreon is pointedly avoided') and Davies's *Trachiniae* commentary, p. xviii n. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Listmann (1910) 22–3. Contrast *Phil.* 539–627, where the False Merchant delivers a message to Neoptolemus when the latter is in conversation with Philoctetes. The scene begins with discussion between the former pair, but soon Philoctetes forces his way into the conversation (578–9, 622–5).

<sup>29</sup> See Scullion (2002) 91.

<sup>30</sup> Some would date the play to the Peloponnesian War (431–404), or the years leading up to it, on the ground that the scene with Menelaus displays anti-Spartan feeling (see Stanford p. 294 n. 1, who lists and refutes supporters of

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scholars have seen allusions to literary works of the fifth century, none of which convinces.<sup>31</sup> A lekythos from c. 460 is taken by some to show the influence of *Ajax*,<sup>32</sup> but this supposes a naïve view of the relationship between drama and the visual arts.<sup>33</sup> General considerations of literary quality are better avoided, too, as excessively subjective.<sup>34</sup>

All criteria with weight suggest that *Ajax* is a fairly early drama, and some tie it more closely to *Antigone* than to any other play; the criterion provided by interlinear hiatus suggests a gap between these two plays and *Trachiniae*. I would tentatively put *Ajax* with *Antigone* in the 440s. A date in the early to mid 430s or very late

this view). Others claim that 1260–1 presuppose the Periclean citizenship law of 450/1 (see n.). Attempts to see *Ajax* as a reflection of different fifth-century politicians recall the allegorical interpretations of Pindar so popular in the nineteenth century, and not entirely abandoned today (see my edition of Pindar's *Pythian Eleven*, pp. 38–9). Cf. Easterling, *Trachiniae* commentary, p. 23: 'The attempts so far made to link *Trachiniae* with contemporary events have not carried conviction, relying as they do on wholly arbitrary methods of analysis.' Griffin (1999b) 83–9 refutes other attempts to allegorise *Ajax* in a political direction.

<sup>31</sup> Stanford p. 294 n. 3 and Garvie pp. 6–7 provide a list.

<sup>32</sup> Thus tentatively Schefold (1976) 74 and the scholars mentioned by Garvie p. 7 n. 22.

<sup>33</sup> It also ignores the same iconography on an askos from c. 490–480, now lost: see p. 30 below.

<sup>34</sup> Lloyd-Jones writes (Loeb, 1 p. 9): 'To me *Ajax* seems to be a mature masterpiece, probably not much earlier than *Oedipus Tyrannus*', and conjectures that both plays belong to the 430s or 420s. But why should it have taken Sophocles so long to reach artistic maturity? For Winnington-Ingram (1980) 341, 'there is no good ground for supposing that any of the extant plays belongs to the earliest period of his work'. If he means that all the surviving plays are too well crafted to be very early, the career of Aristophanes undermines his underlying assumption. Moreover, Sophocles' defeat of Aeschylus in 468 indicates that at least three, and probably at least four, of the ten judges ranked some of his earliest work above that of the old master. (For the permutations of the voting system, which make it possible for a victor to receive a minority of the votes cast, see Marshall and Van Willigenburg (2004) 102.) The supposed description by Sophocles of the development of his own style recorded by Plutarch, sometimes mentioned in discussions of the chronology of his plays, tells us more about Plutarch than Sophocles (see Pelling (2007)).