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Odysseus and the concept of “nobility” in Sophocles’ Ajax and Philoctetes

Introduction

The belief in strong and causal links between aristocratic descent (εὐγένεια) and personal worth (moral virtue as well as social status) belongs to a traditional self-definition of Greek élites that goes back to a conception of human value best illustrated in early epic poems by figures such as Ajax and Achilles. This view implies that only a man who belongs to the best lineage can be ἀγαθός, ἄριστος, or ἐσθλός. However, words used to designate aristocratic descent only appear in literary sources later than the Homeric poems, as élites felt the need to reaffirm their superiority when the traditional hierarchical structure began to be put into question by a number of changes that accompanied the development of early polis.1 While close in meaning to the three adjectives mentioned above, γενναῖος and εὐγενής explicitly refer to personal worth—and social status—derived from high descent thanks to their close etymological links with the root for “birth, origin”. As the idea of strong links between descent and value began to be more often contested, the original etymological meaning of those words was sometimes left aside in favour of a more general interpretation based on moral value: the reference to birth/origin was not necessarily felt any longer in the use of the terms, or was sometimes explicitly put into question.2 Three ways of doing so have been

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1 See Donlan, Aristocratic Ideal. Duplouy, Prestige des élites, proposes an alternative view of the reasons behind this evolution, arguing against the idea that élite ever had to compete with other codes of values but showing that they nonetheless had to adapt to new norms.

2 For examples of the use of those terms with a general moral value, see Dover, Greek Popular Morality, 94-95. See also Mills, Genos, Gennaios, 29 (n. 42), for the idea that γενναῖτης ‘clearly transcends social position’ in Sophocles’ later plays.
used by ancient authors, often through a distortion of the first meanings of the adjectives mentioned above. The first way of contesting those links consists in giving examples of people who, although born in the best families, are not “noble”. A good lineage does therefore not necessarily warrant high personal worth. The opposite can also be true, and poets sometimes qualify as “noble” figures who obviously do not belong to the best families. A third way in which the relationship between birth and value can be put into question consists in presenting as “noble” values which did not traditionally qualify as such, or to stage as vain values which were thought as showing nobility to élite eyes.

Among tragic poets, Euripides has more often been considered as a “social critic” than other poets on the ground that he explicitly challenges the existence of links between descent and personal worth in some of his tragedies. Because Sophocles is still thought of as being more attached to traditional values, and more focused on the figure of heroes or on general moral questions than on the evaluation of contemporary social norms, elements of his plays that highlight a potential discrepancy between one’s descent and one’s value are less often emphasized. The question of the definition of “nobility” in Sophocles has, however, been tackled from various points of view, as a rapid survey of previous scholarship will show. The fact that the Ajax and the Philoctetes stage the conflict between two contrasting definitions of this concept has been discussed, but analyses tend to focus on only one play or the other, therefore overlooking elements that could be attributed to a possible chronological evolution. The figure of Odysseus has

3 See Winnington-Ingram, Sophocles, 309-310.
4 See, e.g., Aristotle, Rhet. 1390b24-31; Sophocles, Antigone 38 and OC 937-938.
5 See, e.g., Sophocles, Electra 23-25; Euripides, Electra 369-370.
6 See, e.g., Archilochus and Tyrtaeus.
7 See Romero Mariscal, Eurípides crítico social. For the expression “social critic”, see Gregory, Euripides Social Critic.
8 On the relationship between Sophocles’ tragedies and the evolution of Athenian society, see Paillard, The Stage and the City.
9 While the performance of the Philoctetes is securely dated to 409, the date of the Ajax is still debated. For a convenient summary of the debate about the chronology of Sophoclean plays, see Esposito, Changing Roles, n. 1; Whitman, Sophocles, 42-55; Kirkwood, Sophoclean Drama, 53-54; Winnington-Ingram, Sophocles, 341-43; Sutton, Lost Sophocles, 177-82; Lloyd-Jones, Sophocles, 8-9. The majority of scholars agree to place the first performance of the Ajax between 450 and 440. However, Lloyd-Jones, in the preface of his 1994 Loeb edition of Sophocles (Sophocles, 9), dates the Ajax to 430-420, mainly on stylistic grounds. (Similar late dates were proposed by Grégoire, Date de l’Ajax, and Robert, Sophocles, Péricles, Hérodote.) More recently, Finglass (Ajax, 10-11) concludes that the play is likely to have been performed in the 440s, although “a date in the early to mid-430s or very late 450s cannot be ruled out”. A more precise dating of the performance of the Ajax is
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indeed been recognized as an important element for this question in each play. However, the apparently irreconcilable discrepancy between the positive character staged in the Ajax and the allegedly negative figure in the Philoctetes have generally prevented scholars from drawing links between the two plays with regard to the same theme.

By examining how the figure of Odysseus works as a crucial element through which a re-definition of “nobility” is promoted in both plays, this paper aims at emphasizing the precise socio-political implications of this redefinition. The way in which the historical context of performance of the two plays may have influenced the representation of Odysseus will also be discussed. As has been argued elsewhere, the characteristics of this figure and the values he defends are analogous in the two plays. The perception other characters have of him and his values are, however, dissimilar.¹⁰

Before analysing the two plays, it will be useful to survey relevant scholarship on the topic. In a study focused on Philoctetes, Peter Rose analyses the links between the play and the teachings of the sophists, and, among other points, addresses the question of nobility.¹¹ According to Rose, Sophocles defends a traditional aristocratic point of view. Odysseus’ attempt at re-defining the concept of nobility is staged as negative and closely associated with the most decadent contemporary sophists. For José Ribeiro Ferreira, Odysseus is rather the figure of a fifth-century unscrupulous political man.¹² The author argues that Sophocles opposes the distortion of traditional values that was taking place in his own time with truly aristocratic virtues and agrees with Rose that Odysseus’ attempt at redefining nobility is presented in a negative way. Sophie Mills (Genos, Gennaios) explores the concept of τὸ γενναῖον in Sophocles’ late plays. Her examination mainly focuses on Neoptolemos’ dilemma. She shows that the concept was questioned in the play, but she emphasizes its general moral meaning, repeatedly warning against too narrow political readings of the Philoctetes.

¹⁰ The second chapter of Paillard, The Stage and the City, is devoted to the figure of Odysseus in the two plays. The focus of this chapter, however, was the staging of Odysseus as a ‘middle-status’ character. The present article delves more deeply into the question of the redefinition of eugeneia (only briefly addressed in the chapter mentioned) and the relationship between the values defended by Odysseus and the historical evolution of Athens during the fifth century BC.

¹¹ Rose, Sophocles’ Philoctetes.

¹² Ribeiro Ferreira, Figura de Ulisses.
The three next contributions focus on the *Ajax*. All of them discuss the opposite conceptions of nobility displayed by Ajax and Tecmessa. While Ajax links nobility to the respect of a strict code of honour and to one’s descent, Tecmessa encompasses within the definition of this concept gratitude and other cooperative values. The role given to Odysseus in this debate is, however, differently assessed in the three articles. Philip Holt, in his paper on debate scenes published in 1981, underlines the importance of Odysseus but the links between the first debate between Ajax and Tecmessa and the values defended and promoted by Odysseus are not discussed.\(^\text{13}\) Graham Zanker’s examination of the “heroic values” in the *Ajax* goes further.\(^\text{14}\) The author shows that Odysseus is able to bridge the gap between the two sets of values, and thus “represents the crowning form of εὐγένεια in the *Ajax*”.\(^\text{15}\) As his study gives a high importance to emotional virtues in the definition of what is “noble”, the question of the character of Odysseus in the *Philoctetes* is only alluded to in a footnote.\(^\text{16}\) While in the earlier play Odysseus possesses strong positive virtues from an emotional point of view (kindheartedness, gentleness), in the later play he rather embodies the aggressive τιμή-paradigm against Neoptolemos’ generosity. Most recently, Concepción López Rodríguez made an important contribution to the study of this theme.\(^\text{17}\) She focuses on the notion of εὐγένεια and on its links with the respect of a rigid code of honour. According to her, Ajax’s conception of εὐγένεια follows the etymological meaning of the term. Ajax indeed directly links aristocratic descent and a behaviour that follows the code of honour he believes in. Tecmessa, on the contrary, defends the idea that the word is not to be taken in its strict etymological meaning. Odysseus’ behaviour in the *Ajax* is closer to the definition promoted by Tecmessa. Those three articles already present Odysseus as a character linked to an alternative definition of nobility, but none of them highlights his fundamental role in promoting it in both plays.

Only a parallel examination of Odysseus and the treatment of the concept of “nobility” in the two plays will allow us to take into account the chronological evolution that took place between them and to discuss how socio-political and historical factors might explain apparent differences.

\(^{13}\) For a similar examination of the play, see Sorum, *Ajax in Context*.

\(^{14}\) Zanker, *Ajax and Heroic Values*.

\(^{15}\) Zanker, *Ajax and Heroic Values*, 25.

\(^{16}\) Zanker, *Ajax and Heroic Values*, 25 n. 16.

\(^{17}\) López Rodríguez, *Código de honor*. 
Ajax

In the first part of the Ajax, two conflicting definitions of εὐγένεια are defended by Ajax and Tecmessa.\(^{18}\) The former strictly believes in the idea that one’s origin determines one’s worth, and that someone born in one of the best families must follow a code of behaviour that encompasses specific principles. Priority is given to the preservation of honour, and excellence is reserved for people who follow the principle of “help your friends / harm your enemies” and who regard in high esteem military value. In Ajax’s view, someone who was not born in a good family can in no case reach excellence, whatever his behaviour might be. Εὐγένεια, to Ajax’s mind, refers both to one’s origin and to one’s value.\(^{19}\)

Tecmessa, on the other hand, promotes another definition of what someone must do to earn the right to be called εὐγενής. Gratitude and positive reciprocity play an important role in this definition (vv. 520-524). The links between εὐγένεια and its etymological meaning are put aside in Tecmessa’s view of this concept: “nobility” resides in cooperative values rather than in one’s descent and ability at proving one’s worth in competitive terms.

This debate must have raised several questions in the spectators’ minds: what does it mean to be εὐγενής? What kind of value does one have to show to be called εὐγενής? Are the traditional value of an Ajax or an Achilles really “noble”? The play, however, does more than promote one system of values against another. Thanks to the way in which he is presented at the beginning and at the end of the play, Odysseus stands at the heart of an important reversal of values. He does not merely embody or defend Tecmessa’s point of view against Ajax’s in a static way. The way in which he is qualified at the beginning of the play, and when he reappears at the end, as well as the shift in the perception of this character, bring to the fore an alternative definition of εὐγένεια, in which high descent no longer plays the role it used to.

In order to show how the play helps build in the mind of its spectators a new definition of this concept through the figure of Odysseus, it is important to summarize the values he promotes and the way in which he is perceived by other characters at the beginning of the play and in the debate that takes place at the end.

The most obvious Odyssean value is adaptability, or flexibility. Odysseus exhibits this quality at the end of the play, where he tries to explain to an inflex-

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18 See Holt, Debate-Scenes; Sorum, Ajax in Context; Zanker, Ajax and Heroic Values; López Rodríguez, Código de honor.

19 On those characteristic components of “heroic” points of view and on the type of behaviour they elicit, see Knox, Heroic Temper.
ible Agamemnon that Ajax—as well as Teucer—will from now on be treated as a “friend” (φίλος) by himself, although he formerly was his greatest enemy. Odysseus indeed reveals already from the beginning that he is ready to adapt to a changing situation, if required. As such, he exhibits the same ability in the opening section and at the end of the play. This theme of the mutability of friendship and alliances is one of the prominent themes of the play and lies at the core of Ajax’s so-called “deception speech”. Odysseus puts into practice what was only a theoretical concept in Ajax’s speech. Whereas Ajax fails to give an appropriate answer to his observation of the world’s variability, Odysseus is able to solve the problem of Ajax’s burial thanks to his adaptability. The situation has changed, and with it the quality of the relationship between Odysseus and Ajax. At v. 1347 Odysseus explains that when the situation required it, he hated Ajax. At the beginning of the play, Odysseus indeed still considers Ajax as an enemy (v. 78). Now that Ajax is dead, this is no longer the case. At the end of the play, Odysseus clearly argues against the Atreids’ rigidity (v. 1361), countering it with a more flexible attitude which takes into account the specific situation in which a certain behaviour must be adopted. Odysseus demonstrates that their position is unsustainable and that the leaders are themselves threatening the social order with their inflexible system of values, to which they give the appearance of justice and equity. Ajax’s absolute ideal is not seen as a viable alternative in practice either. Odysseus actively tries to persuade other characters that adaptability is the only way to solve conflicts within the social group. With the figure of Odysseus, the end of the Ajax presents a model of leader that is opposed to the aristocratic point of view and succeeds, by taking an active part in the debate, in changing the perspective on an issue where the good of the community is at stake.

Odysseus’ concern for his own interest is always balanced by his concern for the common good. He is only preoccupied with himself because he can imagine others in his own situation and takes care of others because he understands that he could be in their situation. Odysseus defends the idea that great aristocratic

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20 Vv. 1376-7.
21 On Odysseus’ conception of φίλος, see Blundell, *Helping Friends*, 95-103.
22 See the exchange between Athena and Odysseus at vv. 121-133.
23 See vv. 131-2 and v. 1359.
26 See vv. 1246-1249.
27 See, e.g., vv. 121-126 and 1365-1367.
heroes like Ajax and other men of lower status are not dissimilar: they are part of the same world, of the same community, and, as equals, they are interchangeable. Odysseus’ apparent self-interest is actually a very democratic concern. Indeed, by defending values such as respect for a dead member of a community, even if it means putting aside a personal quarrel, Odysseus exhibits the values that make the cohesion of a political community possible.28

Odysseus’ “enlightened self-interest” thus calls for cooperative values rather than competitive ones.29 Those cooperative values are in stark contrast to the ideal of autarchy of an aristocratic figure like Ajax. This “noble” ideal of autarchy is proven unsustainable in the situation described in the Ajax. Until he commits suicide, Ajax is able to live and behave as if he needed only himself.30 But once dead, he needs the help of other members of his community to take care of his body. At this very critical moment, Ajax needs the intelligence, the solidarity, and the cooperative virtues of an Odysseus to be allowed to keep belonging to the civic community. Without burial, Ajax would be excluded from the social body. The debate between the values embodied in Odysseus and the values represented by characters such as Ajax or the Atreids clearly focuses on the contrast between the aristocratic ideal of “helping friends-harming enemies” and of negative reciprocity (retaliation) vs. an Odyssean ideal of solidarity, consensus, and cooperative values between all members of the social group.

**Perception of Odysseus and his values**

The values defended by Odysseus do not vary during the play. The perception of the character, however, undergoes a complete reversal that allows the poet to stage the redefinition of the values linked to ideas of nobility.31

At the beginning of the play,32 Odysseus is compared by Athena to a hunting dog (v. 8). Yet, in the traditional heroic ideal, opponents are not to be hunt-

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30 On Ajax’s inability and refusal to share any kind of reciprocal relationship with his *philoi* and on the fact that he systematically puts his own needs, interests, and ideas above everyone else’s, see Blundell, *Helping Friends*, 72-81 and 101.

31 On the way in which Odysseus is seen by other characters in the play, see Paillard, *The Stage and the City*, 97 ff.

32 For analyses of the prologue, see, for example: Cresci, *Prologo dell’Aiace*; Jouanna, *Méthaphore de la chasse*.
ed like animals but fought face to face. Moreover, Athena’s ironic treatment of Odysseus forces him to reveal his fear at the mere idea of seeing Ajax. Several times in this episode, at vv. 75, 77, and 81, the goddess blames him for his cowardice. Odysseus, therefore, does not behave in a way that follows what we can reconstruct of the Greek aristocratic idea of the “noble hero”, and other characters repeatedly draw the attention of the audience to this point. The slightly comic tone of this prologue also suggests linking Odysseus with lower-status characters, whose sometimes-comical treatment in tragedy can be related to the way Odysseus is staged here.

Both Ajax and the chorus, in the first half of the play, express negative opinions about Odysseus. He is of course Ajax’s greatest enemy, which can explain why he gives a strongly negative picture of him. The chorus, composed of Ajax’s followers, does nothing but echo its master’s opinion. However, they also act as commentators of Odysseus’ answer to the particular situation staged in the play, both at the beginning and in the end. The blame addressed at the beginning of the play by the chorus—and within certain limits by Ajax—to Odysseus is unjustified. The representation of Odysseus is somewhat paradoxical: the way other characters depict him at the beginning of the play does not correspond to the way he behaves in reality. On two occasions the chorus blames Odysseus for things he did not do. At vv. 148-153, he is accused by the chorus of making up a false story about Ajax and spreading it. As demonstrated by de Jong, the chorus does not know anything of the conversation that takes place at the beginning of the play between Athena and Odysseus. The sailors, however, allude to remarks that had spread through the army before this discussion took place and they attribute them to Odysseus. Whether Odysseus had a part in this earlier spreading of the rumours we do not know, but it is clear that he never made up false stories in order to harm Ajax, as the chorus suggests.

33 See Rose (Sophocles’ Philoctetes, 83-84) on the negative link between Odysseus and hunting exposed in the Philoctetes.
34 See the use of the word δειλία, at v. 75. On the unheroic tone of this prologue, see Goldhill, Reading Greek Tragedy, 159.
35 See, e.g., the guard in the Antigone.
36 See, e.g., vv. 103, 379-382, 445-446.
37 Vv. 188-192.
38 For the idea of the chorus as “commentators on the action”, see Barker, Entering the Agon, 315.
39 πλάσσων (v. 148).
40 De Jong, Narratology meets Stylistic, 84.
The second error of the chorus is to think that Odysseus is laughing at Ajax’s fate (vv. 955-960), when in reality he twice refuses to do so (vv. 79-80 and 1348-1349), thus embodying a point of view that explicitly goes against the “heroic code” of “helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies”. With such characteristics, and the chorus’ reminder of his inglorious ancestry (vv. 190-191), Odysseus would certainly not qualify as εὐγενής by Ajax’s standards.

In these two instances, through the mistaken way in which the chorus presents Odysseus, the poet disqualifies an underlying negative perception of this figure.

Contrary to the depiction of Odysseus in the first part of the play, his second appearance is treated positively.41 Teucer and the chorus, inverting their first opinion, now see Odysseus and the values he defends favourably. Most importantly, Teucer qualifies him as ἐσθλός (v. 1399). Vv. 1381-1382 emphasize his change of perception:

ΤΕΥ. Ἀριστ’ Ὄδυσσεῦ, πάντ’ ἔχω σ’ ἐπαινέσαι
λόγοισι, καί μ’ ἐψευσας ἐλπίδος πολύ.42

Given the picture of Odysseus in the first part of the play, the word (ἀριστος) is not only to be taken as a general moral qualification: it has deeper implications. Odysseus, in spite of his dishonorable ancestor Sisyphos and his unheroic characteristics, receives a qualification that makes him equal to men such as Ajax. In other words, Odysseus has proven able to appropriate an εὐγένεια that he was not given by birth, through his behaviour. The idea of a complete reversal in the perception of Odysseus is reinforced by the use of ἐψευσας: to the traditional image of Odysseus the liar is opposed the “noble” Odysseus.43

The chorus, too, is full of praise for him (vv. 1374-1375).44 This dramatic reversal in the perception of Odysseus has already been observed by Norman Brown, who shows that the negative image of Odysseus conveyed by earlier poets such as, for example, Pindar, is disqualified through this reversal.45 Yet, Sophocles does not only disqualify the Pindaric view on Odysseus: he promotes the values

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41 See also Scodel, Politics of Ajax, 42, and Paillard, The Stage and the City, 99 ff.
42 Transl. Finglass, Ajax: “Noble Odysseus, I have only praise for what you have said; indeed, you have considerably deceived me of my expectation.”
43 On ἐψευσας, see also Finglass, Ajax, 516-517 and Hesk, Ajax, 378.
44 See also vv. 1398-1399.
45 Brown, Thirty Years’ Peace, 23. For a survey of the figure of Odysseus throughout literature, see Stanford Ulysses Theme. On the question of Sophocles’ ‘answer’ to Pindar about the figure of Ajax, see Cairns, Paradoxes of the Ajax.
defended by this figure by showing that they allow him, despite his “unheroic” characteristics, to access a “nobility” that, to Ajax’s mind, was strictly reserved for well-born heroes. Through the eyes of the other characters of the play, Sophocles shows his audience that Odysseus’ values constitute an alternative to the traditional aristocratic code, one which is able to encourage social cohesion. Odysseus is presented as a viable alternative model of leader, too, since it is only thanks to his intervention that the community will benefit from the religious protection brought by the proper funeral given to Ajax’s body. Odysseus’ insistence, at the end of the play, on Ajax’s nobility and greatness (vv. 1355) emphasizes the fact that, now dead, Ajax will indeed prove useful to the whole community, and thus truly ‘noble’ according to Odysseus’ new definition of the concept, even more clearly delineated in the *Philoctetes*, as argued below.

*Philoctetes*

The figure of Odysseus in this second play shares a large number of characteristics with the Odysseus of the *Ajax*. The elements that will be examined first are those which aim at depicting him as different from heroes such as Philoctetes, Ajax, or Achilles, who provided paradigms of behaviour for Athenian élites.

Odysseus does not value his honour higher than what the common good might require. He does not care about being perceived badly if it can help him reach his goal of convincing Philoctetes to come to Troy (vv. 64-66). This is in stark contrast to the way in which heroic figures such as Ajax consider honour as being a supreme value, to be preserved at all cost.

Likewise, his unconcealed use of lie and deceit and his commitment to speech rather than action do not belong to the behaviour of a traditional hero. The figure of the Homeric Odysseus was already tainted with such ambiguity, and Sophocles plays on it too. His recurrent use of words linked to ideas of deception or falsehood draws the attention of the audience to a particular characteristic of Odysseus’ behaviour.

Odysseus is also endowed with other features that identify him as “unheroic”. The most obviously unheroic action performed by Odysseus is his disappearing at the end of the play after his last speech at vv. 1296-8, when he tries to escape Philoctetes’ arrows. The beginning of the play already gives this character a touch

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47 See Ribeiro Ferreira, *Figura de Ulisses*, 120.
48 See Greengard, *Theatre in Crisis*, 18 n. 11.
of cowardice when he finds any excuse not to face Philoctetes (vv. 70-76, v. 105), in a way that is not without reminding his reluctance to see Ajax at the beginning of the earlier play.\textsuperscript{49} If the situation requires it, Odysseus has no qualms about choosing to escape rather than fight.

Another component of Odysseus’ characterization links him to low-status figures. Odysseus presents himself as being a mere soldier, obeying orders coming from the two Atreids. He sets himself apart from the leaders. Moreover, Odysseus is compared to Thersites at v. 442.

It is now important to examine the values actively defended by Odysseus and analyse the way in which he appropriates and modifies words and concepts of “nobility”.

The first idea defended by Odysseus throughout the play is the importance of the common interest. At vv. 8-9, he emphasizes the main reason that led him to abandon Philoctetes on a desert island (an act that has been deemed “amoral”): his cries were disturbing the religious activities of the community. Odysseus defends the point of view that individual interests must be subordinated to the common interest, even in the religious sphere. This is not without recalling his position in the debate at the end of the \textit{Ajax}, where, once again, it is thanks to him that the community keeps performing the correct religious rituals (burial) instead of abiding to the interest of a restricted number of individuals. In the way he deals with Philoctetes during the play, the common interest is also generally emphasized: Philoctetes must comply because it is in the interest of all the Greeks.

The second most important value embodied by Odysseus is, as in the \textit{Ajax}, adaptability. Odysseus is ready to adapt to whatever the situation requires (v. 1049) in order to reach his goal, even if it means changing or abandoning his moral framework. He asks Neoptolemos to be ready to follow him in this (vv. 83-85).\textsuperscript{50} The quality of adaptability is strongly linked to the idea of nobility that Odysseus seeks to promote. In order to convince Neoptolemos that adaptability is a ‘noble’ characteristic, Odysseus proposes, throughout the play, a new precise definition of what the criteria to be considered as \textit{γενναῖον} should be. The recurrence of the term and of related words in the play is a sign of the contemporary strong debate about the meaning of these concepts.\textsuperscript{51} As in the \textit{Ajax}, Odysseus is at the centre of a redefinition of what it means to be ‘noble’. This time, however, he is actively promoting it and not simply the object of comments from external

\textsuperscript{49} See Roisman, \textit{Sophocles: Philoctetes}, 75. See also Taplin, \textit{Significant Actions}, 37.

\textsuperscript{50} On this point, see Paillard, \textit{The Stage and the City}, 104.

\textsuperscript{51} See Calder, \textit{Sophoclean Apologia}, 170-1; Rose, \textit{Sophocles’ Philoctetes}, 77.
observers. However, he does not entirely succeed in his attempt at persuading Neoptolemos that adaptability and work for the common interest are truly “noble” values, as the latter feels more inclined to adopt Philoctetes’ idea of “nobility”, which insists on Neoptolemus’ true nature and the bonds of *philia* between aristocratic heroes.

Odysseus distanciates himself from such a conception of “nobility”, instead insisting on other types of values as criteria to define someone as *γενναῖος* (vv. 50-53):

\[
\text{ΟΔ. ᾿Αχιλλέως παῖ, δεῖ σ’ ἐφ’ οἷς ἐλήλυθας}
\text{γενναῖον εἶναι, μὴ μόνον τῷ σώματι,}
\text{ἀλλ’ ἢν τι καὶνὸν ὄν πρίν οὐκ ἄκηκος}
\text{κλύης, ὑπουργεῖν, ὡς ὑπηρέτης πάρει.}
\]

To Odysseus’ mind, true nobility resides precisely in adapting to circumstances and acting (for the common good) as a given situation requires without being prevented from doing so by pre-established codes of behaviour, including one dictated by the traditional heroic ideal. As, of course, the younger man, son of Achilles, does not react in a positive way to the suggestion, Odysseus cleverly manipulates his use of the term *γενναῖος* in order to persuade Neoptolemos.

As I have tried to show in Paillard, *The Stage and the City*, 113-114, verses 1068-69 draw the attention of the audience to Odysseus’ subtle way of using *γενναῖος*:  

\[
\text{ΟΔ. Ἐχει σύ· μὴ πρόσλευσε, γενναῖος περ ὄν,}
\text{ὅτε ὑπηρέτης πάρει.}
\]

The expression “*γενναῖος περ ὄν*” can be understood in two ways: precisely because or although he is “noble”. The particle *περ* combined with a participle can indeed endorse two opposite values: either it is used as a reinforcing particle, or with a concessive meaning. The potential values of the participle, combined with the reinforcing values of the particle *περ* would also allow translations such as...

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52 See Ribeiro Ferreira, *Figura de Ulisses*, 132.
53 See Rose, *Sophocles’ Philoctetes*, 90.
54 Transl. Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles*: “Son of Achilles, the mission you have come on demands that you show your nobility; not only with your body, but if you are told something new, such as you have not heard earlier, you must give your help, since you are here to help me.”
55 See also Ribeiro Ferreira, *Figura de Ulisses*, 131.
56 Transl. Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles*: “You come with me! Do not look at him, noble as you are, so that you do not destroy our luck!”
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as “in order to be ‘noble’” or “so that you be ‘noble’” (proleptic/resultative value), or even “if you are (to be) ‘noble’” (hypothetical value), with περ being used as a way to highlight the adjective. In Odysseus’ mind, working for the common interest while putting aside one’s own individual interest is what is to be considered as truly “noble”, whatever the means one has to employ to reach this goal.

Mills has argued (Gennos, Gennaios) that Odysseus, rather than promoting new criteria on which to base oneself to gauge someone’s ‘nobility’, as proposed in the present paper, is simply perverting the use of what is a fundamentally positive moral value (which, in later Sophoclean plays, is linked to a feeling of shared humanity). Yet, vv. 79-85 are again a good illustration that Odysseus’ point of view is more constructive of new values than he is destructive of older ones. To the traditional aristocratic value of individual inherited “nature”, he opposes the value of integrating one’s actions within one’s own community as a whole, whence the importance of being seen as rightful and pious men among the Greeks. To a principle of “restricted solidarity” between aristocratic individuals (an ἐσθλός helps another ἐσθλός), expressed by Philoctetes at vv. 904-5, Odysseus opposes the idea of extended solidarity with the whole social group, i.e. the Greek army, thus allowing a larger group of people (and potentially every member of the social group) to access “nobility” through a precise type of behaviour, rather than their descent or ‘nature’.

Perception of Odysseus and his values

While the values defended by Odysseus as well as his characterization as a rather “unheroic” figure are similar to what could be seen in the Ajax, Neoptolemos, Philoctetes, and other characters express throughout the play a negative perception of the man and his ideas.

The chorus, however, defends him against Philoctetes at vv. 1143-5, in an attempt at convincing the latter to respond positively to Odysseus’ request to follow him to Troy. The chorus, as a collective character, speaks from a collective point of view, the point of view of the common interest of the Greek army. They adhere

58 See also v. 119.
59 Cp. v. 1363 of the Ajax.
60 See v. 1294.
61 Schein, Philoctetes, ad 1143-5, notes the ambiguity of the chorus’ remark: it can either defend Odysseus or Neoptolemos. Yet, even if the chorus is here defending Neoptolemos, it does so while acknowledging that the younger man is merely following Odysseus’ plan. They thus present the point of view of the latter in a positive way.
to Odysseus’ plan and even take an active role in promoting it. They only try to explain to Philoctetes what in their mind is the best thing to do, and, although they remain close to Neoptolemos, they do not pretend to hate Odysseus just to gain his trust. It is important to note that, at vv. 396-402, they consider that the Atreids only are responsible for the attribution of Achilles’ armour to Odysseus, without mentioning him, contrary to Philoctetes’ point of view (v. 406). The role of the chorus is here to emphasize and point out the positive aspects of the values defended by Odysseus: he works for the common interest of the social group.

Heracles’ appearance at the end of the play could also be perceived as an indirect justification of Odysseus. As Mills puts it: ‘And yet, Odysseus’ position is not entirely wrong, nor does the end of the play conclusively invalidate it.’ The god cannot directly address Odysseus, since he has already left the scene, and he does not even mention his name. Yet, the solution he proposes exactly corresponds to what Odysseus has been working for during the whole play. Philoctetes must go back to Troy with his bow; it is the plan of the gods. Odysseus was thus right to depict himself as a servant of Zeus at vv. 989-90, and we see him, once again, depicted as the guardian of the religious welfare of the social group, in spite of all his alleged ‘amorality’. The end of the play could even be considered as eliciting from the audience a complete reversal in the perception of the values Odysseus embodies, if not his means.

**Conclusion**

In both the Ajax and the Philoctetes, Odysseus is portrayed as a character who markedly differs from the model of aristocratic heroes such as Ajax, Achilles, or Philoctetes himself. He is described as someone who does not share common traits with such figures and whose belonging to a lower status is repeatedly emphasized by the poet through various elements of characterization or behaviour (e.g., his cowardice, his refusal to fight face to face).

In spite of this characterization, he is explicitly acknowledged to be a viable alternative model of leader in the Ajax. In the later play, his aims are also perceived as positive (for the good of the Greek army). In both plays, his actions are consistently judged to be in agreement with the will of the gods and it is thanks to his interventions that the social group can continue or begin to perform religious rituals that will prove beneficial to the whole community (Ajax’s heroic cult, for example).

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62 Mills, Genos, Gennaios, 34.
63 See Craik, Staging, 83.
More importantly, this article has underlined the fact that Odysseus is in both play at the centre of a redefinition of the concept of nobility. In the *Ajax*, Odysseus’ actions are explicitly designated as being “noble”, although the poet had drawn the attention of his audience to the fact that this character had nothing in him that could liken him to the traditional image of a “noble hero”. In the later play, the same redefinition of what it means to be “noble” is staged, but this time, Odysseus actively attempts to promote his new understanding of the concept, by means that are not perceived as being entirely positive. 

Odysseus new definition of “nobility” is very precise: to a traditional aristocratic model where nobility is only judged by one’s bloodline, he opposes a view where the criteria used to define this concept rather depend on very specific types of behaviour (adaptability, cooperation, compromise) oriented towards a specific goal, i.e. acting for the common good of the social group. Odysseus embodies the same shift in the meaning of εὐγένεια in both plays but the means he uses differ, and as a result, the perception of his behaviour is also distinct.

This change can be explained by paying attention to the fundamental evolution that took place in the structure of Athenian society during the second half of the fifth century. One of the major shifts in the socio-political landscape of Athens during this period is certainly the rise to power of non-élite parts of the social spectrum, thanks to a reinforcement (or radicalization) of democracy. In parallel to an increasingly active political participation, non-élite citizens also began to integrate the values formerly reserved to élite citizens and to appropriate them, a change that is well illustrated by Odysseus’ redefinition of “nobility”.

Keeping this chronological evolution in mind, it is therefore important to place the plays within their contexts of performance in order to explain the subtle way in which the message delivered to the audience through the character of Odysseus varies.

At the time of the first performance of the *Ajax*, non-élite citizens were not the dominant power on the political stage yet. Elites retained an important share of power thanks to the fact that they were, more than their non-élite counterparts, more able and used to speak in public and could thus actively influence the political decision process in a way that remained out of the hands of less educated citizens. In the play, Odysseus’ message is very clear: nobility does not reside in 

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64 On the fifth-century evaluation of lie, see Hesk, *Deception and Democracy*.

65 On the evolution of the structure of Athenian society during the second half of the fifth century, see Paillard, *Structural Evolution*.

exclusion but in inclusion. As we shall see for the *Philoctetes*, the play offers various layers of message that could have been addressed to different groups of citizens attending the performance. To members of the élite, the play says that other citizens (embodied by Odysseus) must be listened to if the cohesion of the social group is to be preserved. Conversely, the fact that Odysseus is qualified as “noble” through his actions in favour of the common good could have served as a model to non-élite citizens, encouraging them to become more active politically.

In the last decade of the fifth century, the balance between élite and other groups was different. Shortly before, and after, the re-establishment of democracy following the oligarchic interlude, the non-élite component of Athenian society had become more powerful than traditional blood élites. Odysseus has often been taken as representing the demagogues, in the *Philoctetes*, because they were especially good at orienting the minds (and the votes) of others. However, the message of the play, as in the *Ajax*, cannot be reduced to a simple criticism of a particular category of people within Athenian society. Here again, there is something for everyone, and the overall message is the same as in the *Ajax*: the highest value should be attributed to actions that promote the good of the community as a whole. Odysseus is not simply portrayed as the negative image of a demagogue: his aims are seen positively. The play rather functions as a warning, as a reminder that the civic community can only function and perdure if all citizens work towards the common good without rejecting any specific group from the democratic process. As in the *Ajax*, Odysseus is a character specifically designated as not belonging to the élite, as being “unheroic”. The values he defends (the common good of the Greek army) are seen in a positive light. However, the ways in which he plays with these values, and his tendency to use any means to reach his goals, negating the points of view of heroic figures such as Philoctetes, is criticized. After the oligarchic interlude and the restauration of democracy, anti-élite feelings were certainly considerable among non-élite, threatening the cohesion of the civic body. The treatment of Odysseus in the play could have

From this point of view, Knox’s idea of Ajax as “the last of the heroes” (*Ajax of Sophocles*, 20) is too restrictive: the aim of the play is not merely to mourn the “death of the old Homeric (and especially Achillean) individual ethos which had for centuries of aristocratic rule served as the dominant ideal of man’s nobility and action, but which by the fifth century had been successfully challenged and largely superseded (in spite of its late and magnificent flowering in the poetry of Pindar) by an outlook more suitable to the conditions of the polis, an outlook which reached its most developed form in democratic Athens” (ibid.). The play proposes solutions in order to build a society where élite and non-élite outlooks can coexist and collaborate.

On the new type of political leaders that appeared in Athens in the second part of the fifth century, and on their particular characteristics, see Connor, *New Politicians*.

Shear, *Polis and Revolution*. 
served as a message addressed to citizens tempted to exclude the élite component of society: élite citizens are needed if the civic body wants to be preserved. The play conversely serves as a reminder to élite citizens to use their privileged position for the benefit of the whole civic group, and not for their restricted élite allies.

In both plays, therefore, the redefinition of the concept of “nobility” operated through the staging of Odysseus is deeply linked to a reaffirmation of values that are central to the functioning of democracy: the need, for members of different socio-political groups, to work together for the common good. For each Athenian citizen, here lied true nobility.


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