How to Turn a Hero into a Comic miles
Ajax: An Admirable stultus or a gloriosus Fool?

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Abstract

This paper aims, on the one hand, at contributing to the analysis of one of the most enduring stock-characters in Roman comedy: the comic soldier, in its Plautine manifestations in particular. On the other hand, it will shed light on a much more serious soldier: Telamonian Ajax, and his in some way unfortunate reception. Weaving a two-fold discussion of such apparently distant figures, I will evaluate the possible echoes of the mighty warrior Ajax in the parodic processes enacted by Plautus' milites, as well as the role played in turn by these echoes in the Roman reception of Ajax himself. I will show how the Roman Ajax enhanced and developed comic nuances, which can be better understood through the trigger of Plautine memories and play a role in Rome's own reflection on everchanging criteria for measuring valour.

Keywords

Telamonian Ajax – comic soldier – Plautus – reception

This paper aims at adding a new—perhaps unexpected—piece to the multilayered references at work in the comic miles. Plautus' comic soldiers point to various models which lie at the heart of this stock-type. They draw from their antecedents in Greek comedy, re-enacting parodic processes born in that original context, but they also work in and for their own—Roman—public.

1 The Hellenistic world is the original target of the military parody which, for example, lies behind Plautus' Pyrgopolynices when he boasts about a list of victories in India, Cilicia, and...
On the one hand, they mirror contemporary Roman prejudices against the Greek world: the soldiers on the Roman stage are Greek and mainly mercenaries, whose behaviour could be perceived as a mockery of the Greeks’ military ineptitude, so different from the uera uirtus (Enn. trag. 257-258 R) which defined the Roman uir. On the other hand, the military parody also engages with national values: the uera uirtus itself is at stake, constructing a combination of parodic processes which refers directly to Rome’s own ideals. The pure military valour that “stands its ground and ... has no need of the dynamic movement and covert operations of the trickster” is inevitably affected by a world such as Plautus, where the witty tricks of the clever slaves prevail and the Roman military ideals are “turned topsy-turvy.”

As the comic soldier clashed with the slave’s cunning wit, however, another warrior on the Roman stage had to deal with a champion of ingenuity: Telamonian Ajax, who clashed with Ulysses in the contest for Achilles’ arms. Ajax’s defensive heroism and his quality of resistance make him an appealing figure for Roman culture to use as a mythical embodiment of uera uirtus: the unyielding and upright military valour which informed the model of the Roman uir but was also distorted and parodied by the comic miles. My intent is thus to show how Ajax’s features could have echoed in the construction of Plautine milites and, vice versa, how the figure of Ajax itself was affected by this relation with the comic soldiers.

Cappadocia, and calls himself inuicctissimus, ‘absolutely unbeatable’ (Pl. Mil. 25-57). List of victories in distant lands were a relevant celebratory theme for Hellenistic sovereigns, who also used to present themselves with the epithet ἄνικητος, ‘unconquered, unbeatable’. See Boillat 1991, 300-302, Questa 2004.


3 Enn. trag. 257-258 R3: Sed uirum uera uirtute uiuere animatum addecet | fortiterque innoxium stare aduersum aduersarios ('but it behoves a man to live a life inspired with true virtue and to stand steadfast against the enemy'). Vera uirtus is the quality of the Roman man, the uir: it is indeed “an appropriate virtue for the Roman legion and its collective determination to hold the line” (Leigh 2004, 39). And it is a quality that Plautus himself credits to his Roman audience (e.g., the end of the prologue in Cas. 87-88). On the role played by Roman military ethics in Roman comedy see Leigh 2004, 37-38.

4 Even common scenes such as the soldier’s return from remote military campaigns—despite deriving from Greek models and thus capable of alluding to the Greek mercenary world—echoed, for a Roman audience, the contemporary reality of Rome’s military expansion. See Hanson 1965. Quoting from Gildenhard 2010, 172 on Roman tragedy, Roman comedy also enacts “an interesting oscillation between moments of perceived identity and moments of perceived alterity”.

5 Leigh 2004, 39.

6 Segal 1968, 124.
The Mask of the Comic Soldier

A potential template for what would become the comic soldier has been recognised in Homer’s Thersites, who partially anticipates the moral and intellectual failures that will define this comic type. For the purpose of this paper, it is worth noting that Thersites is verbally and physically beaten by Odysseus in the *Iliad* (Hom. Il. 2.212-275), thus by the same hero who will ‘beat’ Ajax in the wrestling match and, beyond the Homeric narrative, in the contest for Achilles’ arms. Furthermore, Ajax is called ἄμετροεπής ‘rambling, witless in speech’ (ll. 13.824), as Thersites is ἀμετροεπής, ‘rambling, measureless in speech’ (2.212). And the only two Homeric occurrences of ἐβουγάϊος, ‘braggart’, are associated with Ajax (ll. 13.824) and Irus (Od. 18.79), another counter-model of Homer’s heroic world opposed and beaten by Odysseus. With no attempt to draw direct relations between the three characters, these similarities may hint to discordant features potentially implied by the heroic figure of Ajax. Suffice it to say, for example, that Thersites—while being ‘measureless in speech’—is intent on mocking and blaming the great epic leaders, almost taking up the role of the “blame poet”. But he does so within an epic poem: thus, as Ralph Rosen points out, he fails to connect with the context and gain the endorsement of the epic audience, which is what turns him from a tentative agent of mockery into a mocked object. As we shall see, not only do the comic milites similarly find themselves disconnected from the context they act in, but this inconsistency is also what may potentially turn Ajax—similarly intent on speaking against Ulysses and the Atridae in the contest for the arms—from an agent of blame into its target.

Actual parodies of military men have first been tracked in Greek Old Comedy. The character of Lamachus in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* is a recognised antecedent of the comic soldier. The chorus calls him onto the

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8 The match is broken off unfinished but, although it counts as a draw, Ajax is having the worst of it. See already O’Higgins 1989.
9 On Thersites—and Irus—as “blame poets”, see Rosen 2007, 67-73 with further bibliography. Even when considering Thersites’ moral and physical deformity, which reflects the well-known *topos* of καλοκαγαθία, we might see ugly Thersites as a counterpart of the boastful Agamemnon: while fulfilling the Homeric καλοκαγαθία, Agamemnon indeed resembles the bluster of the future comic soldiers, whose boasted appearance will often mark, in reverse, the lack of military skills. The process appears not very different from what happens in a fragment by an actual ‘blame poet’, Archilochus (fr. 114 West), where the ‘looking good—being good’ relation is similarly subverted.
10 Rosen 2007, 72-79.
11 Wysk 1921, 8; Wehrli 1936, 101; Hunter 1985, 66; Mastromarco 2009, 23-29.
stage (Ar. Ach. 566-567) as a great warrior with a dazzling gaze and a Gorgon crest, which will soon reveal itself as a parody of military grandeur reduced to a pompous self-importance. Dominated by a warlike spirit, he opposes Dikaiopolis, the peasant hero of the play, with bullying pride, calling him a πτωχός, 'a beggar' (Ar. Ach. 593). Lamachus is unshakable in his military code (Ach. 621: ἀεί πολεμήσω, 'I will always fight') and caught up in his military pride, which makes him tough, almost stubborn: he is ταλαύρινος (Ar. Ach. 964), an epithet that, in relation to Ares, means 'equipped with a leather shield' but more generally 'tough', 'steeled by war' or, as Henderson translates,12 'tough as φιδίς, tough as leather'. As for Dikaiopolis, he presents himself as a πολίτης χρηστός (Ach. 595), 'a useful citizen', and ridicules Lamachus' warrior pomp and rigid military nature. Military nature finds no reward in the comic world: at the end of the play, while Dikaiopolis appears drunk between one banquet and another, Lamachus appears battered between one battle and another.

In Greek Middle13 and New Comedy14—when the comic processes start working through comic types—military parodies start shaping the actual stock-character of the comic soldier. Roughness, tough character, and stubbornness characterize the type: in a fragment attributed to Menander we read that 'there cannot be such thing as a refined soldier (in terms of both intellect and manners, κομψός), not even if a god created him' (Men. fr. 554 K-T2). As often happens to comic-types in Menander, however, the rude soldier can be transformed, and produce sympathy. Polemon, the soldier of the Περικειρομένη, obtusely falls victim to misunderstandings and jealousies and in a fit of rage crops his girlfriend's tresses; he is punished with the denial of love and we see him go from 'the perfect swaggerer' (ὁ σοβαρὸς ... ἀρτίως) and man of war (πολεμικός) to a contrite figure who lies in tears (Men. Pk. 172-174). Thus, Menandrian soldiers such as Polemon (but see, for instance, Thrasonides in the Μισούμενος) are not κομψός—they are rough and stubborn, just like comic soldiers are expected to be—but they are also capable of generating empathy and playing the positive role of the lovers.15 A more regular type of

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15 In the first part of the play, Polemon "seems to beat out the stereotype" (Furley 2014, 111) and is led to violence and roughness by his own ignorance (on the role played by ignorance in determining the comic soldier's behaviour see already Webster 1950, 6-7). Menander fully resorts to the stock-type of the comic soldier and its typical traits, and then uses them to shape it into the type of the loving soldier. See Blanchard 2016, 116-117.
comic soldier seems to be Bias in the Κόλαξ, who displays a good deal of dullness: ἀναισθησία, a sort of mental torpor, as Plutarch calls it when quoting a passage from the play where the flatterer Strouthias praises the soldier's 'drinking deeds', declaring that he has 'drunk even more than King Alexander' (Men. Kol. fr. 2 K3 ~ Plu. Mor. 57a, see also Ath. 10.434c). The gullible soldier seems to fall prey to flattery again, in other fragments. Men. Kol. fr. 4 K3, for example, presents a series of female names which was likely intent on flattering the soldier, but with ridiculous exaggeration, for his erotic deeds look like a list of heroic deeds. Finally, Men. fr. 745 K-T2, a fragment which also seems to belong to the Κόλαξ, gives an account of what seems an actual warlike exploit but does so with mocking intents and ridiculous results.17

This fragmentary repertoire of comic soldiers leads to Plautus’ memorable characters, among which Pyrgopolynices from Miles Gloriosus is probably the most well-known. In his first appearance on the stage, he adopts the pose of a great warrior, as already Lamachus did, with ridiculously boasted exaggerations.18 The flatterer Artotrogus praises the soldier’s military successes and declares him greater than Mars himself, while Pyrgopolynices is pretty sure of having, no less, rescued Mars in battle (Pl. Mil. 13-16): quemne ego seruaui (‘is he the one I saved…’), the miles asks, and Artotrogus confirms promptly, memini (‘I remember’). There follows a long list of military exploits, exaggerated and clearly unfounded, which Pyrgopolynices asks Artotrogus to recall. The verb memini comes up again (Pl. Mil. 37, 42, 48, 49): Artotrogus’ memory is responsible for keeping track of and validating the soldier’s deeds, to the point of taking on the task of writing them down, with stilus and tabellae (Pl. Mil. 38). While drawing on Greek antecedents (see, for example, the warlike/erotic deeds recalled by Bias’ flatterer), the listing of Pyrgopolynices’ war-memories on tabellae also has an autochthonous target. Honorary military inscriptions and lists of victories are a widespread practice, especially in the years of Republican expansionism:19 a ‘serious’ practice, parodied an exaggerated in Plautus’ scene. Furthermore, when boasting of having saved a

16 The soldier of the Κόλαξ, along with his flattering parasite whom the title itself refers to, will be used as models for the characters in the Eunuchus, the most stereotypical among Terence’s plays. See Ter. Eu. 30-34 and Duncan 2006, 112; Blanchard 2016, 171-174; Pernerstorfer 2009, 84-99.

17 See Pernerstorfer 2009, 69-70. Plutarch quotes the passage (Plu. Mor. 547c), stressing its comic intent and identifying the comic soldier as its target.

18 Santini 2005 and Filoche 2007 note how an hyperbolic lexicon also contributes to the parodic effects of this wannabe-hero.

19 Oakley 1997, 559: “Roman soldiers loved to list their exploits and awards, since bravery in battle counted for much in their militaristic society”. See also Hanson 1965, 56-58 and Segal 1968, 93 for literary and epigraphic parallels.
fellow soldier (none other than Mars himself), the expression Pyrgopolynices uses, *ego seruaui*, points to one of the greatest military merits in Rome: that of *seruare ciues*, rewarded with the civic crown.\footnote{The corona ciuilis was awarded *ob ciues servatos*, for having saved a fellow citizen in battle (e.g., V. Max. 2.8 ext. 7, Plin. Nat. 22.4-6). The use of *seruare* for a Roman audience may thus enact a specifically Roman sensitivity. As Gildenhard 2010, 175 writes, the expression *seruare ciues* has an “emotive force”, hinting and deriving from “key notions of Roman public ideology”. The expression also occurs in Ennius’ *Achilles* (Enn. trag. 1 R²: *serua ciues*), showing that the concept was present on the Roman Republican stage, both tragic and comic, which acknowledged the cultural and military ideals of its audience. On the contacts between Plautus’ comedy and tragic theatre, see already Fraenkel 1960, 368-371 and Gunderson 2015.} Boastful military accounts thus enact mocking processes fully effective for and within the contemporary Roman audience. They indeed occur as a standard element in comic *milites*, so much so that they generate expectations and metatheatrical subversions: in the *Truculentus*, the soldier Stratophanes comes onstage declaring to the audience: *ne exspectetis, spectatores, meas pugnas dum praedicem* (‘do not expect me, spectators, to promote my exploits’; Pl. *Truc.* 482).\footnote{On Stratophanes’ metatheatrical representation of his own stock-character see Duncan 2006, 101.}

The violent, warlike tendencies found in Greek comic soldiers (e.g., Lamachus’ ἀεί πολεμήσω or Polemon’s lack of self-control) crop up in Plautus’ *milites*. Stratophanes, later in the play, is on the verge of lashing out with his ‘violent impulses and rage’ (Pl. *Truc.* 603: *violeñti animi* and *ira*) at his rival’s irreverent cook, and bursts out: ‘one more word and, hell, I’ll tear you to pieces with this [the sword] ... you’ll die instantly if you can’t strongarm me (*ni manu uiceris*)’ (Pl. *Truc.* 622-624). Backed into a corner by the cook’s sharp tongue, Stratophanes intends to get the upper hand with physical strength, *manu*. Likewise, the soldier Therapontigonus, while unsuccessfully confronting the *leno*\footnote{I use here the Latin term, whose common translation as ‘pimp’ has proved misleading. ‘Sex-trafficker’ might be a better option, see Witzke 2015.} in *Curculio*, recalls his *pugnae plurumae*, his ‘countless military exploits’ (Pl. *Cur.* 573) and seeks in his physical strength a means to triumph in the discussion (Pl. *Cur.* 576: ‘I’ll make the ants carry you away in tiny pieces’). But muscle power is all useless in the world of comedy. The *miles* is a victim of cunning skill, who clashes with the protagonist of the comedy and his assistants. Tellingly, at the end of the dispute, Therapontigonus will say: *Curculio hercle uerba mihi dedit* (‘Curculio duped me’, Pl. *Cur.* 583), with an idiomatic expression which can be literally translated as ‘Curculio gave me words’.

Between *manus* and *uerba*, *uerba* prevail. Warlike valour and physical strength are inconsistent with and doomed to failure in Plautus’ world, where
the value of wit wins out. The parodic exaggerations of the comic soldier enact and ease the perception of their actual discrepancy with the world they are confronted with, where the true champion is the *seruus callidus*, the champion of wit, who almost steps into the role of the hero of ingenuity par excellence: Ulysses. Chrysalus, for instance, the *seruus* of the *Bacchides*, explicitly identifies himself with the Homeric hero and compares his own plots to that of the wooden horse: *ego sum Vlixes, cuius consilio haec gerunt* (‘I am Ulysses, according to whose advice all this takes place’, Pl. Bac. 940).

As the soldier and the *seruus*-Ulysses clashed on the comic stage, however, a much more serious warrior would similarly clash with the value of wit, and with Ulysses himself, on the tragic stage: Telamonian Ajax, in the contest over Achilles’ arms.

2 Ajax against Odysseus

Ajax was known on Rome’s tragic scene at least from Livius Andronicus. The first tragic fragments concerning the contest for the arms, however, come to us from Pacuvius and Accius, one or two generations after Plautus. In their *Armorum iudicium*, Ajax’s warlike valour is associated to a key-notion of Roman military ideal: once again, that of *ciues seruare*. The key-verb *seruare* occurs in a line attributed to Ajax in Pacuvius: *... men seruasse ut essent qui me perderent?* (‘... did I save them so they could cause my death?’, Pac. trag. 40 R³).

In Accius the same hero is presented as the repository of all hope for salvation: *in quo salutis spes supre mas sibi habet summa exerciti* (‘in whom most of the army entrusts the highest hopes of salvation’, Acc. trag. 150 R³). In promoting his own military merits against his rival Odysseus, the Roman Ajax resorts to—and thus proves capable of approaching—national models of *uirtus*.

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23 The *miles* is a blocking character in Plautine comedy (Segal 1968, 93-95) and winds up inevitably defeated. The inconsistency of the comic soldier with the world he acts in is also scenically marked (Leigh 2004, 134): he arrives on the stage from overseas and, when he leaves, he never does so through the exit that conventionally leads to the fields. He comes from outside the city and never fully integrates in the world of the *ciues*, the world of social life and landed property where comedy take place.


25 Teucer’s speech in Sophocles’ *Ajax* recalls how Ajax risked his life to protect the Greek army (S. Aj. 1269, 1276) but there is no particular emphasis there on the language of ‘saving’ and ‘salvation’. Nor there is any mention of the *Iliad*’s rescuing episodes, where Ajax saved not only Teucer himself but also Ulysses, now Ajax’s opponent, from battle. The role of the *seruator* associated with and highlighted in the Roman Ajax may thus respond and ‘translate’ a specifically native cultural/military background.
Ajax, the Homeric ‘bulwark of the Achaeans’ who lacks the personal prestige of an aristeia but stands with solid endurance in defence of the entire Greek fleet, displays a certain affinity to Rome’s military ideal. His steadfast, defensive heroism resonates with the Roman warlike imagery, where the uera uirtus is that of standing the ground and the war is not, as in Homer, an ardent exploit of personal heroism but a durus labor (Enn. Ann. 328 Sk.), ‘a tough effort’ to be sustained in defence of the community. Furthermore, when contrasted with Ulysses’ ingenuity, Ajax’s warrior nature may also approach the traditional—Roman—ideal of an unyielding uirtus, foreign to any help that might come from cunning trickery. It hence may be no coincidence that Cicero thinks of Ajax, who chose death to keep from seeing his honour diminished (Cic. Off. 3.113), not long after having recalled the example of Atilius Regulus—a stultus (‘fool’), as Cicero provocatively says that Regulus might be called (Cic. Off. 3.130) for he preferred death to any cunning solution that was inconsistent with pure military uirtus.

If we look at the only extensive narration of the contest that survives in Greek literature—Antisthenes’ δισσοὶ λόγοι, Ajax and Ulysses—Ajax presents himself as the champion of military valour against Odysseus’ cowardice and despicable cunning. Antisthenes imagines the speech pronounced by Ajax and makes him draw a strict dichotomy between deeds (τὰ ξέργα) and words (οἱ λόγοι), stressing the importance of the former over the latter both at the beginning and at the end of the speech (Antisth. Aj. 1, 7). The jury, Ajax says, must evaluate τὰ ξέργα and not οἱ λόγοι when assessing valour; and if the judges of the contest had been eye-witnesses of the events, he—Ajax—‘wouldn’t need to say a word’ since the facts would speak for themselves and there wouldn’t be any advantage for Odysseus, the better talker. Ajax also recalls he is the one who rescued Achilles’ corpse and arms, which Odysseus would not even dare to use, ‘for no coward would use distinguished weapons’ (Antisth. Aj. 3). Odysseus, Ajax says, is only capable of acting ‘in secret’ and resorting to any means to succeed, something he, Ajax, would never do (Antisth. Aj. 5). This dichotomy may well fit into Roman treatments of the contest: Ajax—whose defensive heroism already suited Roman military models—could act as the champion of uera uirtus, devoid of anything which ‘hides, injurious, in the obscure darkness’ (Enn. trag. 260 R3); conversely, his rival’s representation as a coward and

26 “The Homeric uirtus”, of which the heroic aristeia is a crucial expression, “was inconsistent” with Rome’s military ideals and social order (Phang 2008, 73). On the contrary, Ajax’s sturdy and defensive quality offers a mythical model for national heroic deeds (see already Enn. Ann. 391-398 Sk., modelled on Ajax’s resistance at Hom. Il. 16.102-111; cf. Macr. 6.3.3).
reprehensibly crafty character\textsuperscript{27} could well provide a counter-model for precisely what \textit{uera virtus} should be devoid of.

And yet, quite an opposite treatment equally emerges. In his reply, Antisthenes’ Odysseus calls Ajax a ferocious boar, swept away by his own anger, who will end up killing himself (\textit{Antisth. Od. 6})—with a clear hint at the well-known end of Ajax’s myth. Odysseus argues against his rival’s self-appointed valour (\textit{Antisth. Od. 13-14}): according to Odysseus, the physical strength Ajax has shown in his deeds is equivalent neither to \textit{āndreia}, ‘valour’, nor to \textit{σοφία περὶ πόλεμον}, ‘wisdom in war’. Ajax’s \textit{ἀμαθία} (‘ignorance’, ‘dullness’) is unable to understand the difference between strength and real valour and, if a great poet should ever speak of him, he would compare Ajax \textit{τοῖς τε νωθέσιν ὅνοις καὶ βουσά}, ‘to stubborn donkeys or oxen’, which do have strength but not actual valour, and passively put themselves into the hands of others (\textit{ἄλλοις παρέχουσι}). A \textit{σοφὸς} ποιητής had actually made that comparison: the poet of the \textit{Iliad} had already compared Ajax’s endurance under the Trojans’ blows to that of a donkey immovable from its pasture (\textit{Hom. Il. 11.558-565}). And while the Homeric text appears free of cutting critical intents (after all, the donkey’s resistance in the passage is successful in achieving its goal, the pasture), Ajax’s non-conformity to the offensive performances of other great heroes might lie behind this unusual comparison between an Homeric hero and a donkey: a non-conformity that might have jeopardised the assessment of Ajax’s valour, beyond Homer, in some treatments of the contest. The static heroism\textsuperscript{28} and resistant quality of the bulwark of the Achaeans seems to be considered devoid of agency already in a fragment from the \textit{Little Iliad} where—following

\textsuperscript{27} Odysseus’s negative representation—as opposed to and coexistent with his role as “the man of \textit{metis} and a largely sympathetic hero”—is easily found in 5th century Greek tragedy (Worman 1999, 35) but continues in the Hellenistic period and comes down to Rome (Perutelli 2006). For instance, in Theodectes’ \textit{Ajax} (according to Arist. \textit{Rh. 1399b}) Odysseus’ valour appears to be diminished, having Diomedes choose him (and not Ajax) as his companion not because of his bravery but so that his own valour might stand out when contrasted with Odysseus’ inferiority. Roman tragic treatments of the contest for the arms are difficult to reconstruct but, if Ajax seems to claim key-military merits for himself (\textit{ciues seruare}), there may also be found a hint to the dichotomy between valour (\textit{Ajax?}) and cowardice (\textit{Odysseus?}) in Pac. \textit{trag. 27-29 R}\textsuperscript{3}, see Schierl 2006, 147.

\textsuperscript{28} As befits a bulwark, Ajax is always associated with verbs such as \textit{ἵσταμαι} (‘stand’), and never with \textit{ὁρμάω} (‘attack’) which usually marks the heroism of the other Homeric heroes. But it is precisely the \textit{ὁρμή} (the impetus of the attack) that Polybius will significantly identify as the distinctive quality of Greek military ideal (the \textit{Ἐλληνικὴ ὁρμή}, \textit{Plb. 5.64.5-7}), which leaves Ajax’s type of heroism potentially penalised. On the contrary, according to Polybius (\textit{Plb. 6.24.49}), the Romans want their commanders not to be bold and daring but rather firm and steady: a military ideal quite different from the Greek \textit{ὁρμή} and much more favourable to Ajax’s resistant quality.
West’s reconstruction in fr. 2 West—it is depicted as not fully worthy of a real warrior, and placed in contrast with Odysseus’ fighting quality. The fragment’s reconstruction remains speculative but, if taken into account, it would at least point at the same ‘contrast of agency’ clearly thematised, later on, in the words of Antisthenes’ Odysseus: there, the actual ἀνδρεία Odysseus claims for himself (backed by intelligence, σοφία) appears to be in sharp contrast with Ajax’s sturdy but somehow passive quality of resistance (matched by ignorance and dullness, ἀμαθία), to the point of having it presented as the stubbornness of a pack animal.

While not dealing with the contest directly, Sophocles’ Ajax may also hint to the existence of potentially undermining readings of Ajax’s heroic quality. While recalling Iliadic episodes, Teucer reworks them “for the greater glory of Ajax”,29 making Ajax the one who, for example, not only resists but actually fights back and repulses the Trojan attack at the ship (something that only Patroclus and then Achilles manage to do in the Ilíad). Could this re-fashioning of the Homeric Ajax imply the need for Ajax’s heroism to be somehow boosted in order to deal with potential devaluations? Indeed, Sophocles’ Agamemnon in turn seems to rely on—and thus suggest the existence of?—possible unfavourable assessments of Ajax’s heroism. He asks Teucer: ‘Who is that man about whom you speak with such arrogance? Where did he go or stand where I did not?’ (S. Aj. 1236-1237). After all, one may say, Ajax did not prove his valour in an aristeia as the other distinguished heroes in the Ilíad; and, as Agamemnon implies, Ajax did not actually accomplish much more than any other valiant Greek hero. It is worth noting that the association with a pack animal also comes up in the play. While Tecmessa compares Ajax to a groaning bull (321-322) “as an exemplar of quiet determination”,30 Agamemnon implicitly refers to Ajax and says to Teucer that ‘it is not sturdy men who are the most steadfast’, but ‘it is the men of intelligence who always prevail’; ‘the massive ox’ he adds ‘is driven by a small whip’ (1250-1254). Is Sophocles’ text embedding negative assessments of Ajax’s valour—along with the implications of the pack-animal metaphor—that used to occur in Greek treatments of the contest? This cannot be proved, unfortunately, but the re-occurrence of similar themes in Antisthenes may at least suggest a sort of continuity.

Sophocles’ Ajax, on his part, presents himself as the greatest hero Troy has ever seen: a ‘proud boast’, as he himself says (422: ἔπος μέγ᾽), and one that never

29 On which see Finglass 2011, 490-491.
30 Finglass 2011, 485.
actually occurs in Homer, where Ajax is always the second best after Achilles. This claim takes part into the problematisation of Ajax’s warlike pride in Sophocles’ tragedy but may also hint at the existence of a somewhat ‘braggart’ Ajax: an Ajax potentially blamed for claiming an excellence in valour he does not really have, as he already appears to be in the words of Sophocles’ Agamemnon and will then be, more explicitly, in those of Antisthenes’ Odysseus.

Ajax thus seems to provide Rome with a prototype for opposing models, packed into a single figure. On the one hand, he is the valiant hero who lacks a personalistic exploit, the hero who embodies the quality of solid resistance and, in the contest with Ulysses, champions the model of a pure military valour, thus approaching Rome’s military ideal. On the other hand, the potentially discordant aspects Ajax’s heroism implied, which run the risk of even making him a stubborn ox or a proud braggart, could end up approaching the parodic exaggerations of that same ideal, constructing an opposite and yet co-existent character: the ‘comic’ Ajax.

3 Ajax in the miles Mask

The contest between Ajax, the bulwark of the Achaeans, and Odysseus, the hero of metis, is capable of enacting an opposition between deeds and words (between military valour and craftiness, or even between merely physical strength and truly skilful valour) not very different from the one displayed between the miles and the cunning characters on the comic stage. Plautus’ milites also rely on their warlike uirtus (although they often boast it in an exaggerated and ridiculous way) while trying to win out over their talkative rivals. Furthermore, Ajax proves to be capable of embodying Rome’s model of uera uirtus and that same military ideal is the parodic target of the comic soldiers: Ajax, for instance, claims for himself the prestigious role of servator ciuium, just like Pyrgopolynices presents himself in the—ridiculous—role of servator Martis. Both Ajax and the comic miles are indeed expressions of the same ethical milieu, the former embodying traditional military ideals, the latter subverting them in parodic exaggerations.

31 Hom. Il. 2.768-769, 7.279-280, Od. 11.550-551, 11.469-470. Even when duelling against Hector, the Trojan champion (Hom. Il. 7.226-232), Ajax does not present himself as the champion of the Greeks but, as Plutarch will later point out (Plu. Mor. 30a-b), as ‘only one among many equally capable of withstanding the fight’. Again, something which well suited the collective essence of Roman military ideal.
This proximity encourages a search for parallels. Among the sarcastic praises addressed to Pyrgopolynices, he is said to excel in a specific trio: uirtus, forma and facta. In Pl. Mil. 57, Atrotrogus calls him uirtute et forma et factis inuictissumus (‘most invincible in valour, looks and exploits’). The trio is repeated, substituting facta with facies, in line 1027, when the cunning slave Palestrius instructs the maidservant Milphidippa on how to flatter the soldier: conlaudato formam et faciem et uirtutes commemorato (‘you should praise his looks, his appearance, and mention his displays of valour’). The threefold excellence occurs a third time in Milphidippa’s words: ecastor hau mirum, si te habes carum | hominem tam pulchrum et praeclarum uirtute et forma ⟨et⟩ factis (‘no wonder you have a high opinion of yourself, you, such a handsome, famous man for valour, looks and exploits, 1041-1042). Similar praises were assigned three times to Ajax, and Ajax only, in Homer. In two cases Ajax is said to overcome everyone in εἶδος and ἔργα, in ‘looks’ and ‘exploits’ (Il. 17.279-280, Od. 11.550-551). In a third occurrence (Od. 11.469-470) ἔργα is replaced by δέμας, ‘appearance’ which, in combination with εἶδος and ἄριστος (‘the most valiant’, cognate of ἀρετή, ‘valour’), looks similar to Plautus’ variation forma, facies and uirtus. In all the three instances, however, Ajax outdoes all the other Danaans, except for perfect Achilles. Two occurrences out of three, moreover, are placed in Hades, where it is Odysseus who praises the dead Ajax, after having himself caused the overthrow of his rival’s excellences: an ironic potential that might have been expressed in the comic context, where in fact the praises are addressed to the soldier with clearly mocking intents.

The audience might or might not have picked up the connection with Ajax. And yet, it is at least clear that the two characters looked to the same ideal of heroic excellence, as expressed by the encomiastic formula: the serious (Ajax) and the comic (the miles) embodiments of that ideal were able to be presented with a trio of excellences that made the tragic hero and the comic soldier look quite alike.

Lexical details may also trigger similar connections. Artotrogus makes the miles believe that all women are in love with him (Pl. Mil. 58-62): Is he Achilles? is what, according to Artotrogus, the women ask when they see Pyrgopolynices; immo eius frater, ‘no, he’s his brother’, the flatterer says in answer. But there was another frater of Achilles on the Roman stage: Telamonian Ajax. In a tragic fragment related to the episode of the contest over the arms and probably belonging to Accius’ Armorum iudicium, Ajax claims Achilles’ arms calling them arma fraterna (inc. inc. 53 R3). The Latin term frater has a dual meaning, ‘brother’ and ‘paternal cousin’, which seems fully active in the tragic line: Ajax

32 The fragment is assigned to Accius’ Armorum iudicium in Warmington 1936, 326.
and Achilles are in fact cousins but, in the context of Ajax’s intense claim for Achilles’ weapons, the use of the term *frater*na also evokes the deeper imagery of a fraternal bond. In short, for a Roman spectator, the kinship suggested for the comic soldier Pyrgopolynices, *frater* of Achilles, could prompt the memory of Ajax, the tragic soldier who claimed for himself the role of Achilles’ *frater*.

Echoes of terms and imagery associated with Telamonian Ajax also come from other Plautine soldiers. If Antisthenes’ Ajax insisted on the need to prove valour with concrete deeds (τὰ ἔργα), Plautus’ Stratophanes says that he is used to demonstrating his military prowess *manibus*, ‘by hands’, ‘by deeds’, not *in sermonibus*, ‘with words’ (Pl. Truc. 483). Accordingly, Stratophanes says that ‘eye-witness testimony’ is ‘ten-times preferable to hearsay’ (489), finding himself in perfect agreement with the words of Antisthenes’ Ajax who wished the judges had been eye-witnesses of the events. Stratophanes is actually recalling Rome’s military ethics, where, to quote from Livy (10.24.4), military men are men of ‘few words’ (*pauca uerba*) who base themselves ‘on deeds, rather than on speeches’ (*factis potius quam dictis*). And Ajax might have done the same—although the remaining fragments offer no textual evidence—in Roman tragedies. Again, we can only guess, but the hypothesis seems supported by the fact that the superiority of facts over words, which Antisthenes’ Ajax claims insistently, and which was so suitable for Roman military ethics, holds on to the figure of Ajax in its later Roman reception: it will occur in Ovid’s Ajax in a way that, as we shall see, echoes both Antisthenes’ Ajax and Plautus’ soldiers.

Stratophanes also worries about his own offspring (Pl. Truc. 505-522) in a tone similar to Sophocles’ Ajax, when the hero addresses his son Eurysaces (S. Aj. 545-557). Ajax has Tecmessa bring Eurysaces to him: the child, he says, if he is his father’s true son, will not be frightened by the recent massacre (S. Aj. 544-547). The *miles* Stratophanes shows no less attention for the genetic resemblance in warlike nature. He is convinced that the sex-labourer Phronesio has given birth to his son and he asks at once: ‘Does he look like me?’ (ecquid mei simil est?, Pl. Truc. 505). And Phronesio’s maidservant replies that he certainly does, since ‘he looked for sword and shield as soon as he was born’ (606). The warlike nature, though exaggerated and ridiculous in the comic context, is proof of the similarity between father and son, as it was for

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33 On the scant loquacity of Roman heroes see Harrison 1991, 62. Cipriani 2013 focuses on the language of the comic *miles* (simplified syntax, barbaric terms, anacoluthon), showing how their *infantia in dicendo* (‘inability to talk’) hints at the lack of loquacity of Roman heroes but also provides a much more prosaic—and ridiculous—mirror of the actual poverty of speech of Roman soldiers.
the tragic Ajax. Furthermore, in Sophocles’ scene, Ajax frets about his son’s growing up and says that he must at once be inured to ‘the tough code of his father’ (S. Aj. 548). Then, Ajax continues: ‘May Eurysaces have better luck than his father but be equal to him in all the rest’ (550-551). In the comic distortion, Stratophanes imagines his son as already grown up, and thinks of him as having already become a perfect soldier: ‘Has he already joined the legion? What booty has he brought home?’ he asks (Pl. Truc. 508). Not far differently from the tragic Ajax, Stratophanes imagines his son as already perfectly trained for the same military code he himself—his father, a miles—embodies. There is no mention of bad luck, no lamentation of a cruel destiny in the comic scene. And, after all, Stratophanes never really understands that he has been duped, and remains at the mercy of Phronesio till the very end. He could not, therefore, exempt his son from a misfortune that he is too dull to understand himself. Finally, Sophocles’ Ajax says that Eurysaces will have to prove ‘from what kind of birth’ he comes (S. Aj. 557): through his own valour, Eurysaces will demonstrate to the enemy the valour of his father, and bring honour to Ajax’s memory. Stratophanes too, for his part, sees in his son a great source of honour (magnum decus, Pl. Truc. 517), but also of loot (spolia, 522), with an attention to the economic perks of valour that suits the comic context of this father-and-son talk.

The Roman reception of the Ajax-Eurysaces scene finds a textual support in a fragment of Accius, which incorporates Ajax’s painful wish for his son’s fate. It is therefore likely that the Roman public was familiar with the idea of a staged dialogue between Ajax and his son, and could recognise it in the scene of Plautus’ Stratophanes. A connection eased by the fact that both these characters spring from the same, tough, military model—serious and tragic in the former, comic and parodic in the latter—whose fate is that of being defeated by uerba and wit.

4 The miles Mask in Ajax

I have so far discussed how Plautus’ milites may remind the audience of Ajax’s features while mocking the same military model that, in a much more serious way, Ajax himself was able to embody. This in turn unlocks a potential reverse-process: the figure of Ajax may open itself up to comic nuances

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34 Acc. trag. 156 R³: Virtuti sis par, dispar fortunis patris (‘may you be like your father in valour, unlike him in destiny’): a wish which will be famously echoed by Aeneas’ words to Ascanius in Verg. A. 12.435-436.
which can be better understood by taking into account its proximity with the stock-character of the comic soldier.

I focus on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 13, which offers the longest and best-preserved Latin treatment of Ajax’s contest with Ulysses. The contest is staged in two opposing speeches. Ajax is the first to speak, ‘unable to contain his anger’ (*impatiens irae*, Ov. *Met.* 13.3). He recalls right away his own military valour, he, who had faced the Trojan attack on the fleet while Ulysses, who now dares to be his rival, was ready to give up. In the following lines (13.9-12), Ajax claims that it is much safer ‘to fight with artful words’ than ‘combat with hands’ (*tutius est igitur fictis contendere uerbis | quam pugnare manu*); he says he himself has no talent for eloquence (*nec mihi dicere promptum*), since it is in battle that he proves his valour (*inque acie ualeo*), while Ulysses, on the contrary, is the one who excels in words (*ualet iste loquendo*). Dwelling on the contrasts between warlike achievements and empty words, Ajax adds (13-15) that there should be no need to recount his deeds (*nec memoranda ... mea facta*), for the audience has seen them (*uidistis enim*); Odysseus is the one who needs words (*sua narret Vlixes*), since what Odysseus says to have done has been done with no eye-witness (*sine teste*). The same theme comes up again at the end of Ajax’s speech, where he urges that they resolve the contest with action instead of words: ‘what’s the point of words? Let’s test ourselves in action’ (*denique quid uerbis opus est? spectemur agendo*, Met. 13.120). Ajax suggests to let Achilles’ weapons be cast among the enemy: he shall win who retrieves them to safety. The proposal is modelled on a gesture which was quite common in Roman military narration: that of throwing the *signa* into the enemy’s ranks in order to encourage the charge.35 In claiming the primacy of pure military valour and despising the art of eloquence, Ovid’s Ajax thus echoes Rome’s most traditional ethics and even hints at a traditional Roman gesture.36 While proving capable of embodying Roman military models, however, Ovid’s Ajax ends up recalling not only coexistent and potentially diminishing depictions of his heroism like those already detected in Greek treatments of the contest, but also his proximity with the comic *miles*. As we shall see, this contributes to making his figure functional to the discussion on changing cultural values implied in Ovid’s episode.

35 Liv. 34.46.12 calls the gesture a *res saepe temptata* (*something often attempted*). See Hopkinson 2003, 106; Hardie 2015, 234.

36 Ovid is aware of Ajax’s capability of embodying Roman models. In *Pont.* 4.7.41-50, he will actually use the Greek hero as a positive example of Roman military values, modelling the heroic resistance of a Roman centurion (Vestalis) on Ajax’s Iliadic resistance by the ships.
Potentially weakening features lurk within Ajax’s speech itself. The opposition between deeds and words, for instance, suits Rome’s military ethics and was perhaps used by Ajax in his own advantage in other Roman treatments of the contest. But it may also hint at Antisthenes δισσοί λόγοι, where the same opposition is constructed by Ajax but then turned into one between his merely physical strength and the true valour and intelligence Odysseus claims for himself in his own speech. This is a downside of the words/deeds dichotomy which, for the Roman readership, can also be activated by the memory of the comic milites: they similarly affirm the superiority of manus over uerba while actually relying on not much more than physical threats and brute force. Likewise, Ajax’s proposal of solving the contest with action fits Roman sensitivity. And yet, a similar pattern emerges from Greek sources, with disturbing tones. Menelaus’ final words in Sophocles’ Ajax (Aj. 1159-1160) interrupt the verbal dispute with Teucer with an appeal to the use of force instead of words: ‘it would be disgraceful’ Menelaus says ‘if anyone knew I was rebuking with words (λόγοις κολάζειν) when I could use force (βιάζεσθαι)’. Is Menelaus embodying an attitude which was assigned to Ajax elsewhere, in Greek treatments of the contest for the arms? This is again speculative, but it is at least clear that the idea of recurring to force to solve a verbal fight is assigned to Menelaus when he is wearing the garments of quite an arrogant and abusive warrior: the same garments that Ajax might have been made to wear—to his detriment—in some treatments of his verbal dispute with Odysseus. And, once again, for a Roman reader, this is an attitude that appears shared by comic milites such as Plautus’, equally braggart, violent, and ready to try to win their argument using force. Another example comes from the kinship with Achilles Ovid’s Ajax also claims for himself: frater erat, fraterna peto (‘he was my brother/cousin, I seek for my brother/cousin’s arms’, Met. 13.31). Ovid may recall what was perhaps a recurring argument to Ajax’s advantage. In Accius, for instance, Ajax’s claim for arma fraterna takes part in an attempt to present himself as aemulus of Achilles, the closest to Achilles both in terms of blood

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37 As mentioned above (n. 27), Pac. trag. 27-29 R3 seems to construct a similar dichotomy between cowardice and valour. According to Ribbeck’s conjecture, there also seems to occur the idea of ‘staying safe’ (in tuto) that we will later find in the words of Ovid’s Ajax (tutius est igitur fictis contendere uerbi, Ov. Met. 13.9). This may suggest—although, unfortunately, it is not enough to prove it—the hypothesis of Pacuvius constructing a similar opposition between fighting with words (which allows one to stay safe) and actual heroic deeds. See also Schierl 2006, 147.

38 As recognised in Hopkinson 2000, 15, 156; Hardie 2015, 216.

39 Lexical similarities such as the metonymical use of manus—used by both Stratophanes and Ovid’s Ajax in opposition with the world of words—might have favoured the autochthonous, comic parallels.
and valour (inc. 53-54 R³). This proximity may have favoured Ajax in a culture like Rome’s, where acting as an aemulus of exemplary models was a fundamental ethical practice.⁴⁰ And yet, the comic soldier (at least once, in Plautus) had assigned the same proximity for himself, providing the claim of kinship with vain and ridiculous tones ready to be enacted by Ajax’s words in Ovid.

If such echoes affect Ajax’s speech from within, the end of the episode also activates comic memories. In Ov. Met. 13.386, the narrator comments on Ajax’s death and says: inuictum uirum uicit dolor (‘sorrow beat the unbeatable hero’). That of the valiant man unexpectedly defeated is a topos of complaint in ancient literature, but the idea of an ‘unbeatable Ajax’ is also specifically connected to the prodigious invulnerability that part of the tradition assigns him (e.g., Pi. I. 6.35-54). The agent that beats Ajax, however, is dolor: this adds a possible hint at the romantic dolor, the pain of love, which is a widespread theme in elegiac poetry⁴¹ but also makes Ajax overlap once again with the comic world. Sorrows of love overcome tough warriors on the comic stage: Menander’s Thrasonides, for example, says he has been subdued by a young girl, he who has never been beaten before (Men. Mis. fr. 3 K³), and is now on the verge of committing suicide.⁴² Killing oneself for love was also a theme developed in Roman comedy. Young Calidorus in Pseudolus, for example, asks for a sword to kill himself and the leno who sold his beloved (Pl. Ps. 349); old Lysidamus in Casina is prepared to throw himself on his gladium if he loses the girl he is in love with: gladium faciam culcitam | eumque incumbam (‘I’ll make a pillow of my sword and throw myself on it’, Pl. Cas. 307-308). Interestingly, the expression incumbere (in) gladium also occurs in the pun attributed to emperor Augustus in relation to Ajax’s suicide. When trying his hand at writing a tragedy on Ajax but then deciding to erase the text, Augustus seems to have said that his Ajax had ‘thrown himself’ not on the sword but ‘on the eraser sponge’ (in spongiam, inquit, incubuit, Suet. Aug. 85,2, see also Macr. 2.4.2). The quip works if the expression was recognised as typically associated with Ajax’s suicide or at least with tragic suicides like Ajax’s. Thus, when occurring on the comic stage, it could similarly target tragic suicides, or even Ajax’s suicide in particular. Moreover, suicides ‘by the sword’ are considered the noblest in Roman culture: they are in fact perceived as somewhat ‘military’ and honourable deaths,

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⁴⁰ Ajax’s proximity to Achilles in terms of valour is attested in Greek literature, where they are often presented as a heroic pair (B. 13.166-167 Maehler, E. Rh. 497, Diod. 17.17.3, Dict. 2.13-19). On Ajax’s positive role as an aemulus of Achilles in Roman culture, see Quint. Inst. 12.11.26-27.

⁴¹ Hardie 2015, 271.

⁴² Blanchard 2016, 263 n. 2.
even if suicidal.\textsuperscript{43} Ajax hence approached Roman military models also in his suicide and, since such models are often the target of comic parody, it could easily happen that both the tragic hero and the comic characters were associated with \textit{incumbere in gladium} on the Roman stage.

When presenting an unbeatable Ajax beaten by \textit{dolor}, Ovid’s text may thus relaunch this mutual echo. Ovid is acquainted with the comic-type of the soldier desperate for love: in \textit{Am.} 1.7, the elegiac poet seems to take on the role of Polemon, the soldier of the \textit{Περικειρομένη}.\textsuperscript{44} The poet of the \textit{Amores} too, in a fit of fury, has torn the hair of his beloved, and is tormented by remorse. In this context, Ajax finds his place. Menander’s model is implied but the poet-lover makes an explicit comparison between his own behaviour and the raging brutality of Ajax, ‘the lord of the seven-layered shield’ (\textit{clipei dominus se tempticis Aiax}, Ov. \textit{Am.} 1.7.7) who slaughtered the Greek flocks. True, the poet mentions Ajax along with Orestes, suggesting that the intent of the simile is mainly to condemn the madness of the gesture (since madness is what the two mythical examples have in common). But the presence of Ajax remains significant: Ajax is a hero Ovid can think of at the moment when he takes on the role of the comic soldier, rude and quick to rage, doomed to failure in the refined world of elegy. Moreover, Ajax is presented as the lord of a shield made of seven layers of leather, an image that recalls the Homeric epithet assigned to Ajax’s shield (\textit{ἐπιταξαδείον σάκος}) and reoccurs in a passage of \textit{Ars amatoria}: here, it significantly acts as a symbol of Ajax’s coarseness—almost expanding on a metaphor already enacted in Aristophanes’ \textit{ταλαύρινος} (‘tough as leather’) Lamachus. In \textit{Ars} 3.111-112, the elegiac poet asks: ‘would you present yourself as a bride all dressed up to Ajax, one who covered himself with seven ox-pelts?’ Surely not, since Ajax is the expression of a time when ‘there was a rude simplicity’ and now, instead, ‘Rome is golden’ (\textit{simplicitas rudis ante fuit: nunc aurea Roma est}, 113). Ajax, with his massive shield, is here an example of a rough and obsolete military code that clashes with the refined world of golden Rome. Ovid’s elegy seems to place Ajax—and the ethical example he embodies—in strong disagreement with the world he is confronted with: a role that the lord of the seven-skinned shield shares with the comic \textit{miles}, being both called on to show their inconsistency with a context dominated by new, different, much more urban values.

\textsuperscript{43} Van Hooff 1990, 47-54. He also notes that suicides committed with a stabbing weapon are historically the most attested in the Roman world (156 is the total number of Roman suicides committed with swords, daggers or knives, compared to only 66 Greek cases).

\textsuperscript{44} McKeown 1989, 162-164.
The figure of Ajax in the *Metamorphoses* may draw on a similar role. As we have seen, Ovid relies on both Ajax’s capability of embodying the most traditional face of Roman *uirtus* and on the features which make him conversely approach the stubborn coarseness of a comic soldier. These two, coexistent faces of Ajax’s heroic nature become a tool for showing how traditional values may turn into outdone toughness when confronted with new cultural models: namely, those provided by Odysseus, whose *uirtus* is not only military but also based on culture and intelligence.

Ovid’s Ajax in *Met.* 13 is a man of few words and sturdy resistance, as the traditional Roman hero, but he is also quick to anger, sure of his military valour and ready to use his physical strength to resolve the contest: he thus shows potential affinity with the comic soldier which may point to the downside of the values he embodies; an affinity further developed in Odysseus’ speech, where the uncompromising military code Ajax stands for is no longer the quality of an admirable *stultus* but an actual expression of stubborn dullness. Odysseus blames Ajax of boasting a warlike primacy he does not really have, for he actually claims merits that belong to all Greek heroes: *ne communia solus occupet* (‘let him alone not seize collective merit’, *Met.* 13.272). Taking up a theme already touched by Sophocles’ Agamemnon, this argument hints at an individual military pride which was foreign to Homer’s Ajax but had been deeply problematised in Sophocles’ tragedy. The speech of Ovid’s Odysseus, however, moving away from its most tragic and controversial overtones, combines Ajax’s military pride with quite a diminished depiction of his heroism. Not only is his valour reduced to a merely physical and somewhat passive strength (e.g., in Ov. *Met.* 13.365-367 Ajax is compared to a rower who needs to be guided by the master of the ship), but Ajax also undergoes an actual transformation

45 Ovid’s Odysseus carefully negotiates his exemplary role, paying attention not to neglect military valour. He seems intent on responding to the ‘metaliterary’ risk of being shaped as the coward he was/could have been in Greek and Roman treatments of the contest (and still is, at least according to Ovid’s Ajax, in *Met.* 13.117). Odysseus insists on his own military deeds, among which he also lists the act of having rescued Achilles’ corpse (*Met.* 13.284-285). Literary tradition usually assigns it to Ajax (e.g., *Little Ilias* fr. 2 West and Antisth. *Aj.* 2), but Ovid’s Ajax does not mention it, nor is Odysseus’ claim contested. This actually draws on an alternative mythical tradition (West 2013, 48) but, more importantly, it (re)writes a version of the episode which contributes to Odysseus’ effort (or even ‘metaliterary need’) to emphasise his military merits.

46 And Ovid’s Ajax, too, claims the key-merit of Rome’s military ethics: that of *seruare* (*Ov.* *Met.* 13.76).

47 An actual *hybris*—of Sophoclean flavour—may even emerge in Ajax’s speech itself, and weaken it from within: in *Ov.* *Met.* 13.91, for instance, Ajax says he clashed against Jupiter himself. See Dippel 1990, 95; Hardie 2015, 234.
into a true and proper hebes, a ‘fool’ (13.135), all brawns and no brain. Ulysses also calls him a rudis et sine pectore miles (‘rough and lacking in sensitivity and intellect’, 13.290): in other words, he attributes to Ajax the same ἀναισθησία (‘lack of sensation’, ‘mental torpor’) Plutarch assigns to the comic soldiers. And—Odysseus adds—the rudis miles Ajax, who does not even understand art (‘he wouldn’t even understand the decorations of Achilles’ shield’, 13.291), cannot win the contest. It is he, Odysseus, not Ajax, the useful citizen, the one consistent with and functional to his own society (uobis ... profuit ingenium, 136-137), just like Dikaiopolis—and not the tough-as-leather Lamachus—was the πολίτης χρηστός in the world of comedy.

In sum, Ovid’s Odysseus makes Ajax truly look like a comic solider, depicting him as a coarse soldier and a ‘fool’ filled with unfounded warlike pride. And the rudis and hebes Ajax—that is to say his proximity to the comic miles—has long affected his reception in Western culture. As a final note, we can indeed track a relevant example at least down to the theatre of Shakespeare, in whose Troilus and Cressida Ajax is still a dull hero, an hebes, vainly convinced of being Achilles’ equal, but actually an unwitting pawn of the cunning intrigues of Nestor and Odysseus:

If the dull brainless Ajax come safe off, we’ll dress him up in voices; if he fail, yet go we under our opinion still that we have better men. But, hit or miss, our project’s like this shape of sense assumes: Ajax employed plucks down Achilles’ plumes.

48 Ajax actually continued to appear little more than a simple-minded giant in contemporary critics (e.g., Hight 1949, 273). And it is not hard to see how broad studies on Ajax’s reception have been lacking in comparison to those devoted to his more fortunate mythic rivals. The figure of Achilles, Ajax’s unmatchable model, has been fully investigated from Homer to the Middle Ages (e.g., Callen King 1987), with specific attention to its Roman reception (e.g., Papaioannou 2007). Odysseus has been the topic of a long series of studies, starting from Stanford 1954. If applied to Ajax, such comprehensive reflections will enhance our understanding of cultural processes and shed light on the corresponding evolutions undergone by this hero, whose Roman reception sets the first step of a multifaceted afterlife as a constantly adjustable paradigm in Western culture.

49 W. Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, Act I, Scene III 381-386.
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