SOPHOCLES, AJAX 192-200

BY

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At the end of the parodos the chorus of Salaminian sailors, greatly agitated by the report that Ajax is responsible for the attack on the army’s sheep and cattle, call upon their leader to come out of his tent and resolve their doubts and fears (192-5) 1):

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ἀλλ’ ἀνά εξ ἔδρανων
ὅπου μακραῖοις
στηρίζει ποτὲ ταῦτα ἄγωνιος σχολᾶ,
ἐπὶν οὐρανὸν φλέγον.
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Let us consider the phrase μακραῖοις . . . ταῦτα ἄγωνιος σχολᾶ more closely. The noun σχολᾶ almost certainly refers to Ajax’s present inactivity now that he has withdrawn from the war after the award of Achilles’ arms to Odysseus. And the epithet μακραῖοις, expressing the chorus’ impatience, indicates that some considerable time has elapsed since the award of the arms 2).

The difficulty lies in the epithet ἄγωνιο. The term ἄγωνιος θεοῖ is used several times by Aeschylus and once by Plato (Lg. 783 a) of the gods ‘in assembly’ or ‘of the assembly’ or ‘of the games’, the meaning in these contexts being far from certain 3). Pindar uses ἄγωνιος in contexts of athletic and other competition (ἄγωνιον εὔχος, O. 10, 63; ἄγωνιος ἀθλητής, I. 5, 7; ἄγωνιος ποδί, Fr. 107 a Snell) and applies it to Hermes as a god presiding over the games (I. 1, 60).

1) I am following throughout Pearson’s Oxford Classical Text. The interpretations of ἄγωνιος and εὐάκμοις offered here are not affected by the slightly different texts of other editors.

2) Radermacher takes μακραῖοις in the sense of ‘senile’, i.e. Ajax is displaying the inactivity of an old man, not the energy of a hero. But this explanation is less natural and in any case represents a somewhat stronger criticism of Ajax by the chorus than is in keeping with the overall tone of the parodos.

3) See e.g. Fraenkel on A. Ag. 513.
Sophocles himself uses it of Zeus as ‘decider of the contest’ (Tr. 26).

None of these passages, however, provides a clear parallel to ἀγωνίῳ σχολᾷ. There is a slight possibility that the epithet may be used in the same sense as in S. Tr. 26. The phrase would thus mean ‘this inactivity which decides the issue’, i.e. by staying in his tent Ajax is giving himself no chance of saving his reputation or regaining his position in the Greek army. He is, as it were, cooking his own goose. Or again, given the particularly strong Homeric flavour of the Ajax parodos 4), the epithet may be connected with the Homeric use of ἀγών as gathering or assembly (cf. e.g. θεῖον ἀγώνα, Il. 7, 298). Its use here would be a bold extension of its use in the phrase ἀγώνωι θεοί (cf. above) indicating Ajax’s absence from the army and his refusal to join them. But this interpretation (‘idleness away from the gathering’) is extremely forced.

Jebb takes the phrase to mean ‘battle-pause’ or ‘rest from battle’. Kamerbeek is inclined to accept this explanation, although he also suggests ‘state of idleness after the struggle’, i.e. after the δπλων χρῖς which is referred to as ἀγών (936) and ἀγώνας (1240).

Few commentators, however, accept an interpretation along these lines. Ellendt-Genthe understand the phrase as an oxymoron in the sense of “‘otio negotioso’—quippe quo Aiax ad caedendos pecudes abutebatur”. And LSJ similarly offer the translation ‘strenuous rest’ (as an alternative to ‘pause from battle’). But as Kamerbeek among others points out, the chorus do not believe or rather do not want to believe and certainly do not assume that Ajax has been employing his ‘leisure’ to kill cattle. And there is no other strenuous activity to which ἀγώνας could refer.

Radermacher adopts the comment found in the ancient scholia τὸν ἀγώνα ἐμποιοῦντι σοι (cf. also the later scholion ἀγωνίαν ἐμποιοῦση ἄνέπτει) and explains it as ‘discriminis plena’, i.e. Ajax’s inactivity is perilous to himself because his enemies have been allowed to grow

4) This is, of course, partly due to the metrical forms adopted. In the anapaestic section, for example, there is the adjectival patronymic for Ajax (134), the epithets ἀμφιστός (134), ἀγχάλου (135) and τνηης (140), and the phrase αἴθιον σιδῆρον (147). In the lyrics there are the phrases βοῦς ἀγελαίας (175) and χλωτῶν ἄφρων (177), epithets such as χαλκοδόρας (179) and ξυνοῦ (180), the combination ἦ ἐξ (172), the form τόσσον (184), and the use of ἕνα (192).