



Aias Mastigophoros: Divine Ostentation within a Play

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AIAS MASTIGOPHOROS

In a prominent tragic scene, Odysseus watches Aias coming out of his tent in reply to Athena's call. Aias, who cannot see Odysseus, is holding a whip covered with blood, and he greets the goddess with the self-assurance of being her protégé. Yes, he boasts in response to Athena's questions, he has killed the Atreidai (so, let them rob him of Achilles' weapon now); as for Odysseus, his worst enemy, he is keeping him chained in his tent and will flog him to death. Athena objects to such cruelty, but just before returning to his tent, Aias sounds determined:¹

χαίρειν, Ἀθάνᾳ, τᾶλλ' ἐγὼ σ' ἐφίεμαι,
κεῖνος δὲ τείσει τήνδε κοῦκ ἄλλην δίκην.
(112–3)

In all other matters, Athena, I salute you;
but that man shall pay this penalty and no other.

This short scene forms part of the opening of Sophocles' *Aias*, a tragedy concentrating on the suicide and the funeral of one of the bravest heroes of the Trojan War. Structurally, it seems a somewhat independent inset, embedded within two dialogues between Athena and Odysseus, which contextualize it. At the beginning of the tragedy, Odysseus, sneaking around Aias' tent, hears the voice of

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1 The text of Sophocles' *Aias* follows the edition and translation by Hugh Lloyd-Jones.

Athena.² The goddess confirms Odysseus' assumptions that it was Aias who killed the cattle the night before and that it was she who played a part in this mad deed by preventing Aias' initial intention to kill Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Odysseus. Aias was overcome with rage because Achilles' weapon had been presented to Odysseus, so she inflicted madness upon the hero. She made him confuse the animals for Greek soldiers, which led to the sheep's massacre. Athena then proclaims her intention to show the maddened hero to Odysseus:

δείξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανῆ νόσον,
ὥς πᾶσιν Ἀργεῖοισιν εἰσιδὼν θροῆς. (66–7)

And I will show this madness openly to you also,
so that you may tell all the Argives what you have seen.

Odysseus objects in fear. The goddess nevertheless summons the hero, arranges that the latter cannot see Odysseus, and starts to converse with Aias, pretending to be his ally. When Aias leaves the stage to torture what he believes is Odysseus, the goddess turns to Odysseus again:

ὄραξ, Ὀδυσσεῦ, τήν θεῶν ἰσχὺν ὄση;
τούτου τίς ἄν σοι τάνδρ' ὅς ἢ προνούστερος
ἦ δρᾶν ἀμείνων ἡύρέθη τὰ καίρια; (118–20)

Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the power of the gods? What man was found to be more farsighted than this one, or better at doing what the occasion required?

Aias coming onstage with a whip amid a bloody act of revenge must have been a memorable scene: it has given the play a later subtitle, *Μαστιγοφόρος*, as noted by an Alexandrian scholar.³ Furthermore, it is no exaggeration to say that the scene is unique in the corpus of extant ancient drama. Though there are, of course, comparable elements and dramaturgical strategies to be found in other ancient

2 Athena seems to be invisible to Odysseus and later probably also to Aias (see, however, Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, 185). How Athena's epiphany was staged, though, is impossible to work out. It seems likely that she was visible to theatre spectators, most probably on the *theologeion* (see Jebb and Garvie, ad 15). There is, however, no scholarly consensus.

3 See *Hypothesis*.

ent plays, this scene seems unparalleled as regards its dramaturgical structure. It achieves powerful effects through a specific composition that doubles the structural elements of theatre.

Scholars have often noted the performative dimensions of this inset.⁴ Although they seem to refer to the inset using “a play-within-a-play” and related expressions rather instinctively, one can begin by rationalizing specifically the structural similarities that this extraordinary scene shares with theatre. In order to be as exact as possible, this paper shall bring into discussion some concepts and observations made by theatre theoreticians, but will deliberately avoid expressions such as “play-within-a-play,” “internal actor,” “internal director,” and alike. These expressions tend to be somewhat vague if one tries to describe the scene with precision.

WATCHING “FICTION”

One can begin with the following observation: at the moment when Athena is speaking to Aias, two separate fictitious worlds coexist onstage (that is, within a theatre performance of Sophocles’ *Aias*). The first, being a creation of Athena, is contextualized as non-real – it is a distorted reality as seen by poor Aias. In it, Aias is a brave hero avenging an injury who has just taken a break from torturing Odysseus and other soldiers in his tent. Athena is his ally, talking to him in a friendly way. However, the audience knows that this world is a product of Aias’ hallucinations and Athena’s pretense. It is the other world that is – all the while juxtaposed with the former – contextualized as the real, actual one. In this realm, Aias is a sufferer of madness inflicted on him by Athena. The objects subjected to the torture in his tent are not actually Greek soldiers but merely sheep.

- 4 For example, J. P. Poe, *Genre and Meaning in Sophocles’ Ajax*, 29–30, referring to the scene as a play-within-a-play, comments that Aias is Athena’s “play thing,” being “brought on stage by Athena specifically to perform ... and ... put through an act directed by her.” Patricia E. Easterling, “Gods on Stage in Greek Tragedy,” 82, writes that Athena “presents for Odysseus as a spectator a play-within-a-play.” M. Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn*, 31–32, recognises in the prologue “a performative scheme which is periodically reenacted throughout the play” and K. Valakas, “The use of the body by actors in tragedy and satyr-play,” 73, describes Athena as “a theatrical director.” Aias is “transformed by her, like an actor into a madman,” while Odysseus “watches and listens as terrified, pitying and silent as the spectators.”

Athena only pretends to be Aias' ally. Besides, Aias is observed by his worst enemy, Odysseus, who is not helpless in Aias' tent but is Athena's true protégé.

Even though the dialogue between Athena and Odysseus that preceded the inset (1–70) contextualized the first world as a non-actual, parallel world, that world is nevertheless concretely presented onstage. Friendly words between Aias and Athena are spoken for real, and Aias behaves like a hero. The logic of the action which happens for real but is contextualized as non-actual is close to a fundamental characteristic of theatre performance. Theatrolologist Anne Ubersfeld⁵ points out that in a tale, written or spoken, “the story is expressly denoted as being imaginary,” whereas fiction presented in theatre is built on a paradox. Objects, people, and actions onstage “indisputably exist,” but this “concrete reality” is “at the same time denied, marked with a minus sign.” This paradox is, of course, taken for granted by theatre participants – by performers and spectators. In this inset, the underlying logic appears to be similar: Aias and Athena “indisputably” converse as allies, but this “concrete reality” is only a construct: it is “marked with a minus sign.” Furthermore, the “minus sign” is acknowledged by Athena as well as Odysseus.

One may now take a closer look at the position of Odysseus. This is how his participation, as arranged by Athena, is described:

ΑΘΗΝΑ

δείξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανή νόσον,
ὥς πᾶσιν Ἀργείοισιν εἰσιδὼν θροῆς.
θαρσῶν δὲ μίμνε μηδὲ συμφορὰν δέχου
τὸν ἄνδρ'· ἐγὼ γὰρ ὁμμάτων ἀποστρόφους
αὐγὰς ἀπείρξω σὴν πρόσοψιν εἰσιδεῖν.

(...)

ἀλλ' οὐδὲ νῦν σε μὴ παρόντ' ἴδῃ πέλας.

ΟΔΥΣΣΕΥΣ

πῶς, εἴπερ ὀφθαλμοῖς γε τοῖς αὐτοῖς ὁρά;

ΑΘΗΝΑ

ἐγὼ σκοτώσω βλέφαρα καὶ δεδορκότα. (...)

σίγα νυν ἐστὼς καὶ μέν' ὥς κυρεῖς ἔχων.

(66–70; 83–5; 87)

5 Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, 24.

ATHENA

And I will show this madness openly to you also, so that you may tell all the Argives what you have seen. Stay to meet the man with confidence, do not expect disaster; I shall divert the rays of his eyes so that he cannot see you. (...)

But now he will not even see you near him.

ODYSSEUS

How so, if he is seeing with the same eyes?

ATHENA

I shall place his eyes in the darkness, even though they see. (...)

Then stand in silence and remain as you are.

It follows that Odysseus is a self-conscious spectator of the inset, as well as a privileged recipient of the action. Firstly, Odysseus watches self-consciously, knowing all the necessary codes. He knows that Aias is mad and that Athena is only pretending; he is aware that this is only a show. Furthermore, the conversation is first and foremost created for him (and through him for all the Argives),⁶ and special arrangements are made which provide him the safety of a spectator. This implies one of the fundamental characteristics of theatre performance, namely that there exist double recipients for everything spoken onstage. As T. Kowzan describes this “vraie spécificité de l’art théâtral”:

The moment at least two characters are implied, we are dealing with the phenomenon of double reception, internal and external, typical of every dramatic action, with words and even without words. Every sign, every message is, in the context of theatrical fiction, supposed to be intended primarily for a stage partner or partners, co-characters in the play being performed ... Nevertheless, from the point of view of the theatre as a public and social activity, from the point of view of the communication process, it is the spectator who is the real receiver of everything performed ...⁷

Similarly, all the words spoken by Athena and Aias are intended to be heard not only by the collocutor – that is, either Athena or Aias – but, from Athena’s point of view, primarily by Odysseus. In other words, and to borrow the insights of stage performances and the theatre frame by E. Goffman,⁸ Aias and Athena are “fellow performers

6 Cf. 67, quoted above.

7 T. Kowzan, *Sémiologie du théâtre*, 59.

8 E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 127.

who respond to each other in the direct way as inhabitants of the same realm,” whereas Odysseus watches from another “realm,” responding “indirectly, glancingly, following alongside.”

THE OSTENTATION ACT

A useful theoretical concept to capture the performative essence of the scene might be so-called “ostentation,” a phenomenon analyzed by Umberto Eco in one of the first articles on theatre semiotics published in English. Eco talks about “the specific object and the starting level of a semiotics of theatre,” namely “the basic mystery of (theatrical) performance.”⁹ He analyses an intriguing example (first given by Charles Peirce): the Salvation Army exposes a drunkard in public space to promote the advantages of a moderate life. The drunkard displayed to the audience, Eco writes, has ceased to be only a body and has become “a semiotic device,” a sign, “a physical presence referring back to something absent.” The drunkard is subjected to a communication process in which different interpretations of the meaning of him as a sign (that is, different answers to the question “What is our drunken man referring back to?”) can be created. In this case, Eco continues,¹⁰ the interpretation is marked by a given context that surrounds the drunkard: the principles of the Salvation Army thus denote the understanding of a drunkard as “an ideological statement.”¹¹

What is the relation between the displayed drunkard and a theatre performance? As already noted, Eco is after the essence of a theatre experience, trying to avoid “one of its main temptations,” that is, “to start straight away from the most complex phenomena, instead of rediscovering the most basic features” of a phenomenon under scrutiny.¹² He finds “the most basic instance of performance” in the phenomenon of ostentation, namely in “one of the various ways of signifying, consisting in de-realizing a given object in order to make it stand for an entire class.”¹³ From the very moment when a human

9 Umberto Eco, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance,” 108–110.

10 Ibid., 117.

11 As Eco, *ibid.*, explains: “What would have happened if the drunk had been exposed under the standard of a revolutionary movement? Would he still have signified ‘vice’ or rather ‘the responsibilities of the system,’ ‘the results of a bad administration,’ ‘the whole starving world’?”

12 Ibid., 109.

13 Ibid., 110.

body becomes “framed within a sort of performative situation that establishes that it has to be taken as a sign,” Eco concludes, “the curtain is raised.”¹⁴

A conscious and emphasized act of displaying a body that becomes “a semiotic device” and overgrows into a general message seems to lie at the core of *Aias Mastigophoros*. The act of ostentation appears to be close to Athena’s displaying of Aias’ condition. The goddess articulates her aim as follows:

δείξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανῆ νόσον,
ὥς πᾶσιν Ἀργεῖοισιν εἰσιδὼν θροῆς. (66–67)

And I will show this madness openly to you also,
so that you may tell all the Argives what you have seen.

All three verbs included in the two lines seem to be relevant: Athena *displays* – *ostends* (δεικνύναι) Aias to Odysseus, who by *watching* (εἰσορᾶν) would gain the experience significant enough to be *conveyed* (θροεῖν) to all the Argives.

When one thinks about the interpretation, the message of Aias on display, it is the reaction of Odysseus as an internal recipient that seems to be the most important. In this context, it is worth noting that Odysseus, being a secret observer and a privileged recipient of the ostentation, acts as an intermediate between theatre spectators and the action onstage. It could be even argued that in the focus of spectators’ attention is not only an internal show but also Odysseus’ reaction and interpretation of what he sees.¹⁵ Indeed, Odysseus’ comprehension of *Aias Mastigophoros* turns out to be quite a specific

14 Ibid., 117.

15 Several scholars single out the presence of internal spectators as a crucial element of the play-within-a-play and related devices. It is on an internal spectator, as Victor Bourgy, “About the Inset Spectacle in Shakespeare,” 6, persuasively argues, “that the inset spectacle operates immediately and it is its effect on him that matters.” The effect on internal audiences is normally more powerful when internal spectators are also internal recipients. No example is better and more complex than the Murder of Gonzago within Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a Claudius-trap; the recipient status of Claudius and Gertrude is emphasized by the play being especially tailored for them and their reaction being vigilantly observed. Cf. Bourgy, *ibid.*: “All the court of Elsinore have gathered to watch the inset performance, just as all the paying audience have come to watch *Hamlet*, but the real game is played between a few great ones among the stage spectators, in their effort to catch on one another’s faces signs of their secret thought or designs. Claudius, seconded by Polonius, watches Hamlet on the sly as much as the latter, with the help of Horatio, watches him.”

experience. When the spectacle is over, his impressions are different from those anticipated. When Athena first summoned Aias out of his tent, Odysseus objected to her intentions (74ff.). The reasons for his objection, explicitly mentioned, are fear and the fact that Aias is hostile to him. Athena followed the thread, suggesting that Odysseus could mock his enemy, who was so unheroically overwhelmed by rage, gloating over his insanity. However, when the spectacle is over, both Athena and Odysseus discuss the subject in different terms. For Odysseus, Aias is no longer only his enemy, but primarily a miserable human being:

... ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν
 δύστηνον ἔμπαρ, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῇ,
 ὁθούνεκ' ἀτῆ συγκατέζευκται κακῇ,
 οὐδὲν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦμὸν σκοπῶν.
 (121–4)

... I pity him in his misery, though he is my enemy, because he is
 bound fast by a cruel affliction, not thinking of his fate, but my own.

The experience has made Odysseus think about his destiny. Aias has become a specimen, provoking in Odysseus not only a feeling of pity but also a cognition about humankind in general (125–6). Athena only confirms this, making clear to Odysseus that to experience *Aias Mastigophoros* was to learn a moral lesson:

τοιαῦτα τοίνυν εἰσορῶν ὑπέρκοπον
 μηδέν ποτ' εἴπης αὐτὸς ἐς θεοὺς ἔπος,
 μηδ' ὄγκον ἄρη μηδέν', εἴ τινος πλέον
 ἢ χειρὶ βρίθεις ἢ μακροῦ πλούτου βάθει.
 ὥς ἡμέρα κλίνει τε κἀνάγει πάλιν
 ἅπαντα τὰνθρώπεια· τοὺς δὲ σώφρονας
 θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακοῦς.
 (127–34)

Look, then, at such things, and never yourself utter an arrogant
 word against the gods, nor assume conceit because you outweigh
 another in strength or in the profusion of great wealth. Know that
 a single day brings down or raises again all mortal things, and the
 gods love those who think sensibly and detest offenders!

To borrow Eco's words once more, Aias, being "framed within a sort of performative situation," is turned into "a semiotic device." With it, Athena shows to Odysseus (and through him to other Greeks) the ephemerality of humans, warning him against arrogance towards the gods and emphasizing the importance of σωφροσύνη.

DIVINE POWER

One can, therefore, argue that an act of ostentation, an essential performative situation, is included within a theatre performance of Sophocles' *Aias*. Since theatre performance is the most complex performative situation and a fundamental paradigm of performance as a concept itself, there is no doubt that Athena's display of Aias is far more sophisticated and complex than the drunkard displayed by the Salvation Army as described by Umberto Eco. The subject on display, and consequently the context which surrounds it in this scene, is more ambiguous, the relations between participants more telling, meaningful, binding, even fatal. After all, everything that occurs in theatre has a special meaning. Everything is highly relevant and portentous since the audience watching a theatre action – by contrast to events in everyday life – does not need, as Langer emphasizes, "to find what is significant; the selection has been made – whatever is there is significant, and it is not too much to be surveyed *in toto*."¹⁶ Some elements that contribute to the complexity of the ostentation act within *Aias* have been already singled out above: the act consists not only of Aias being displayed but of a parallel, non-actual world which Athena helps to sustain by pretending to be Aias' ally. Besides, Odysseus is a privileged recipient and an attentive spectator of *Aias Mastigophoros*.

However, one of the most significant characteristics, which makes the scene particularly convoluted, is the fact that this is a divine ostentation act. It is no exaggeration to say that Athena is a *sine qua non* of *Aias Mastigophoros*. By inflicting madness on Aias' mind, she creates a parallel world. By pretending that Aias' world perception is accurate, she makes the parallel world concrete. By summoning Aias out of his tent and arranging that Odysseus can watch him safely, she creates a sophisticated performative situation. By explaining to Odysseus how Aias is to be understood, she gives a deeper meaning to the show as a whole. *Aias Mastigophoros*, with all its characteristics that seem related to theatre, is, therefore, Athena's creation.

16 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 310.

As regards Greek dramaturgy of the fifth century BC, Athena's omnipotence seems to be nothing extraordinary. Gods, in one way or another, always crucially mark tragic stories presented on the Athenian stage. They are the origins, forces which frame crucial events, strengths which turn the action in unexpected directions, entities to which characters address their complaints or requests, they are called as witnesses to injuries ... There is no doubt that Athena's ability to put Aias on display is grounded in this divine omnipotence, always present in the tragic theatre.

One of the challenges for a playwright dealing with mythical subjects, among others,¹⁷ was undoubtedly to find a specific way to translate divine figures and their characteristics into stage language. This implies the very building and exploration of the language of theatre. Tragedy, "crumbs from Homer's table," as Aeschylus allegedly described his works, has to look for its way to show the presence of mythical gods. Sophocles seems to have created some of the most compelling representations of gods onstage. The haunting importance of Apollo's oracles in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, could prompt one to conclude that Sophocles elaborates with unsurpassed mastery the method through which divine presence and influence are only suggested and not concretely represented.¹⁸ The thunder in *Oedipus at Colonus* (1456ff.), a magnificent sign of divine presence, seems an equally powerful device that conjures up the meeting of Oedipus with the gods. Athena's appearance in *Aias* can be understood similarly, as a result of Sophocles' search for a specific dramaturgical manner to show divine presence onstage. However, what is the significance of Athena's act of ostentation within *Aias*? How does it affect the audiences in the theatre?

Whereas the ultimate will and intention of the goddess (and the same applies to other Sophoclean gods) remain elusive and remote,¹⁹ the main reason for her exhibition of Aias seems clear. Her primary purpose is implied in the question she addresses to Odysseus immediately after the terrifying spectacle is over:

17 See Burian's inspiring discussion "Myth into *muthos*."

18 Cf. Easterling, "Gods on Stage in Greek Tragedy," 78: "One could ... argue that the most imaginative, compelling and effective way to create a sense of divine presence and power was... by suggestion rather than visible representation, just as violence narrated is often more powerful than violence shown to the audience."

19 See Parker, "Through a Glass Darkly: Sophocles and the Divine."

ὁρᾷς, Ὀδυσσεῦ, τὴν θεῶν ἰσχὺν ὅση; (118)

Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the power of the gods?

“Aias on display,” therefore, signifies the greatness of “ἡ θεῶν ἰσχὺς.” Furthermore, the latter – so it seems – is not only exhibited by the manifestation of Aias’ madness. Athena emphasizes the shameful condition of a hero (which later becomes the cause of his suicide) by making a spectacle of him in front of his worst enemy. This seems to be an even heightened demonstration of divine power. Besides, the power of Athena is also foregrounded by the fact that Aias becomes a specimen signifying a general message for the particular recipient. It is in this segment that Sophocles’ dramatic mastery is most evident. Such manifestation of divine authority seems to be indigenous to the theatre. Mirroring theatre characteristics, it is effective and powerful particularly in theatre.

If one tries to grasp the function of the inset in the tragedy as a whole, it seems crucial to note that, in essence, Athena’s ostentation of Aias is not required as regards the plot. All the facts are already known from the opening conversation between Athena and Odysseus. Odysseus’ impressions are also not crucial for the immediate development of the story; instead, they are essential in different ways and in a longer run. *Aias Mastigophoros* seems to mark both momentous events in the tragedy of Aias: the hero’s suicide and his funeral which ends the play. It is because of this scene that later events seem credible.

In retrospect, Aias’ ostentation functions as a powerful and pithy visual demonstration of the reasons for his subsequent suicide. That Aias’ misfortune is shown by way of a horrifying spectacle, which is, in addition, watched by the hero’s worst enemy (cf. 1383), has a more profound effect on the spectator than mere listening about Aias’ condition would. Because Aias’ victorious feelings are witnessed by Odysseus, who knows that the latter are unjustified and will not last long, Aias’ condition is not only terrifying and pitiful but also profoundly humiliating. This seems to foreground Aias’ later feelings of shame and disgrace, making them more credible.

First and foremost, however, the sophisticated ostentation act justifies Odysseus’ behavior when he reappears at the end of the play (1316ff.). By contrast to Menelaus and Agamemnon, the other two imaginary victims of the hero’s rage objecting to the funeral of the warrior that wanted to harm them, Odysseus sees things in a different light. He surprises Agamemnon by challenging his ver-

dict and insisting that Aias should be buried as befits a hero. The reasons for his behavior are to be traced to the beginning of the play when he received Athena's lesson. Again, it seems crucial that Odysseus' learning of the divine lesson did not consist of learning facts (he knows everything before Aias comes onstage), but of experience, of "seeing a madman in full view," as Jebb's translation reads.²⁰ In short, it was the experience of a spectator that has made him a better human.

FLEETING SHADOWS

The fact that Athena, by way of a performative situation, makes Odysseus a better human, might remind one of Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Aristophanic Euripides, discussing the qualities of a good playwright with Aeschylus, expresses a similar idea:²¹

ΑΙΣΧΥΛΟΣ

ἀπόκριναί μοι, τίνος οὐνεκα χρή θαυμάζειν ἄνδρα ποιητήν;

ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗΣ

δεξιότητος καὶ νουθεσίας, ὅτι βελτίους τε ποιοῦμεν

τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν.

(1008–10)

AESCHYLUS

For what qualities should a poet be admired?

EURIPIDES

Skill and good counsel, and because we make

people better members of their communities.

This parallel seems to underpin an assumption made by P.E. Easterling, namely that Odysseus' experience of *Aias Mastigophoros* "can be seen as a guide to the audience as spectators ... of tragedy in general," whereas the internal scene "illustrates the function of theatre to create models for us to try out."²² That observed, there is no need to insist on describing either Athena or the inset as a whole in explicitly metatheatrical terms, for instance, interpreting Athena as "an internal playwright/director" and the like. Whereas it is in any case difficult to capture the audiences' experi-

20 *The Ajax*, translated by Richard Jebb, 81.

21 Edition and translation by Jeffrey Henderson.

22 Patricia E. Easterling, "Gods on Stage in Greek Tragedy," 82.

ence in all its complexity, it does not seem likely that Athena's *Aias Mastigophoros* was meant to become a mirror of theatre during the performance of *Aias*.²³ Rather than making audiences rationalize by drawing their attention to the theatre as an artistic medium, the principal and more immediate purpose of the inset appears to be to affect spectators somehow irrationally. This happens by way of a frightful spectacle well-grounded in tragedy as a whole, on the basis of which, as noted in the preceding section, later events in the play seem more credible.

It has, however, been argued throughout this paper that Athena's ostentation of Aias is structurally created in the image of theatre. Thus it cannot be denied, either, that a particular kind of implicit theatrical self-awareness permeates the scene. This is perhaps most evident in Odysseus' experience as a spectator. To illustrate it once more, one has to return to the dialogue between Athena and Odysseus after they witness the terrifying spectacle:

AΘΗΝΑ

ὄρᾳς, Ὀδυσσεῦ, τὴν θεῶν ἰσχὺν ὄση;
τούτου τίς ἄν σοι τάνδρὸς ἢ προνοούστερος
ἢ δρᾶν ἀμείνων ἡρέθη τὰ καίρια;

ΟΔΥΣΣΕΥΣ

ἐγὼ μὲν οὐδέν· οἶδ' ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν
δύστηνον ἔμπας, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῇ,
ὁθούνεκ' ἄτη συγκατέzeugται κακῇ,
οὐδὲν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦμὸν σκοπῶν.
ὀρῶ γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν
εἶδωλ' ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν ἢ κούφην σκιάν.

(118–126)

- 23 The question of “metatheatre” requires a paper on its own. In this context, let me only emphasize that I agree to a large extent with T. Rosenmeyer, “Metatheatrical: An Essay on Overload,” who argued that classical studies, especially on the west side of the Atlantic, are especially prone to exaggeration as regards the use of the term metatheatre, as well as the concept itself and its implications. One could argue that one of the questionable ideas which have been taken for granted is the assumption that the effect of dramatic devices sharing structural resemblances with theatre performance (such as the ostentation act in *Aias*) usually, perhaps always, draws spectators' attention to the play as a play and consequently makes the audience contemplate theatre and play. This seems to be to a large extent an oversimplification: effects brought about by such devices must have been (and remain) complex and varied.

ATHENA

Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the power of the gods? What man was found to be more farsighted than this one, or better at doing what the occasion required?

ODYSSEUS

I know of none, and I pity him in his misery, though he is my enemy, because he is bound fast by a cruel affliction, not thinking of his fate, but my own; because I see that all of us who live are nothing but ghosts, or a fleeting shadow.

It seems striking that the concluding thoughts expressed by Athena and Aias after they witness *Aias Mastigophoros* appear to be extraordinarily close to what B. Senegačnik persuasively singles out as the most probable “common landmark” of all extant plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, namely the “cognition that man’s position in the cosmos is uncertain and his own identity unstable.” The latter is usually shown as a consequence of the actions of heroes brought in conflict with divine order. This conflict “always signifies radical relativization of their power and freedom.”²⁴ Furthermore, if “this tragic *message*,” as Senegačnik continues, “is most distinct in plays that show great heroes falling off the top of glory into nothingness,”²⁵ one may add that *Aias Mastigophoros* can be seen as a compact specimen of such a fall. It shows a man, once a hero, one of the greatest heroes ever, utterly humiliated, disgraced, at the very bottom.

Perhaps the implicit theatrical self-awareness of this scene is to be attributed to the playwright’s inherent reflection on his artistic medium, its power, and responsibility. This short but memorable scene, as this paper tries to show, exhibits characteristics intrinsic to theatre art. Perhaps it is through it that we may glimpse Sophocles’ perception of tragedy.

24 Brane Senegačnik, “Klasična antiška tragedija,” 76.

25 Ibid.

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses a short scene that forms part of the opening of Sophocles' *Aias* (66–133): Aias, suffering from the madness that was inflicted upon him by Athena, is displayed by the goddess to Odysseus. In the corpus of extant ancient drama, this inset appears to be unique. Its expressive power is derived from the scene's specific structure that doubles the integral elements of theatre. The paper suggests the reasons why the scene has often been labelled "a play-within-a-play," describing and illustrating the elements that can be paralleled with the structural components of theatre. Taking as basis concepts and ideas proposed by modern theatre theoreticians (Anne Ubersfeld, Tadeusz Kowzan, Umberto Eco), the paper argues that the essence of the performative dimension of the scene is to be found in the phenomenon of the "ostentation act" first described by Umberto Eco. Tracing the meaning of the inset within the tragedy as a whole, the paper emphasizes the fact that the "ostentation" in *Aias* is a divine creation, and examines how Odysseus, a privileged recipient of the spectacle, reacts to the display of Aias' shameful condition.

KEYWORDS: Greek drama, Sophocles' *Aias*, theatre theory, play-within-a-play, theatricality, "ostentation act"

AIAS MASTIGOPHOROS: BOŽANSKO RAZKAZOVANJE V IGRI

IZVLEČEK

Članek analizira krajši prizor v začetnem delu Sofoklejevega *Ajanta* (66–133): Ajanta, zmrcvarjenjega od norosti, ki mu jo je sama povzročila, Atena pokaže Odiseju. V celotnem korpusu ohranjene antične dramatike se zdi tak scenografski prijem edinstven. Njegova izrazna moč izhaja iz specifične strukture tega prizora, kjer se podvajajo ključni elementi gledališča kot takega. Članek navaja razloge, zakaj je bil ta prizor večkrat označen kot »igra v igri«, ki opisuje in prikazuje elemente, vzporedne strukturnim komponentam gledališča. Temeljne koncepte in ideje najde pri modernih teoretikih gledališča (Anne Ubersfeld, Tadeusz Kowzan, Umberto Eco) in predlaga, da je bistvo performativne razsežnosti tega prizora v pojavu »razkazovanja« ki ga je prvi opisal Umberto Eco. Ko raziskuje pomen tega dramskega vložka za celotno tragedijo, članek pokaže, da gre pravzaprav za stvaritev bogov, in ugotavlja, kako se Odisej, privilegirani gledalec te drame, odzove na prikaz Ajantovega sramotnega stanja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: grška dramatika, Sofoklejev *Ajant*, teorija gledališča, »igra v igri«, teatralika, razkazovanje