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Flyte Club: an Idiom of Contest in Sophocles and Athens

The Homeric epics contain an impressive array of verbal duels with an *ad hominem* orientation. The role of these so-called 'flyting' exchanges is complex and multi-layered (see Martin 1989; Parks 1990). Competitive exchanges involving (often) improvised ripostes and verse forms can also be found in modern cultures around the world. These contests are part of a community's 'social poetics' (Herzfeld 1986: 136-149).

This paper suggests that certain forms of flyting were also an important component of classical Athens' social poetics of manhood and citizenship. Furthermore, I argue that Athenian civic drama integrates flyting as a means of representing and exploring different models of manhood and heroism. Verbal duelling (whether stichomythic or part of an agōn) is a mode through which different forms of conflict and negotiation can be measured.

I will focus on one particular sequence of the verbal contest between Teucer and the Atreids in the closing scenes of Sophocles' *Ajax*. Teucer successfully defeats Menelaus in a flyting exchange through a display of linguistic trumping and debunking. In contrast to other taxonomies of verbal duelling where 'ludic' contests are distinguished from serious consequential ones, it is precisely the difficult distinction between contractual game and deadly prelude to violence which Teucer manipulates so successfully. Not only does Menelaus lose but his 'improvised' *ainos* points to Teucer's attainment of the status of a *megas anēr* through the process of verbal combat. Teucer's flyting thus disrupts the chorus' and the Atreids' imagery and assumptions concerning 'big' and 'small' men.

Critics have suggested that Teucer's approach is vulgar, incompetent and deliberately framed as inferior to Ajax's awesomeness. I argue that Teucer offers a flawed but serious alternative to Ajax's style of manly self-assertion. Ajax's burial is achieved through Odysseus' (rather different) tactics as much as Teucer's flyting. But the latter's effective, entertaining and unruly defence of his brother's body (achieved without recourse to physical violence) would have resonated richly with an Athenian audience.

I will conclude by presenting evidence from other texts which indicate that Athenians knew and enjoyed flyting abuse as a mode of self-assertion. Such abuse could also be represented as 'vulgar', illegal or as an element of extra-judicial feuding and violence. Thus, flyting abuse was a problematic genre of speech for Athenian conceptions of manly citizenship and it is this problematic status which Sophocles explores.