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Nothing Up My *Eisodos*: some examples of Sophoclean sleight of hand

Ajax has left the stage with Hector's sword, having filled the preceding episode with a single speech strongly indicating that he is about to kill himself (Sophocles, *Ajax* 690). Following a short strophic pair from the chorus, everyone in the audience, familiar with the conventional structures of Athenian tragedy, looks to that same *eisodos*, expecting a messenger to announce the hero's death. A messenger does enter (line 719), but along the opposite *eisodos*, bearing news not of Ajax's death but of the arrival of his half-brother, Teucer. We may even ask how long a pause Sophocles leaves for his audience as it anticipates an arrival that never comes. The playwright uses the techniques of Athenian stagecraft to create expectations that are not met, but which allow for a surprise effect. Such an instance of theatrical 'sleight of hand' works precisely because the playwright knows the audience is familiar with the performance conventions. He can then use that knowledge for a startling result. Consequently, these moments may be examined to understand better how the Athenian audience interpreted Greek tragedy. A similar dislocation comes at *Ajax* 814, when the characters and chorus leave the stage to allow another soliloquy from a reappearing Ajax. Later in the same play, Tecmessa's shrouding of Ajax's body at lines 915-24 allows for the substitution of a dummy body so the Ajax actor can return as Teucer, tricking the audience again, as Sophocles appears to employ four speaking actors. In the *agones* that follow, Teucer's debates with the sons of Atreus again yield a surprise when Odysseus enters at 1317 and begins *stichomythia* not with Teucer, but instead arguing on his behalf.

These four instances in *Ajax* constitute a virtuoso display of repeated audience deception by the playwright. Only in *Ajax* are these effects so concentrated. However, similar examples of each technique can be found elsewhere in tragedy: in this paper I will discuss Euripides' *Heraclidae* 630, *Hecuba* 402, *Heracles* 815, *Helen* 482, Sophocles' *Electra* 1404-16, and *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1223. While commentators have adduced some of these instances, there has been no systematic attempt to view such sleight of hand as a deliberate theatrical technique that may be employed regularly by a playwright.

A fifth technique can be seen in *Alcestis*, where the exit of the funeral procession at line 746 creates a sense of closure, as if this were the end of the play. In the same way, until the offstage cry following *Trachiniai* 961, Sophocles has mislead his audience into thinking that the play is ending. The subsequent arrival of Heracles on a bier, in all likelihood played by the Deianeira actor, consequently is more surprising than has generally been acknowledged. Nowhere is this technique employed to greater effect, however, than in the repeated false endings of *Philoctetes*. Gestures of closure culminate at line 1221, only to be frustrated by the unexpected return of Neoptolemus with Philoctetes' bow, and again in line 1408, immediately prior to Heracles' appearance *ex machina*. Whether the third, actual ending (line 1471) is in any way the most satisfying for an audience remains an open question.

These prestidigitatory theatrical effects-creating the impression of doing one thing, but surreptitiously substituting another-are particularly characteristic of Sophocles and show

him expecting from his audience an ongoing awareness of stagecraft techniques during performance.