

Experiencing Through Theatrical Characters: Healing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Ancient and Modern Veterans

Erin Bello
Classical Civilizations
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Asheville, North Carolina
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sophie Mills

Abstract

Experience-taking has been defined as “the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character's thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits as if they were one's own.”¹ This research examines the representation of mental and physical trauma in three ancient productions in relation to Experience Taking and healing in theatrical productions: Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. Ajax was a hero in Homer's *Iliad*, and his mental breakdown indicates the lingering effects of wartime despite the battles having ended. Philoctetes, another Homeric hero, is abandoned on an island after he is wounded and his fellow Greeks leave him in constant pain. The *Trojan Women* is a production that highlights the aftereffects of war on the survivors and captives that must suffer at the hands of their new masters, which would move an audience of conquerors. Warfare in the ancient world was an intimate and horrific event that historians such as Xenophon and Thucydides describe as brief and bloody and the many altercations inspired authors to write productions about the experiences of soldiers and heroes. Playwrights use the painful and evocative speech of soldiers to appeal to an audience ravaged by violence and invasion. This research will use the phenomenon of Experience Taking to further understand the correlation between tragedy and healing in the ancient and modern world.

1. Introduction

Kaufman and Libby (2012) examined the empathetic response experience-taking, described as “the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character's thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits as if they were one's own.”² Experience-taking is a psychological phenomenon that suggests that personal qualities, such as the way someone speaks, acts, or thinks about a certain subject or event can be manipulated or changed through evocative literature. This relies on a powerful empathetic response, allowing a reader, or as my research asserts, a viewer to experience opposite opinions and beliefs through the dialogue and performance of a sympathetic character. The process relates to Greek tragedy and the powerful response it elicited from traumatized soldiers in the audience who could vicariously grieve through the dialogue of tragic characters. Greek tragedies could appeal to an audience of Athenian soldiers that had suffered trauma and when viewed could inspire a high empathetic response towards tragic characters that had experienced similar events. An empathetic response would allow soldiers to psychologically acknowledge doubts and fears of war through the experiences of mythological and fictitious characters able to express emotions openly without cultural censure and could enable spectators to begin to heal through theatrical performances. This research examines the potential influence of theatrical productions, specifically Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, and Euripides' *Trojan Women*, and the ability to heal wartime trauma through the psychological study of experience-taking.

2. Experience-Taking

Kaufman and Libby (2012) conducted six studies on experience-taking, defined as the “immersive phenomenon of simulating the mindset and persona of a protagonist,” finding that “readers let go of key components of their own identity—such as their beliefs, memories, personality traits, and ingroup affiliations—and instead assume the identity of a protagonist, accepting the character’s decisions, outcomes, and reactions as their own.”³ These experiments involved groups of individuals provided with fictional literature and narratives that either agreed or conflicted with their own viewpoints on social interactions, politics, race, and gender. Through persuasive narratives and likable characters, readers would begin to assimilate or imitate traits of the characters, such as thoughts, perspectives, emotions, goals, and even behaviors.⁴ The first three studies examine extroversion and introversion in experience-taking, the fourth examines a readers’ response to voting, and the fifth and sixth discuss the differences in perspective of African-American and homosexual characters read by white, heterosexual readers to determine underlying prejudices. The experiment began with an established baseline of personal autonomy and understanding, or Private Self-Conscious. Those that had a higher understanding of their own personal intentions and emotions and the ability to explore their own thought processes were shown to be less susceptible to experience-taking. However, when asked to think as a participant in the community, or as a general contributor to the population, the Private Self Conscious was slightly less influential on the participant and experience-taking was relatively higher. The experiments found that first-person narratives with a central character who held a primary position in a community group produced the highest level of experience-taking.

When a collective group of individuals with similar experiences views a narrative with characters that expresses familiar experiences of on trauma and loss, an audience could be able to empathize heavily due to a common perspective. Although this experiment focused on literature, it can easily be applied to theatre and other visual forms of narratives, including film, and video- games—as a narrative might become especially evocative through performative vocalizations and visuals that would heighten human emotions expressed through literature.⁵ Greek drama was highly exaggerated and performances included fantastical events and characters, but distant places, epic characters, and extreme reactions would have lessened the proximity between Athenian soldiers and literary characters in order to not overwhelm the audience. Thus, soldiers that viewed a production that focused on similar events to those experienced in warfare and campaigns might experience the events as if they themselves were the characters. Although it cannot be claimed that an audience’s perspective would change so drastically that they may begin to mimic certain beloved characters in actions or speech patterns, it can be argued that this response would aid in collective acknowledgement of trauma and could possibly lead to some degree of communal healing. Sophocles’ productions, *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, and Euripides’ *Trojan Women* focus on aspects of wartime trauma inflicted on soldiers and their families with equal distance and relevance to soldiers.

3. Healing In The Modern World

Modern ideas of healing through exposure to different perspectives use a combination of medicine, psychology, and art. Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) is defined as “the scientific field of study investigating the link between bi-directional communications among the nervous system, the endocrine system, and the immune system and the implications of these linkages for physical health.”⁶ The study of PNI demonstrates the correlation between mental health and physical health, and sickness or health of the body due to the power of the mind. The power of belief is a main aspect of this research and many experiments include placebos, which author Hartigan (2009) claims is a kind of “acting” through the belief of both doctor and patient.⁷ Theatrical performances engage an audience, as “the entire nervous system is involved.”⁸ In addition, Shay (1995), author of “Achilles in Vietnam,” writes, “When a survivor creates a fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused.”⁹ Adding the phenomenon of experience-taking to these assertions, the mind is able to replace the actor onstage with his or herself—the characters decisions, actions, beliefs, and words become their own and through assimilation with the viewer and aid in their healing process. This would allow the viewer to purge their negative emotions and thoughts, as Aristotle claimed, as the characters lamented and mourned the losses and tragedies on stage. Bryan Doerries, director and creator of “The Theatre of War” troupe and author of the book of the same name, is not the only person to notice the use of these productions and a number of adaptations have been made to the ancient versions to better express modern issues,

which “invite experimentation” to better suit a particular audience.¹⁰ It is impossible to claim that audience members would be affected by experience-taking, but the possibility augments the theories about the healing qualities of productions and the analyses from both ancient and modern scholars concerning their impact and influence. Thus, it can be claimed that ancient viewers would have been emotionally impacted and may have experienced experience-taking when watching wartime narratives.

4. Healing In The Ancient World

The power of art in healing the mind is explored by various ancient authors works, such as Aristotle in the *Poetics*, Plato’s *Republic*, and in Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*. Theaters in the ancient world were also often geographically near temples and altars of Asklepios, a god of healing.¹¹ Hippocrates, the most influential physician of the ancient world, writes *On the Sacred Disease* that the body and mind are inextricably linked and that “pleasures, joys, laughter, and jests as well as our sorrows, pains, griefs, and tears,” stem from the mind.¹² Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* that “men have a natural instinct for representation...What happens in actual experience proves this, for we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses.”¹³ Tragedy can heal the soul through catharsis (κάθαρσις), a purging of negative emotions from the body and mind. Tragedy is fictional and filled with heroic deeds and speeches, and “through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions.”¹⁴ Other ancient authors express the idea that theatrical productions could inspire emotional responses from an audience and that poetry has the ability to influence a viewer. Plato goes so far as to remove poets entirely from his *Republic*, writing,

...when in misfortune we feel a natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation, and that this feeling which is kept under control in our own calamities is satisfied and delighted by the poets;...allows the sympathetic element to break loose because the sorrow is another’s; and the spectator fancies that there can be no disgrace to himself in praising and pitying any one;... And so the feeling of sorrow which has gathered strength at the sight of the misfortunes of others is with difficulty repressed in our own.¹⁵

To express one’s emotions was considered effeminate for soldiers in antiquity, but theatrical productions allowed a powerful response from an audience that empathized with a character. Plato claims that through the “sorrow of another” a viewer mourns and laments with the character and experiences their reactions as their own. Philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato both remark on the power of poetry to change the disposition of men through the lyrical and persuasive qualities of the writing and that it can even create sympathy for men of poor quality and character. The study of experience-taking explores similar responses from literature that the ancient philosophers commented on in their own work with the addition that a reader or viewer could empathize directly enough to feel as though the actions and decisions of the character were their own.¹⁶

5. The Ideal

Homeric heroes, like theatrical characters, often have emotional outbursts that are acceptable due to their divine and mythological heritage. Greek literature and epic are filled with men who are struck by hubris (ὕβρις) or ate (ἄτη), a reckless impulse that ultimately destroys a hero.¹⁷ The ability to express such emotions in Ancient Greece was more frowned upon for ordinary men, the masculine ideal characterized by sophrosyne (σωφροσύνη), or balance and self-control over the body and mind. The definition of a man was courage and honor, the ability and desire to stand against enemies of the state and to protect the polis. Tyrtaeus, a Greek poet writing in the late seventh century, writes, “no man is of high regard in time of war unless he can endure the sight of blood and death, and stand close to the enemy, and fight.”¹⁸ Emotional responses in general were more associated with women and the female sphere, which made outbursts and expression an effeminate trait.¹⁹ The masculine ideal of glory in battle is contrasted with tragic descriptions of war in theatrical productions, the idealism of battle separated from the reality of death. However, poetry and theatre blur the lines between the ideal and reality, which question male expectations and beliefs about war. Productions that focused on war would discuss its destructive and negative aspects and could allow an audience discouraged from openly grieving and discussing trauma to purge, as Aristotle claimed, these emotions through an acceptable communal outlet.²⁰ The ability to express the trauma of battle and warfare in a public environment allows veterans to experience their emotions through the characters on stage—this could trigger an empathetic response

potentially as extreme as experience-taking. Through this psychological phenomenon, men defined by ideals of sophrosyne could express emotions of doubt, fear, and disgust of warfare communally and without reproach.

6. The Reality

War during any time period is an extremely traumatic and violent experience. One of the earliest sources for Greek battle is Homer's *Iliad*, which describes both earlier and later warfare tactics. Despite a cultural idealism focused around heroic one-on-one battles, hoplite warfare began during the seventh century "where warriors of like class sought to eye each other at close range as they killed and died."²¹ These clusters of eight to twelve men would face the enemy as a wall of spears and shields. When two phalanxes clashed, they would meet briefly, shoving and eventually overpowering the defeated side and chasing them down to slaughter the victims. Hanson (2000), claims that there are few types of warfare as terrifying as hoplite battle: "The Greek battlefield was the scene of abject terror and utter carnage..."²² After the slaughter, the victorious group was allowed access to the dead and would collect armor and spoils from the carcasses of their enemies. Despite the end of the battle, the terror continued as a soldier was forced to pick over the bodies of both his enemies and his friends. All males over the age of eighteen with armor would likely share the memories of the noise, the fear, and the death of collective battle, the trauma of which would be expressed throughout a number of theatrical productions.²³ Plays like *Philoctetes*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Ajax* all utilize mythological or fictitious characters to express latent emotions of grief, doubt and fear to an audience with similar experiences, which might allow them to empathize to the point of experience-taking and imagine themselves as a character in the production.

Philosophers in the ancient world remarked on the powers of poetry and empathy to influence readers.²⁴ In Aristotle's *Poetics* he claims that tragedy elicits powerful emotions of agony and shame in order to purge them from the soul, a cathartic cure to trauma.²⁵ Shay, in his analytical study of Vietnam veterans' experiences in comparison to Homer's *Iliad*, also claims that theatrical productions in the ancient world contributed to communal healing. He writes that trauma narratives can help heal and comfort "the community that listens and responds to it emotionally."²⁶ The relation between Greek tragedy and veterans' health and trauma care has become highly influential on Classicists and theatre directors alike, as reproductions and reinterpretations of ancient Greek plays are being written and produced on stages as large as Broadway. Although they often add or subtract plot points, characters, and change the language, the tropes and themes of the productions are often used to express similar ideas as their predecessors. Doerries discusses his own personal experiences as both a scholar and a director as he attempts to reconcile both in order to reach as many trauma victims as possible. The group produces shows full of evocative and powerful scenes from different dramas, including *The Trojan Women*, *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, and others, before they allow discussion on the responses to the scenes. This modern application has received a powerful, positive response from veterans and scholars in examining the effects of theatrical productions with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other types of trauma. Though impossible to definitely claim that audience members would be affected by experience-taking, the possibility augments the theories about the healing qualities of productions and the analyses from both ancient and modern scholars concerning their impact and influence.

7. Ajax

Van Nortwick (2008), defines Ajax as "The Soldier's Soldier." He describes him, "Physically powerful and fiercely dedicated to his comrades, taciturn and formidable in his single-minded attention to duty..."²⁷ Although Ajax is considered an ideal hero, he succumbs to a mental breakdown that leads him to commit suicide at the climax of the production.²⁸ He is offended and insulted when Odysseus is chosen to receive Achilles' armor and his response is to enact revenge and murder the recipient of the dead hero's panoply. Tecmessa, Ajax's war-bride and mother of his child, Eurysaces, describes the mental break and his slaughter of the field of cows before he rushes back to his tent while still covered in animal blood:

After all that, he ran out the gate and started screaming out at some shadow, all sorts of insults directed one minute at the Atreus brothers and the next at Odysseus and, at the same time, laughing loudly at the thought of the disaster he had just caused in his madness. Then he rushed back into the hut and slowly and with difficulty regained his senses. But then, as he looked around and became aware of what he had done -the whole room clogged with ruin and destruction-he struck his head with his hand and let out a horrible shout.

Then he fell down among all the bloody carcasses and all the slaughtered sheep. Then he began to tear out his hair with his fingernails.²⁹

Sophocles writes that this fall was due to the vengeful influence of Athena as an explanation for his outburst and post-traumatic symptoms. After Ajax realizes what he has done he begins to speak about taking his own life, even going so far as to beg his comrades and the gods to slaughter him as he had the animals, but Tecmessa beseeches him to understand that his death would not rectify his actions but condemn both herself and their son to terrible fates.³⁰ Ajax, however, is not persuaded and encourages his son to become greater than his father, but to still remain true to his heritage and be a leader and warrior.³¹ After a final goodbye to his son, his comrades, and Tecmessa, he plants the sword in the ground and then falls onto the blade before the chorus and his wife find him dead in the nearby hills. His body is described in a nearly monstrous state with “black blood gushing out through his nostrils, black gore that rose up from the deadly gash of his self-slaying.”³² His fellow soldiers mourn the loss of Ajax, but Menelaus and Agamemnon appear near the end of the play to accuse the half brother of Ajax, Teucer, as a liar and his faith in Ajax as misplaced. They further claim that Ajax and his actions should not be lauded, nor does he deserve an honorable burial, but this suggestion is fought by none other than the intended victim, Odysseus. The play ends with Teucer and Eurysaces digging a grave for the septic body of the fallen hero, still “spouting black blood,” to restore his honor with a proper burial.³³ Each line of this play is full of powerful imagery and emotive monologues and soliloquies that would inspire an audience of soldiers to connect and empathize with not only Ajax but his abandoned son and wife.³⁴

Ajax, despite Tecmessa’s and the Chorus’s attempts to dissuade him, commits suicide, an action which has been a major concern for the VA hospitals around the country. The Department of Veterans Affairs released a massive study on suicide rates of American veterans in 2012, which claimed that from the years between 2003 to 2009 over 100,000 veterans committed suicide in the United States.³⁵ Doerries cites a New York Times article entitled, “Across America, Deadly Echoes of Foreign Battles,” which reported that in 2008 there were “121 cases in which veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan committed a killing in this country, or were charged with one, after their return from war.”³⁶ Doerries’ theatrical group performed scenes from Sophocles’ *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* and received powerful responses from audiences full of active and retired service members that were able to empathize with the similar emotions of pain, regret and sorrow that tragic heroes articulate. The viewers were allowed to comment on the scenes afterward, prompting a trained sniper to react to *Ajax*, saying, “The violence of war is swift and decisive. The violence of Ajax was swift and decisive.”³⁷ Here, the soldier relates to Ajax’s actions and soliloquies in the play as being similar to his own experiences and traumas concerning wartime violence. The experience of these productions focuses on the reality and establishes a kind of trust between narrator and viewer that could establish the empathetic response of experience-taking.

Ajax, the epitome of the ideal Greek man, unshakable in his values and virtue and unaided by the gods throughout the Trojan War, is more relatable to an Athenian audience. Ajax proclaims in the fifteenth book of the *Iliad*, “Where men fear shame, more survive than are killed. But there is neither glory nor safety in flight.”³⁸ Sophocles, however, turns the ideal soldier into representation of a man unable to return to a sense of normalcy after his actions. Ajax in particular demonstrates that honor can inspire men to glory or death in the ancient world, but it also expresses the aftereffects of warfare on a soldier and the fate of families left behind without protection. Ajax claims that it was the generals that brought him to the Trojan shores and it was they that brought him down from greatness, which many Athenian soldiers would have probably felt similarly but were unable to openly express their fury.

This production was one of the first used by Bryan Doerries in his early stages of his Theater of War, where he took a group of actors to read pieces from productions in front of all levels of military men and women and their families. After the scenes were read, Doerries opened up the floor for anyone particularly moved to express their reactions.³⁹ Much like Shay suggests in his book “Achilles in Vietnam” when he writes, “We must create our own new models of healing which emphasize communalization of the trauma...listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater at the foot of the acropolis,” Doerries attempts to find a similar way to allow modern soldiers to express their discontent and anguish over warfare as Athenian citizens might have done.⁴⁰ The extreme anguish, fear of Ajax and his breakdown and eventual suicide might resonate with soldiers that experience PTSD and trauma and could offer the opportunity to express repressed thoughts and doubts of war to be reconciled through experience-taking. The fourth study of the experience-taking experiment found that the main narrator was the character most empathized with, and so an audience would experience both Ajax and Tecmessa after his suicide.⁴¹ The audience may feel Ajax’s death as if it was their own decision in the beginning, but are then immediately confronted with Tecmessa’s horror and end with the small Eurysaces aiding Ajax’s half-brother, Teucer, to move the putrid body.⁴² With the loss of the main narrator at the climax of the production, a viewer may connect with another sympathetic character, such as Tecmessa or Teucer. This would lead the viewer to first experience the production through Ajax and agree with his decision to commit suicide before suffering grief through the characters that mourn

him so poignantly. This could aid a viewer that was affected with PTSD to purge the desire to commit suicide by experience-taking with Ajax and then mourning the loss of a loved one through the dialogue of his closest companions in the second half of the play.

8. Philoctetes

The play opens as Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive on Lemnos in search of Philoctetes, a famous archer in the Trojan War referenced in Book II of the *Iliad*, who was bitten by a poisonous snake, fell ill and was abandoned to suffer alone for ten years.⁴³ Betrayed, Philoctetes refuses the aid of the Greek soldiers and Odysseus persuades the son of the hero Achilles, Neoptolemus, to gain Philoctetes' trust in order to recall the hero and have him fight at Troy and win the war. Neoptolemus is unwilling to lie, as it is "not in his nature" but Odysseus, portrayed as wily and clever, convince the younger man that it will end the Trojan War.⁴⁴ Philoctetes, however, is furious at his treatment and abandonment by his fellow Greeks and Odysseus' attempts to trick him. The play focuses on the soldier as he mourns his losses, both his comrades and the promise of glory, yet he manages to survive despite the wound and subsequent infection. The first we hear from Philoctetes is groans of pain from offstage as he drags his wounded foot to where the son of Achilles waits with the chorus and he is delighted to see any other men in hopes they might be able to help him. Philoctetes' reaction, recalling his abandonment is equally furious and bereft: "Imagine my surprise when I awoke, the tears I shed, the sound of my sadness." A hero, who would be a determining factor in the end of the Trojan War, openly weeps at his misfortunes and begs on his knees that he not be left alone on the island to die a miserable death.⁴⁵ Philoctetes, wracked with pain, wails and begs that death would take him, "How I wish you, instead of me felt this horrible pain! Felt it for as long as I have!"⁴⁶ The chorus describes his foot as "pus-ridden, pus-rotting, maggot-eaten," and they feel pity for Philoctetes' fate and pain that he has suffered on Lemnos.⁴⁷ Philoctetes learns of Neoptolemus' betrayal and swears never to return to Troy to help the very generals that left him to die, and instead threatens to take his own life. Neoptolemus eventually convinces him, along with a vision of Heracles, that if he should go to Troy he will end the war and be healed.⁴⁸ The horror of this betrayal would be equally evocative to an ancient audience as modern receptions, who had witnessed fellow soldiers be wounded or maimed in battle to receive little honor and recognition once they have returned home.⁴⁹ Philoctetes must experience divine intervention from Heracles to finally leave the island with a promise of health and relief, which could be read as another form of mental instability or hallucinations from pain.⁵⁰

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is another play used by Doerries in his "Theatre of War," a production that focuses on the mental and physical anguish of war and pain. Wounds in the ancient world were brutal: spears would tear through the breast, groins, or unguarded sections of the throat.⁵¹ Both ancient and modern soldiers would know similar emotions of abandonment and anger, as their return to civilian life with such trauma is extremely difficult and hard to reconcile with wartime actions. Bryan Doerries uses this play with his troupe, and reactions often lead with the discussion of veteran care and aid after the war is completed. Just as Philoctetes was abandoned, soldiers of both the past and present were left to deal with the aftermath of war and traumatic experiences. Modern soldiers that were able to receive long-term care in over-filled and understaffed hospitals were now "stranded," as Doerries claims, as they were now entirely dependent on others for care in recovery.⁵² Shay also examines another important aspect of *Philoctetes* in his analyses of the *Iliad*, the corruption of what is morally correct. Philoctetes, abandoned, is further isolated when Neoptolemus admits his near betrayal later in the production.⁵³ Ancient soldiers may have also felt the rage and loss of Philoctetes and the struggle between honor and corruption in war, and his rescue would trigger an empathetic response from the audience. As Philoctetes raged and finally reconciled with the Greeks, an audience could feel his pain and betrayal and later feel the relief and promise of a cure.

9. The Trojan Women

Euripides wrote *The Trojan Women* in the midst of the Peloponnesian War. This tragedy, however, does not take the perspective of traumatized soldiers of the Trojan War, such as Ajax or Achilles, but of the women who face an unknown fate at the hands of their Greek captors. The women that cling to the walls of the fallen city of Troy are famous characters, such as the Queen of Troy and wife of Priam, Hecuba, the chosen prize of Agamemnon and prophetess, Cassandra, the wife of Hector and mother of Astynax, Andromache, and the prize of Paris and Menelaus' wife, Helen. These characters are mostly unaware of their fate, except Cassandra who sees her death at the hands of Clytemnestra, and the play progresses through masculine influences and actions. Although it has been suggested that

Euripides wrote the play as a commentary against the destruction of Melos that took place in early winter of 415 BCE this unlikely true due to the length of time required to write a production and train a chorus.⁵⁴Thucydides briefly describes the conflict between Athens and Melos and how the Melian delegation surrendered to the Athenians, who then proceeded to slaughter all the men and enslave all the women and children. While many wartime tragedies focus on the emotions and after-effects on soldiers, this production discusses other horrors and realities that war brings to fallen cities. These female characters may have very well appeared similar to the women that were enslaved from Melos, or could have even instilled the fear of Athenian capture and a similar fate.⁵⁵This play coincides well with the fifth and sixth psychological study conducted at Dartmouth, which were written in the opposite perspectives of white, heterosexual males presented with narratives from African American and homosexual perspectives; this play focuses on the enslaved so that a male audience could understand another perspective. Although women were allowed to observe the Dionysia in Athens, and this production surely expressed some of the latent fears of Athenian women should the walls fail to protect them, it also allowed soldiers to experience a female, foreign, and subjugated perspective. The experience-taking study revealed that characters with a compelling narrative or voice can alter opinions and beliefs through their expressions and evocative stories. This could be even more effective from a powerful actor and dramatic chorus in a tragic performance where an empathetic response would be even stronger through a portrayal of the character.

10. Validity and Proximity

Doerries recounts the reactions of soldiers after scene readings of Ajax. In order to begin a conversation about the play, he asks the audience as why they think Sophocles wrote the tragedy. One soldier proclaimed that it was to “boost morale...because it is the truth.”⁵⁶ In Shay’s earlier work, he corroborates this idea when he discusses the tragedies ability to heal psychologically, as “Narrative heals personality changes only if the survivor finds or creates a trustworthy community of listeners for it.”⁵⁷Through a trustworthy narrator, the listeners respect what is said and are able to empathize. He elucidates further, “ Trauma narrative imparts knowledge to the community that listens and responds to it emotionally.”⁵⁸Shay continues with the explanation that earlier treatments of combat debriefings where soldiers were encouraged to “get it all out” was believed to be an idealistic immediate cathartic cure but would often result in suicides.⁵⁹Thus, the experiences were too poignantly felt and overwhelmed the veterans because “uncovering of trauma history only re-traumatizes the survivor.”⁶⁰The need for distance is expressed in Herodotus’ description of the Athenian reception of a production written and produced about the capture of Miletus, a powerful and wealthy city and ally, by the Persians. The response elicited from the audience was so powerful that “they burst into tears” and the author was fined 1000 drachmas “for reminding them of their own evils.”⁶¹ Both modern and ancient soldiers struggled to directly confront painful experiences, requiring the distance of time or a barrier of mythology and fiction so as not to be overwhelmed by the trauma. Experience-taking offers a victim to interact with their trauma at a safe distance, but still able to purge the subversive emotions without being re-traumatized.

11. Conclusion

Experience-taking is a psychological phenomenon that attempts to explain the human ability to take the perspectives of an empathetic character through evocative language. Ancient philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, comment on poetry’s ability to influence and persuade an audience through meter and lyrics. The poets ability to evoke emotional responses, such as pity and terror, would purge the negative emotions from the mind and encourage healing. This ancient theory has gained new life through the resurgence of ancient Greek tragedies such as Ajax and Philoctetes, which Bryan Doerries use in his Theatre of War troupe. Performing to audiences full of soldiers, Doerries attempts to hal soldiers with the same productions viewed by Athenians thousands of years prior. His response has been extremely successful, and he continues to expand his outreach each year to servicemen of varying ranks. Sophocles’ Ajax and Philoctetes and Euripides Trojan Women all take different perspectives from those impacted by war and trauma which could allow an audience to experience and understand multiple perspectives, living vicariously through the characters on stage. Although nothing can be claimed with certainty about experience-taking in the ancient world, or even the modern without extensive research, it offers another aspect to why and how theatre impacts those with psychological traumas in both the ancient and modern world.

12. Endnotes

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- 29 Sophocles, George Theodoridis trans., *Ajax*, Poetry in Translation, 300-309, Accessed December 01, 2018. <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Ajax.php>.
- 30 Soph, *Ajax*, 392-411, 486-520.
- 31 Ibid., 550-60.
- 32 Ibid., 915-920.
- 33 Ibid., 1405-1415.
- 34 Ibid., 918-923, "Oh, Ajax! What shall I do now? Which of your friends shall carry you? Where is your brother? Where is Teucer? Oh, I wish he were here right now! A brother, dressing the body of his brother! Unfortunate Ajax! What a man you were, what a man you are now! Even your enemies could mourn your death!"
- 35 United States, Department of Veterans Affairs, *Mental Health Services, Suicide Data Report 2012*, by Janet Kemp, RN PhD and Robert Bossarte PhD, 14-16, accessed December 01, 2018, <https://www.va.gov/opa/docs/Suicide-Data-Report-2012-final.pdf>.

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- 36 Bryan Doerries, *The theater of war: what ancient Greek tragedies can teach us today*. (Knopf, New York: 2015). 67.
- 37 Ibid., 105.
- 38 Homer and Joe Sachs trans., *The Iliad* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2018). 15.564.
- 39 Doerries, 118-124.
- 40 Shay, 194.
- 41 Kaufman and Libby, 16-18.
- 42 Soph, *Ajax*, 1412.
- 43 Hom. Il. 2.681-710. "Now, King Philoctetes lay in agony on holy Lemnos' isle, where the Greeks had left him suffering a deadly water-snake's foul venom. There he lay, in pain, yet destined before long to occupy the thoughts of the Argives by their ships."
- 44 Sophocles, George Theodoridis trans. *Philoctetes*. (Poetry in Translation. Accessed December 01, 2018.) <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Philoctetes.php>. 71.
- 45 Ibid., 485-501.
- 46 Ibid., 794.
- 47 Soph, *Philoctetes*, 696.
- 48 Ibid., 1409-1469.
- 49 Van Nortwick, 136-138.
- 50 Doerries, 66-67.
- 51 Hanson, 164-165.
- 52 Doerries, 64-65.
- 53 Ibid., 189.
- 54 Maria Van Erp Taalman Kip, "Euripides and Melos." *Mnemosyne, Fourth Series*, (40, no. 3/4 1987: 414-19.) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4431648.1-3>.
- 55 Xenophon, Robert B. Strassler, and John Marincola, *The Landmark Xenophons Hellenika*, (London: Quercus, 2011). 48, 2.2.3.
- 56 Doerries, 4.
- 57 Shay, 188.
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- 60 Ibid., 188.
- 61 Herodotus, and Robert B. Strassler. *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2009.) 6.21.2.