

CASA ESSAY COMPETITION

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IS IT CORRECT TO SAY THAT REASON TRIUMPHS IN SOPHOCLES' AJAX ?

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Introduction

Reason can be defined in many ways, and more than one definition would be fertile ground for investigation in the *Ajax*. Perhaps the most tempting way to understand Reason, especially given the theme of insanity in the play, is as sanity; however, Reason might also be understood as an interpersonal phenomenon, the ability of individuals to 'reason' together, negotiating and arguing to reach an agreement. It is this *agonistic* (*agonistic* in that it is what characters attempt to do in an *agon*) sense of Reason I have chosen to examine.

Reason and suicide

Having been denied the arms of Achilles, Ajax becomes angry (41)¹ and attempts to kill the Atreidae, but his revenge is prevented by Athena, who deludes him into attacking the cattle plundered by the Greeks; this is what causes his suicide.² The similarities between *Iliad* 1.188–222 and the *Ajax* are significant; Achilles and Ajax, both Homeric heroes who have been deprived of τιμή (honour)³ are about to exact their revenge violently (under the influence of χόλος (wrath); *Iliad* 1.192, *Ajax* 41) when Athena intervenes; as a result, they isolate themselves from the community.⁴ A comparison between the Cyclic and Sophoclean accounts is useful: in the *Ilias Parva*, Athena intervenes only to help Odysseus win the contest of arms, and Ajax seemingly becomes mad, slaughters the cattle and commits suicide without Athena's intervention:

ἐμμανῆς γενόμενος τήν τε λείαν λυμαίνεται καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἀναίρει.⁵

After going mad, he ruins the plunder and kills himself.

¹ All in-text references are to the *Ajax* of Sophocles unless otherwise stated.

² Tyler 1974:24–25.

³ Achilles' γέρας (his sex-slave, Briseis) serves a similar role as τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὄπλων (41) do for Ajax, though Ajax's true γέρας is an honourable burial (825–830).

⁴ Beer 2004:54.

⁵ Allen 1912:106.

Indeed, Athena is nowhere else found to drive Ajax to killing the cattle prior to Sophocles, nor is any plot against the Atreidae,⁶ which provided the motive for her intervention in Sophocles' version. It appears that Athena's involvement is almost entirely a Sophoclean innovation; Sophocles must be encouraging his audience to reflect on the ways in which Athena intervenes in the cases of Achilles (in the *Iliad*) and in that of Ajax (in Sophocles' own *oeuvre*). The only salient difference is that Athena restrains Achilles from violence using persuasion (Homer, *Iliad* 1.193–214), while she eggs Ajax on (ᾠτρυνον, 60) by imposing madness on him (51–73). The audience, then, would from the beginning of the play reflect on the differences between the Homeric Athena and the Sophoclean one, and, more specifically, their attitudes to Reason.⁷ Athena's unwillingness to reason with Ajax, as we shall see, is programmatic for the rest of the play. It is this, ultimately, that leads to his suicide.

But was it rational? Or, in other words, even though the ultimate cause of his suicide was his madness to which Athena drove Ajax, was the process by which he arrived at the conclusion (that he must commit suicide) a rational one? When Ajax first appears on stage (91–113), he is very obviously not contemplating suicide, since he is deluded into thinking that he is victorious. It is only after sanity returns (259) that Ajax expresses his wish to die (361, 391). Thus, the decision to commit suicide is not the product of an insane mind, but a sane one. A great motivating factor for this is his loss of τιμή after the night-time raid. Ajax connects his state of dishonour (ὕβρισθην) with the mockery (γέλωτος),

ὦμοι γέλωτος, οἶον ὕβρισθην ἄρα.

Oh, the mockery! Oh, the indignity I am subjected to! (367)

because of his attack on the cattle:

ὦ δῦσμορος, ὃς χερὶ μὲν
μεθήκα τοὺς ἀλάστορας,
ἐν δ' ἐλίκεσσι βουσί καὶ
κλυτοῖς πεσὼν αἰπολίοις
ἐρεμνὸν αἶμ' ἔδευσα.

Oh, how misfortunate I am! I let those bastards slip through my fingers, and, falling on the horned oxen and splendid herds of goats, spilled their black blood! (372–376)

⁶ Heath and Okell 2007:363–380, 365–366.

⁷ Athena's refusal to reason with Ajax is manifested in sending him mad, *i.e.*, depriving him of his ability to reason; the Sophoclean Athena seems determined to deny Ajax reason.

This lies in stark contrast to heroic τιμή; as Yamagata says:

For a hero / nobleman (ἀγαθός), whether he is a king (βασιλεύς) or not, military valour is an essential source of τιμή ... Their duties being chiefly military, heroes are honoured most for their valour and heroic achievements ...⁸

This is almost comic; Ajax, in an attempt to gain τιμή through waging battle against heroes (Agamemnon, Menelaus, Odysseus), has become an almost farcical figure because of his mad slaughter of the cattle; he becomes, in a word, ἄτιμος (dishonoured, 426, 440). Park, for example, finds him to be a 'grotesque object of fun, stripped of all dignity'.⁹ And since,

ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι
τὸν εὐγενῆ χρή ...

To live honourably or to be an honourable corpse is the noble man's duty
(479–480),

Ajax must either renounce his status as εὐγενής, καλῶς ζῆν, or καλῶς τεθνηκέναι. To do the first is impossible, given Ajax's pedigree;¹⁰ it does not even merit consideration. Καλῶς ζῆν is impossible for Ajax, now that he is irredeemably ἄτιμος, and so the only remaining option is καλῶς τεθνηκέναι. Ajax cannot allow himself to be killed in battle, because this might gladden the Atreidae (466–469), so he must end his life on his own terms. Suicide is his only remaining option. So long as one accepts Ajax's premises, his conclusion follows with a certain fatal inevitability. He is convinced that death is his only σωτηρία (salvation) from his current woes.¹¹ In the prologue, Athena gives a rather biased version of events, twisting language to present Ajax negatively,¹² and ensures that the news will spread, with the intent to humiliate Ajax;¹³ Athena's plan is to leave Ajax alive but humiliated, and then enjoy her victory,¹⁴ which Ajax escapes by committing suicide; again, a seemingly rational approach to a difficult situation. Tecmessa provides additional explanation for Ajax's suicide in lines 263–277; she points out that Ajax will not commit suicide because he is mad (had he continued in his insanity, he could have gone on living), but because he has been mad and is now

⁸ Yamagata 1994:129.

⁹ Poe 1974:4.

¹⁰ The reference to his γένος in the adjective εὐγενής can hardly be coincidental, given Ajax's concern for his father and son.

¹¹ Wigodsky 1962:154–158.

¹² De Jong 2006:73–94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴ Van Erp Taalman Kip 2007:469–470.

sane. This illustrates the paradox of Ajax's suicide; he does not kill himself because of madness or Reason, but because of both.

The failure of reason

This, however, does not stop the Chorus and Tecmessa from trying to change his mind; they hold out the false hope that now that he is sane:

φίλων γὰρ οἱ τοιοῖδε νικῶνται λόγοις.

For men like him are won over by the arguments of friends. (330)

The most obvious meaning for τοιοῖδε would be something along the lines of 'men of his kind'¹⁵ or 'men of his nature', but this seems implausible; Ajax proves intractable throughout the play and seems to be rather stubbornly disposed. An easier reading would be 'men in his mental state', *i.e.*, 'men who are sane [as he now is]'. *Prima facie* this reading seems more plausible, as it is intuitive that a sane person would be easier to reason with than a mad one. The context seems to demand this as well, as Tecmessa (one who is φίλη to Ajax) narrates both her inability to reason with Ajax in his insanity (288–294) and then his return to sanity (305–327; see especially ἔμφρων, 306) immediately before making this statement. Therefore, this might be paraphrased as 'people who are sane, like Ajax is, can be won over by their friends', an idea which the Chorus seems to take no issue with. However, when confronted with a suicidally inclined Ajax, the Chorus declares:

δηλοῖ δὲ τοῦργον ὡς ἀφροντίστως ἔχει

The fact of the matter is that he is clearly not in his right mind (355)

and,

ὦ πρὸς θεῶν ὑπεικε καὶ φρόνησον εὔ

Oh, by the gods, submit and come to your senses! (371)

before even trying to employ λόγοι (rational arguments). This reveals a fundamental inconsistency in their approach: the strategy that they adopt (persuasion through λόγοι) is justified by Ajax's sanity, but Ajax, according to them, can only want to commit suicide if he is not in his right mind. Therefore, they ought either to give up persuasion or to acknowledge that his wish for death is sane and rational. This inability to interact with Ajax on his own terms can be seen through the lens of conversation analysis, especially as described by Van Emde Boas.¹⁶ The exchange in lines 348–429 is the most telling, and certain complicating factors (such as the two simultaneous levels of conversation and three participants)

¹⁵ Jebb 1893.

¹⁶ Van Emde Boas 2017:411–416.

make a detailed conversation analysis along the lines of that in Van Emde Boas¹⁷ impossible in an essay of this scope. That is because this exchange is not really a conversation; despite the close (almost stichomythic) interchange of dialogue, there exists only one base pair in the exchange (356–363); this ends in a refusal on the part of the Chorus (362–363); neither party attempts to negotiate this point. The opening lines are programmatic for this exchange; Ajax opens with a greeting and observation (348–352), which essentially functions as an invitation to dialogue; the Chorus completely ignores this (354–355). Such a beginning indicates that the exchange will be fruitless: the two parties are simply talking past one another. By line 373, the exchange has lost all semblance of conversation; Ajax addresses himself (373–376), Odysseus (379–382), and Zeus (388–391); never does he address one of his interlocutors. The nature of the text at this point is significant: it is a *kommos*, in which Ajax sings while his φίλοι speak in the standard iambic trimeter;¹⁸ the φίλοι are employing the standard meter of tragic conversation and *agon*, to be sure, but Ajax is not really speaking to them. The Chorus, by their unwillingness to cooperate at the beginning of the exchange, have lost any opportunity they might have had to reason with Ajax; he might have been willing to reason at the beginning, but soon loses all interest.

Tecmessa is later able to hold a conversation with Ajax (485–544), but on a rather different subject; this time, she engages him on the topic of γένος (family, 485–524); specifically, his duty to her as a wife (487–499),¹⁹ his son (499, 510–513) and his parents (506–509), invoking a principle of reciprocal χάρις ('favour' or 'goodwill', 522), which, if Ajax should ignore it, would contradict his εὐγένεια (nobility, 524). This is an interesting rhetorical strategy; she is using the final two lines of her speech to directly challenge Ajax's definition of εὐγενής (noble) in the last two lines of his; to Ajax, the most important feature of εὐγένεια is τιμή²⁰, while for Tecmessa it is χάρις and the reciprocity thereof.²¹ Therefore, while there is genuine dialogue between Tecmessa and Ajax, it is ultimately ineffective because they are approaching the subject of εὐγένεια from radically different perspectives. Tecmessa, just like the Chorus, is unable or unwilling to understand Ajax on his

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Thanks to Professor Chandler of UCT for pointing the significance of the metrical aspect of this exchange out to me.

¹⁹ Note also the reference to her father: ἐγὼ δ' ἐλευθέρου μὲν ἐξέφον πατρός, / εἵπερ τινὸς σθένοντος ἐν πλούτῳ Φρυγῶν: / νῦν δ' εἰμὶ δούλη ('I was born to a free father, / and, what's more, one who was one of the wealthiest Phrygians; / and now I am a slave' (487–489). Tecmessa's past reversal of fortunes sets the stage for both what will happen to her (496–505) and the rest of Ajax's γένος when he commits suicide.

²⁰ Zanker 1992:21–22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

own terms and accept that his decision to commit suicide is rational within the framework of εὐγένεια, and so reasoning with him is ultimately impossible.

This comes to a head in the *Trugrede*, the ‘deception speech’, in which Ajax seems to decide to put aside all notions of suicide and keep on living. The question of the precise nature of the speech, and the intentions with which Ajax made it, is irrelevant here; what matters is the way in which his audience (Tecmessa and the Chorus) received it. It is certain that they were deceived by it,²² regardless of Ajax’s intentions. The ambiguity of the speech has led commentators to take wildly differing positions on the nature of the *Trugrede*.²³ This ambiguity pervades the speech; for example, while lines 651–659 might imply that Ajax has taken pity on Tecmessa and changed his mind, deciding to reconcile with Athena and renounce violence, lines 646–647 can be taken as foreshadowing Ajax’s demise,²⁴ as well as

ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ νύξ Ἄιδης τε σφζόντων κάτω

But let Night and Hades keep it below.

(660)

From this, it would seem that the reason that Tecmessa and the Chorus so easily accepted that Ajax had changed his mind was not so much because he deceived them, but because they had deceived themselves; they were so eager to prevent his suicide that they could not recognise the ambiguity in

ἐγὼ γὰρ εἴμ’ ἐκεῖσ’ ὅποι πορευτέον·
 ὑμεῖς δ’ ἄ φράζω δρᾶτε, καὶ τάχ’ ἄν μ’ ἴσως
 πύθοισθε, κεί νῦν δυστυχῶ, σεσωσμένον.²⁵

For I am going where I need to go; but as for you, do what I say, and you will soon find out, even if I am miserable at the moment, that I have been saved.

(690–692)

Instead they assumed that their preferred interpretation (that Ajax has changed his mind) was correct, and so immediately began rejoicing (693–718). The Chorus and Tecmessa were unable to reason with Ajax because they were unable to accept that his suicide was, ultimately, a product of Reason. Reason, so far, is failing, and failing badly.

²² Apfel 2011:251.

²³ For a discussion, see Apfel 2011:247–255; also Davidson 2018:472–474.

²⁴ It seems to mean much the same thing as our ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’.

²⁵ For a discussion of the word σεσωσμένον, see Wigodsky 1962:154 ff.

The triumph of Reason

Precisely the opposite is true for the second half of the play; unlike in the first half, persuasion is possible, and is achieved by Odysseus in his discussion with Agamemnon. At first it seems that the *agon* between Teucer and Menelaus (1047–1161) will decide the conclusion of the play; this too ends in frustration and threats of force (1159–1161). At this point in the play, it seems that Reason will once again suffer loss; the unwillingness of either Teucer or Menelaus to compromise and negotiate has brought the matter to the brink of violence. This is only confirmed by the arrival of Agamemnon; he refuses to reason with Teucer at all in lines 1257–1263. This complicates matters to a great degree: first, Teucer is almost made into a new Ajax:²⁶ Ajax is gone,

οὐκέτ' ὄντος, ἀλλ' ἦδη σκιᾶς

He no longer exists, but is already a shadow

and Teucer θαρσῶν (Ajax is known for his boldness) ὑβρίζεις (Ajax does this, according to the Atreidae; cf. 1061, 1081, 1088); furthermore, Agamemnon asks: οὐ σωφρονήσεις; ('Won't you be sensible?'), implying that Teucer, like Ajax, is not in his right mind. However, Teucer is not Ajax's equal in social rank (οὐ μαθὼν ὅς εἴ φύσιν — Will you not learn your natural place ...?), so Agamemnon will not speak with him:

σοῦ γὰρ λέγοντος οὐκέτ' ἂν μάθοιμ' ἐγώ: / τὴν βάρβαρον γὰρ γλῶσσαν οὐκ ἐπάω;²⁷

For if you went on speaking, I would not understand; I do not know your barbarian language.

Teucer may be the new Ajax, but he is a lesser Ajax,²⁸ and so Agamemnon will not negotiate with him. Despite Teucer's counterarguments (1266–1315), Agamemnon refuses to respond, implying that, however this new problem is resolved, it will not be through Reason. The 'new Ajax', Sophocles seems to imply, like the old Ajax, will not be treated reasonably. At this point, the audience might reasonably expect there to be further conflict, a story like the one that Sophocles would later tell in *Antigone*. This, however, is averted by Odysseus, who is, unlike Teucer, of the appropriate social status. Odysseus is not only allowed to engage in reason with Agamemnon but succeeds in it; his diplomatic style of argumentation wins

²⁶ Holt 1981:287.

²⁷ The 'foreignisation' of Teucer is perhaps a little immature; certainly it reflects an utter unwillingness to negotiate.

²⁸ For similar, but far less charitable, interpretation of this, see Winnington-Ingram 1980:61–62.

Agamemnon over²⁹ by acknowledging Agamemnon's way of thinking and not trying to persuade him to use his conception of ethics,³⁰ the result of which is that 'two characters have collaborated toward the political — though not conceptual — resolution'.³¹ Indeed, unlike the *agon* between Ajax, Tecmessa and the Chorus, this dialogue easily admits of a systematic conversation analysis;³² this is not only an exchange of words, but an actual discussion, in which one person can persuade the other. This is significant; Ajax's φίλοι failed to persuade him, in part, because of their failure to acknowledge his point of view and reason with him on his own terms. Odysseus does precisely the opposite with Agamemnon and succeeds. As a result of Odysseus' successful intervention, he and the 'new Ajax' become φίλοι (1377, 1381–1382, 1398–1399). This is perhaps the most significant 'triumph' of Reason; it has managed to resolve the problem caused by the contest of arms, the enmity between Ajax and Odysseus.

There is no 'diptych' structure on this reading; the play, when viewed through the lens of Reason, is not centred around the death of Ajax, but finds its climax in the turn from dissent to Reason.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that Reason triumphs in the *Ajax*; Reason is that which ultimately resolves the conflict, not just the one between Teucer and the Atreidae, but also that between Odysseus and Ajax, in a way that leads to no further bloodshed. Athena refuses to reason with Ajax as she does with Achilles, and, although Ajax is in full possession of his reason when he makes the decision to commit suicide, his φίλοι (Tecmessa and the Chorus) nevertheless cannot accept this and refuse to acknowledge the role of Reason in Ajax's decision; this rejection of Reason results in their inability to persuade Ajax, and, therefore, his suicide. Later, Teucer engages in debate with the Atreidae over Ajax's body, where they refuse to reason with him on his own terms; Teucer parallels Ajax in many ways, and so it seems that the cycle of unreasonableness will continue. However, Odysseus intervenes, using Reason to persuade Agamemnon to spare Ajax's corpse, thus effectively saving Ajax from further dishonour and reconciling himself to Teucer, an Ajax-substitute; thus, Reason triumphs. Sophocles, through the lack of Reason displayed by Athena, the Chorus, Tecmessa, Teucer and the Atreidae, dramatizes its role in the play; whether or not Reason will triumph is genuinely doubtful at many points.

²⁹ Van Emde Boas 2017:427.

³⁰ Hawthorne 2012:391–392.

³¹ Van Emde Boas 2017:397.

³² *Ibid.*, 425–427.

Ultimately, however, Reason wins out, and in so doing makes all things well (or as well as they could be, given the circumstances).

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