

A Convergence of Character: Ajax as Themistocles (and Vice Versa) in the Greek Imagination

1. Cratinus fr. 1 (Plut. *Cim.* 10.4):

κάγῳ γὰρ ἠΰχουν Μητρόβιος ὁ γραμματεὺς
σὺν ἀνδρὶ θείῳ καὶ φιλοξενωτάτῳ
καὶ πάντ' ἀρίστῳ τῶν Πανελλήνων πρὸ τοῦ
Κίμωνι λιπαρὸν γῆρας εὐωχούμενος
αἰῶνα πάντα συνδιατρίψειν. ὁ δὲ
λιπῶν βέβηκε πρότερος.

And I, Metrobius the scribe, used to pray that I would
with that godlike man—the most hospitable,
in all ways the very best of all the Greeks—
with Cimon to be entertained in sleek old age
for the rest of my life. But he
has left and gone before me.

2. Plutarch, *Themistocles* 31.4:

...οὔτε δι' ὀργὴν τινα παροξυνθεὶς κατὰ τῶν πολιτῶν οὔτε ἐπαρθεὶς τιμῇ τοσαύτῃ καὶ
δυνάμει πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον, ἀλλ' ἴσως μὲν οὐδ' ἐφικτὸν¹ ἡγούμενος τὸ ἔργον, ἄλλους τε
μεγάλους τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἐχούσης στρατηγούς τότε καὶ Κίμωνος ὑπερφυῶς εὐημεροῦντος
ἐν τοῖς πολεμικοῖς, τὸ δὲ πλεῖστον αἰδοῖ τῆς τε δόξης τῶν πράξεων τῶν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ
τῶν τροπαίων ἐκείνων, ἄριστα βουλευσάμενος ἐπιθεῖναι τῷ βίῳ τὴν τελευτὴν
πρέπουσαν...

...he was not provoked by some anger against the [Athenian] citizens nor was he excited by
the kind of honor and power he would have in the war, but perhaps believed that the task was
impossible, since Greece had other great commanders then, and Cimon was marvelously
successful in the wars; **but mostly out of regard for the glory of his own exploits and the
trophies they brought him, he decided it would be best to put a fitting end to his life...**

3. Plutarch, *Themistocles* 15.2 (Simonides fr. 536 Page):

ὡς εἶρηκε Σιμωνίδης, τὴν καλὴν ἐκείνην καὶ περιβόητον ἀράμενοι νίκην, ἥς οὔθ' Ἑλλησιν
οὔτε βαρβάροις ἐνάλιον ἔργον εἶργασται λαμπρότερον, ἀνδρεία μὲν καὶ προθυμία
κοινῇ τῶν ναυμαχησάντων, γνῶμη δὲ καὶ δεινότητι τῇ Θεμιστοκλέους.

... as Simonides said, [the Greeks] bore away that fine and famous victory—and no exploit at
sea more illustrious than this one had ever been achieved by Greeks or barbarians—victory
won through the manliness and shared zeal of those who fought in the ships and also
through the judgment and natural ingenuity of Themistocles.

4. Sophocles, *Ajax* 119-20:

τούτου τίς ἂν σοι τάνδρὸς ἢ προνούστερος
ἢ δρᾶν ἀμείνων ἠύρέθη τὰ καίρια;

Who could be found to be more forward-thinking than this man or better at doing what was right at the time?

5. Thucydides 1.138.3:

Themistocles most certainly exhibited natural genius and is especially worthy of respect for this quality, more so than any other; by his own inborn intelligence, and not by early education or later learning, he was the strongest judge (γνώμων) of matters that require quick deliberation on the spot and the best diviner of what was going to happen in the future; he was good at expounding upon the things that were familiar to him, and was willing and able to judge matters in which he had no experience at all; **he saw beforehand the best and worst of what was yet unseen** (τό τε ἀμεινον ἢ χειρον ἐν τῷ ἀφανεῖ ἔτι προεώρα μάλιστα). In sum, by the strength of his natural genius (φύσεως μὲν δυνάμει) and the quickness of his deliberation, **this man was the best at improvising on the spot whatever had to be done** (κράτιστος δὴ οὗτος αὐτοσχεδιάζειν τὰ δέοντα ἐγένετο).

6. Sophocles, *Ajax* 419-27:

ὦ Σκαμάνδριοι
γείτονες ῥοαί,
εὐφρονες Ἀργείοις,
οὐκέτ' ἄνδρα μὴ
τόνδ' ἴδητ', ἔπος
ἐξερῶ μέγ', οἷον οὔτινα
Τροία στρατοῦ δέρχθη χθονὸς μολόντ' ἀπὸ
Ἑλλανίδος: τανῦν δ' ἄτιμος
ὧδε πρόκειμαι.

O neighboring streams of the Scamander friendly to the Argives, no longer will you see this man—I shall utter aloud a big word—no man equal to him in the army did Troy ever see coming from the land of Hellas. But now I lie here like this, **without honor**.

7. Homer, *Iliad* 17.278:

Αἴας, ὃς πέρι μὲν εἶδος, πέρι δ' ἔργα τέτυκτο
τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ' ἀμύμονα Πηλείωνα

Ajax, who was the finest in form and action
of all the other Danaans after the blameless son of Peleus”

8. PMG 898:

Παῖ Τελαμῶνος, Αἴαν αἰχμητὰ, λεγουσί σε
ἐς Τροίαν ἄριστον ἐλθεῖν Δαναῶν μετ' Ἀχιλλέα.

Son of Tealmon, spearman Ajax, they say you
were the best of the Danaans to come to Troy after Achilles.

9. Herodotus 8.123:

After dividing the spoils, the Greeks sailed to the Isthmus, there to give **the prize of valor** (ἀριστήια δώσοντες) to the man who had become most deserving of it during the war. But when the commanders arrived they cast their votes at the altar of Poseidon, judging the first and second among them all, and every single one of them cast a vote for himself there, each one deeming himself to be the **best** (ἄριστος), but the multitude agreed in judging Themistocles to be **second** (δεύτερα δὲ οἱ πολλοὶ συνεξέπιπτον Θεμιστοκλέα κρίνοντες), and so they were each left alone with a single vote, but Themistocles surpassed them all with votes for second place.

10. Sophocles, Ajax 440-44:

ἄτιμος Ἀργείοισιν ὦδ' ἀπόλλυμαι.
καίτοι τοσοῦτόν γ' ἐξεπίστασθαι δοκῶ:
εἰ ζῶν Ἀχιλλεὺς τῶν ὀπλῶν τῶν ὦν πέρι
κρίνειν ἔμελλε κράτος ἀριστείας τινί,
οὐκ ἂν τις αὐτ' ἔμαρψεν ἄλλος ἀντ' ἐμοῦ.

Dishonored by the Argives, I am destroyed like this. Even so, I think I know this much: if Achilles were alive and about to award someone **the prize of valor** in a contest for his arms, no one else would take hold of them instead of me.

11. Herodotus 8.124.2:

ὅτι δὲ νικῶν οὐκ ἐτιμήθη πρὸς τῶν ἐν Σαλαμῖνι ναυμαχησάντων, αὐτίκα μετὰ ταῦτα ἐς Λακεδαίμονα ἀπῆκετο θέλων τιμηθῆναι: καὶ μιν Λακεδαιμόνιοι καλῶς μὲν ὑπεδέξαντο, μεγάλως δὲ ἐτίμησαν. ἀριστήια μὲν νυν ἔδοσαν... Εὐρυβιάδῃ ἐλαίης στέφανον, σοφίης δὲ καὶ δεξιότητος Θεμιστοκλεί καὶ τούτῳ στέφανον ἐλαίης: ἔδωρήσαντό τέ μιν ὄχρῳ τῷ ἐν Σπάρτῃ καλλιστεύσαντι.

Because he was **not honored** for his victory by those who fought in the ships at Salamis, he went straight away to Sparta wishing **to be honored**; and the Spartans received him kindly and **honored him greatly**. They gave **the [first] prize of valor** to Eurybiades, an olive crown, but gave Themistocles a crown of olive for his wisdom and cleverness, and they gifted him the finest chariot in Sparta.

12. Timocreon, PMG 727 (Plut. Them. 21.2-3):

ἀλλ' εἰ τύγε Πausανίαν ἢ καὶ τύγε Ζάνθιππον αἰνεῖς
ἢ τύγε Λευτυχίδα, ἐγὼ δ' Ἀριστείδα ἐπαινέω
ἄνδρ' ἱερᾶν ἀπ' Ἀθανᾶν
ἐλθεῖν ἕνα λῶστον: ἐπεὶ Θεμιστοκλῆ ἤχθαρε Λατώ,
φεύσταν, ἄδικον, προδόταν, ὃς Τιμοκρέοντα ξεῖνον ἐόντ'
ἀργυρίοις σκυβαλικοῖσι πεισθεῖς οὐ κατᾶγεν
εἰς πάτραν Ἰαλυσόν...

But if you praise Pausanias , or you Zanthippus,
or you Leotychidas, I praise Aristides
the one best man to come from Holy Athens; since Leto hates Themistocles
the liar, unjust, traitor, who was persuaded by dirty money not
to lead Timocreon back to his homeland of Ialysus, though he was his guest-friend...

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