

## Prophecy and the Limits of Human Knowledge in Sophocles' *Ajax*

Sophocles seems to have had a fascination with prophecy. Each of his seven extant plays and many of his surviving fragments include prophetic utterances. The prophecies in several plays have received attention (e.g., Bowman 1997, Hester 1981 on *El.*; Bowman 1999 on *Trach.*; Gill 1980, Kane 1975 on *OT*; Hinds 1967 on *Phil.*), but there is no comparable treatment for *Ajax*. This paper examines Calchas' prophecy (*Aj.* 746–83) within the context of the play as a whole; it is part of a larger study of prophecy in the plays of Sophocles.

Ajax is affected by a violent psychosis that is presented as theogenic. His resulting fate, while particular, is repeatedly generalized as an example of the ephemerality of humans, for whom fortune and life itself are mercurial and unpredictable. Unlike the human characters, who vainly seek to predict events throughout the play, Athena in the prologue characterizes herself as “the one who knows” (13); she is the one who sent on Ajax the delusion (51–2, 60), who obscures Ajax's vision (69–70, 85), who summons Ajax so that Odysseus can witness his madness (66–7), and whose anger brings about his demise (776–77). Odysseus responds to the sight of Ajax with pity—a response, he adds, prompted by consideration of his own condition rather than that of Ajax, “for I see that all we who live are nothing but apparitions or a light shadow” (125–26). Athena similarly draws a general lesson from the plight of Ajax: it illustrates the power of the gods in relation to mortals (118, 131–32), and the limits of human knowledge (“What man, I ask you, was found to be more farsighted than this one,” 119).

The play enacts the uncertainties and vicissitudes of the human experience. News of the prophecy of Calchas (745–83) is delayed until after Ajax's departure to his death. This postponement allows the chorus to interpret Ajax's riddling monologue (646–92) as a positive indication of change for the better. Indeed, the chorus responds to Ajax's apparent change of mind with a confident declaration (“All things are withered by mighty time; and I

would declare that nothing is impossible now that Ajax, beyond our hopes, has unexpectedly repented of his anger...,” 714–8). The paper draws comparison to other instances in Sophocles’ plays in which the chorus functions as prophet, interpreting developments and making predictions (cf. εἴπερ ἐγὼ μάντις εἶμι, *OT* 1086; εἰ μὴ ἴγὼ παράφρων μάντις ἔφην, *El.* 473). Indeed, individual verbal correspondences (πάνθ’ ὁ μέγας χρόνος, 714, cf. ἅπανθ’ ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος, 646; ἀέλπτων, 716, cf. ἄελπτον, 648) suggest that this second stasimon is the chorus’ interpretation of Ajax’s riddling words, which are oracular in their polyvalence.

The chorus’ optimistic predictions, though they prove misguided, are not incompatible with the openness of the utterances of Athena and Calchas. Athena’s gnomic statement (“for a day causes all human affairs to decline and recover again,” 131-2) entertains the possibility of a single day bringing about a change of fortune for the better (see Finglass 2011, 175). Similarly, Calchas’ prophecy entertains the possibility that Ajax may escape the anger of Athena, which will pursue him for only this one day (756, 778-9). The messenger’s recapitulation of the prophecy to Tecmessa (“that on this day brings death or life for him,” 802) emphasizes this point.

As audience members, however, we occupy a position of privileged knowledge that the chorus does not hold. We have witnessed Athena’s scheming in the prologue, and are aware of the metatheatrical dimensions of the frequent references to the single day as the span in which human fortunes are reversed, a reversal which in tragedy tends towards misfortune. As we watch from this position of knowledge as the chorus, Tecmessa, the messenger, and Teucer each attempts to read the signs with regard to Ajax’s fate, we come to understand empathetically the knowledge gained through experience by the chorus (“Many are the things that mortals can judge when they have seen them. But before he sees no man is a prophet of how he will fare in the future,” 1418-20). Thus the limitations of human

knowledge of the future and the vicissitudes of human fortune are central themes that intersect in the play's exploration of prophecy.

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