

Tecmessa in Sophocles' *Ajax*

A female figure is commonly used by Sophocles to point out to the main character, usually a male, what he or she has overlooked. Some examples are Ismene in *Antigone*, Chrysothemis in *Electra*, Jocasta in *Oedipus Tyrannos*. This female character may be a primary figure as well, for instance Antigone in *Antigone*, Electra in *Electra*, but even there they are representing what one might describe as virtues of the *oikos*, and if they act, their action is not critical to the plot. This is only a sketch, but it serves as background to contrast with what is of interest here: the character Tecmessa in Sophocles' *Ajax* and her role in the play. She is not merely a representative of the qualities usually represented by females; she is a person of authority.

In the first lines addressed to Tecmessa, we are made aware of the unusual nature of her situation: "speak, child of Phrygian Teleutas, /since swift Ajax supports you, and cares for you, a war bride." (παῖ τοῦ Φρυγίου Τελευτάντος, / λέγ', ἐπεὶ σε λέχος δουριάλωτον / στέρξας ἀνέχει θούριος Αἴας, 210-112) The alternate reading, "a spear-bride, but loving (him)," is textually possible, supported by Finglass, but the reading accepted by Jebb and Stanford and Lloyd-Jones is preferable, since the chorus is explaining why she has the status to not only address them, but to direct them: it was her suggestion that they meet with Ajax. It is significant I think that Stanford refers to her as "captive," "princess," and "wife" in one page of his introduction (xxxiii). In this active role she differs from the closest parallels I can suggest, Cassandra in the *Agamemnon* and Briseis in the *Iliad*. Ormand compares her with Alcestis in his interesting article that also supports this view of Tecmessa's unusually active character.

It is normal for the woman in the plot in a Greek tragedy to represent the interest of the *oikos* in the form of a child, for which she is either the parent, sister, or nurse. This is displayed early. When Ajax calls out “child child” Tecmessa responds, “Eurysakes, ‘tis for thee he calls~! What can be his purpose? Where art thou? Unhappy that I am.” (Jebb, 340-1) This is what we should expect. But as the scene progresses, we will learn that Tecmessa has hidden Eurysaces from Ajax, and that, even more surprisingly, he approves of what she has done. (530-536) Especially note his praise of her *pronoia* in 536, a quality for which he has been praised by Athena (noted by Finglass).

After Ajax has given his first long speech, where he explains what he has done and has indirectly indicated his intention to kill himself, he is answered by Tecmessa, and her theme is good sense, which we have been prepared to expect from her in the earlier scenes. But first she opens by explaining how their situations are parallel: “Ajax, my lord, the doom given by fate is the hardest of evils of evils among men. I was the daughter of a free-born sire, wealthy and mighty, if any Phrygian was; and now I am a slave; for so the gods ordained, I ween, and chiefly thy strong hand.” (485-90, Jebb)

These lines, I would argue, come closest to being the statement of the great theme of this play: “the doom given by fate,” as Jebb puts it, or in a closer version, “the necessities that are part of fortune.” Ajax is the man around whom the battle never broke. And here he has been broken. To face him is a woman who has faced more horrors than he can know, and she is surviving.

It is Tecmessa who leads the chorus on a hunt for Ajax, after the messenger’s report; it is Tecmessa who covers the body, and who delivers the first eulogy. The second eulogy is by Teucer, who faces an uncertain future. As Teucer faces the corrupt leaders who have caused this

catastrophe, Tecmessa stands beside the body with Eurysaces. The third eulogy is by Odysseus, who has seen that a human life is a shadow of smoke. Each, in their own way, is a survivor. For Ajax, it was just too much.

Bibliography

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