

Politics in the *Ajax*

Is the *Ajax* in any way concerned with politics? Finglass argues that it is not: “The playwright is free to evoke specifically democratic ideas and practices in his portrayal; equally, he is free to direct his audience’s attention elsewhere.” (Finglass, 57-8) He claims this is the case, and largely bases his argument on the mere two instances of the word *polis*. This is an odd argument; but it does force us to consider political language in the play. Here I would like to trace a theme that is politically significant.

In their parodos, the chorus raise an issue that lies at the heart of democratic politics, perhaps of all politics: namely, how the great men and the little men should relate to each other: “And yet small men separated from great ones are an unsafe tower of defense. For a lowly man accompanied by great, and a great man attended by small, have the most prosperous course.” (154-161, *Ajax* translations are by Finglass throughout)

This is a critical issue in Athenian politics. For instance, Thucydides refers to the constitution of the five thousand in terms of the great and the small: “for it was a moderate blending (σύγκρασις) between the few and the many. . . (which was) “a good constitutional arrangement.” (8.97.2. Trans. by Hornblower). Finglass quotes a similar statement from Euripides containing σύγκρασις, the word used by Thucydides. (fr. 21.1-4TrGF)

After the death of *Ajax*, a series of scenes present the conflict between the rule of law and the claims of the great man. In his debate with Menelaus, Teucer says that Menelaus was “found to be a vote making thief,” and Menelaus replies, “he failed because of the jurors and not me.” (1135- 6). The reference to bribing jurors has a contemporary ring. “Juror,” δικαστής, and words formed with ψηφο-are not Homeric, Stanford notes. “Vote-making” (ψηφοποιός), a unique

word, would suggest that Menelaus was found to have forged ballots, such as those ostraca found in the agora, first published by Vanderpool. “You were found” suggests that Menelaus was caught red-handed.

In the same scene Menelaus gives a strong argument and then undercuts it with a weak one. First, he argues that “It is the mark of a bad man when a commoner does not deign to listen to the authorities.” (1071-2). Finglass calls this “absurd,” and of course it is more than that: “commoner” (*demotes*) is an anachronism, first appearing in Tyrtaeus, and it makes the question of Ajax’s burial far more problematic if it is not answered. Teucer, however, answers this easily; Ajax came to Troy as a “*symmachos*,” another anachronism. (1098) Menelaus then makes a weak argument, claiming he is giving *hybris* in return for *hybris*.

Agamemnon also begins with a strong argument: “As a consequence of such behaviour there could never be a firm establishment of any law.” (1246-7). However, then he undercuts his case with a weak argument: “A large-ribbed ox nevertheless takes a straight course under the influence of a small whip.” (1253-4). One should recall Athena said that Ajax was “forethoughtful, able to act in a timely manner.” (119-120) Agamemnon has turned Ajax into a non-human object.

Menelaus and Agamemnon are both hugely mistaken, of course, and yet they are exposing the problem, the dilemma, that lies under this play. By following the policy of enforcing obedience to authority, to the law, in this case, they are destroying not only Ajax but the great man in general.

Odysseus restrains them from this disastrous course by applying what he realized in the prologue: we are all shadows of smoke. That is, once we are dead there is no friend and enemy.

This enables Agamemnon to make the right decision in the final scene, but it does not solve the dilemma that underlies this play.

This is revealed by Odysseus himself. As he argues in favor of the burial, Odysseus makes an admission that Ajax indeed was the best after Achilles (ἄριστον, 1340). This reveals that the conflict that is the matter of this play is not resolved. (Finglass argues against “many scholars” on this point in vain; on the theme of unresolved argument in Sophocles, see Goldhill 2009). That is, since Odysseus still has the arms, the great man and the little men are not supporting each other. If Ajax was the best, then the decision of the jurors was unjust, not to mention being corrupt. Sophocles raises this point at the end of his play, and he leaves it resolved.

Bibliography

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