

## A Convergence of Character: Ajax as Themistocles (and vice versa) in the Greek Imagination

For nearly a century now critics of the *Ajax* have tentatively speculated that the tragic life of Themistocles inspired Sophocles' characterization of the Athenian hero from Salamis. The comparison traditionally centers on their respective falls from grace, deaths, and contested burials. Themistocles, who had led the Greeks to victory at the Battle of Salamis, was later ostracized by the Athenians, condemned for treason *in absentia*, and denied burial in Athens before being secretly interred there by his family and eventually redeemed (Thuc. 1.138.6; Plut. *Them.* 32.4-5). Likewise, the critics note, Sophocles' *Ajax* was condemned by the Greeks for turning against them, died by suicide, and was initially prevented from receiving proper funeral rites before his burial and heroization (e.g. Bowra 1944, 49-50, Hesk 2003, 20; cf. Rose 1995).

This paper explores the question further and seeks to identify other points of contact between Sophocles' *Ajax* and the biographical narratives surrounding Themistocles. The dispersal of relevant evidence suggests the existence of a deeper discourse and mutual influences among poets and historians. For example, Themistocles is also said to have committed suicide (Thuc. 1.138.4). According to Plutarch (*Them.* 31.4-5), he acted out of respect for his earlier achievements and chose a fitting suicide over diminished glory, not unlike Ajax who sought to preserve his dignity through honorable self-destruction (*Aj.* 470-80). If Themistocles did resemble Ajax in the Greek imagination, it is possible, and I think likely, that the mytho-poetic portrait of the hero inspired the composition of certain stories about Themistocles like the one Plutarch tells about his death. Thucydides describes Themistocles as a man of extraordinary foresight who "saw beforehand" (προεώρα) the best and worst course of action and was capable of doing whatever was "necessary" (τὰ δέοντα, 1.138.3-4) or most fitting in the face of any

contingency—an accurate digest of his pragmatic character as Herodotus portrays it. Similarly, in Sophocles’ play Athena asks if anyone can be found “more forward-thinking” (προνοούστερος) than Ajax or more capable of doing what is “seasonable” (τὰ καίρια, 120-21) or necessary under the circumstances (see Finglass 2011, 172). In this particular case, Sophocles’ concise description of Ajax’s abilities seems to echo the popular characterization of Themistocles found in Herodotus and may in turn have influenced Thucydides’ summary of the Athenian general’s aptitudes.

Themistocles also developed a reputation for arrogance and annoyed his fellow Athenians with reminders of his past achievements (Plut. *Them.* 22.1). This negative character trait may lie behind Ajax’s hubristic boasting in Sophocles’ play. The hero infamously rejected the gods’ help, believing he could achieve *kleos* without them (*Aj.* 767-75), and after his downfall continues to assert that he was the best Greek warrior at Troy: “Troy did not see a man equal [to me] in the army who came from the land of Hellas” (οἶον οὔτινα/ Τροία στρατοῦ/ δέρχθη χθονὸς μολόντ’ ἀπὸ/ Ἑλλανδίδος, 423-6). These lines caustically play on the traditional refrain that Ajax was the best of the Achaeans after Achilles (*H. II.* 2.768, *Aj.* 1338-41, etc.), and in this too a comparison can be made with Themistocles. Both men contended for the “prize of valor” (ἀριστεΐα; Hdt. 8.123.1-2; *Aj.* 443) within a coalition of Greek military commanders and both fell short of first place through a questionable voting process. The narratives surrounding the contests use remarkably similar tropes to describe the events: both heroes felt “dishonored” by the outcomes (οὐκ ἐτιμήθη, Hdt. 8.124.2; ἄτιμος, *Aj.* 426), and though Themistocles lost the foremost honor he was unanimously awarded “second” place (δεύτερα) just as Ajax was consistently judged to be the best of the Achaeans after Achilles. The lyric poet Timocreon evokes the historical contest in an attack upon Themistocles, claiming that Aristeides is the “the

one best man to come from holy Athens (ἄνδρ' ἱερῶν ἀπ' Ἀθανῶν/ ἐλθεῖν ἕνα λῶστον), since Leto hates Themistocles” (*PMG* 727, 2-4); he also seems to echo the Homeric formula that compares Ajax to Achilles, especially as it appears in the so-called Telamon skolion (“Son of Telamon, spearman Ajax, they say you were the best of the Danaans to come to Troy after Achilles,” Παῖ Τελαμῶνος, Αἴαν ἀιχηητᾶ, λεηουσί σε/ ἐς Τροίαν ἄριστον ἐλθεῖν Δαναῶν μετ' Ἀχιλλέα., *PMG* 898). The interplay of both these songs may have inspired the boast Sophocles places in Ajax’s mouth (423-6), which uses similar language. Even if some of the similarities (like the contests) are purely coincidental, the respective narratives, I argue, likely influenced one another.

#### Bibliography

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