

To Be or Not To Be: Suicide and Heroism in Sophocles' Ajax

Thomas Barton

In this play, Sophocles tells a tragic tale of a Greek hero gone mad. Ajax, the second greatest hero of all the Greeks who sailed to Troy, is denied his honor and his right to the most prestigious war-booty: Achilles' armor. He loses the armor to Odysseus whom he felt is not worthy of such a distinction. Ajax loses his mind and attempts to kill his fellow Greeks out of revenge. He is tricked, however, by the goddess Athena and fails to exact his revenge. Further shamed by his actions of retribution, Ajax is confronted with a stark realization of what the world has become. The story comes to a climactic end with Ajax taking his own life and his brother attempting to reassert Ajax's lost honor and heroic identity.

At the conclusion of the play, the audience is left to decide whether Ajax has forever lost his heroic identity and honor. Although most scholars argue that Ajax's suicide resulted in a loss of heroic status, I contend that Ajax's suicide was able to effectively reestablish his heroic identity and his honor. The key to understanding the play is the central speech delivered by Ajax himself. In this speech Ajax comes to the realization that there is a conflict between his own identity and the changing world in which he now lives. Subsequently, Ajax is ultimately confronted with two clear choices: he could change with the world around him, but by doing so he would sacrifice his own heroic identity, the very thing that makes him Ajax; or he could end his own life, thus preserving his self identity as an honorable hero. Further evidence for this interpretation is to be found in his suicide speech and the thematic issues of time and change. These will serve as evidence that further exhibit the honor and heroism found in Ajax's decision to end his own life.

In order to argue that Ajax's suicide was both honorable and heroic, we must first examine the definition of a hero in ancient Greece. The fifth-century Greeks would have recognized Ajax as a hero from Homer's epic *Iliad* and evaluated his behavior through the lens

of the heroic code. The code is quite simple and straightforward. The ultimate goal of the Homeric hero is the pursuit of *time* (τιμή), literally one's 'value',¹ and *kleos* (κλεος), 'honor,' through successful military action. *Geras* (γεραζ), 'war booty,' and gifts served as tangible evidence of one's *time* (τιμή) and *kleos* (κλεος).² In addition, one should value loyalty and justice, help one's friends, and harm one's enemies.³ The Greeks abandoned these values when they awarded Odysseus the right to Achilles' armor. Ajax felt that as the second best warrior among the Greeks he was entitled to the most prestigious of gifts and honors; and under the old Heroic system of values, he was. When he realized Odysseus, through cunning and cleverness, had won the armor, Ajax felt he had been denied his *kleos* as well as his *time*. This drove Ajax to hate Odysseus and the other Greeks.

Through the course of the first half of the play we see the heroic Ajax as crazed, murderous, shamed and broken. We see an Ajax that cannot possibly understand why the Greeks have suddenly denied him his honor by awarding Achilles' armor to Odysseus. We see his resulting murderous and crazed tirade on a flock of sheep, which he thought were the Greeks that were once his friends and are now his enemies. We see Ajax continuing a spiral downwards into a world of shame, dishonor and depression. It is here that we see the conflict between Ajax's heroic identity and the changing world that surrounds him. Keeping in mind the definition of the Homeric hero set out above, we can see how Ajax's identity would have been in conflict. First, the black and white world and the definitive boundaries that encompass the value of "help your friends, harm your enemies" becomes unclear. Those who used to be Ajax's friends have now turned against him by refusing him the armor that he believes is rightfully his, thus denying his

¹ G. Zanker. "Sophocles' Ajax and the Heroic Values of the Iliad." *The Classical Quarterly*, 42 (1992): 20

² Ibid, 20.

³ Bernard Knox. "The Ajax of Sophocles." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 65 (1961): 4.

time (τιμή). The shattering of this heroic value also inevitably shatters his value of loyalty. Additionally, Ajax's attempt to kill Odysseus and the Atriedai and his subsequent failure causes his sense of justice to become a source of confusion and chaos that further diminishes his *time* (τιμή).

In addition to understanding the heroic code, it is also important to examine the ancient Greek views of suicide. Just like contemporary times, the idea of suicide would have been a controversial subject to a Greek audience. The Greeks would have considered suicide in the form of self-sacrifice, to save the community, as one of virtue. Institutional or state sanctioned suicide would have carried no stigma; suicide out of shame, guilt, fear or dishonor was considered to be commendable; suicide out of laziness or cowardice would have been seen as a disgrace; and suicide to restore one's honor would have been accepted with approval.⁴ With all of this in mind, suicide was a largely socially acceptable facet of life in ancient Greece. Examples of this are evident in many sources, such as Thucydides. He records that during the Cocyraean civil war Messenian soldiers who were captured committed suicide rather than face the shame and dishonor of being imprisoned or becoming slaves; furthermore their suicide was motivated by the shame and dishonor that is associated with having been captured.⁵ Additionally, many Greeks would have accepted the notion of "vengeance suicide" or the killing of one's self with intentions that their own death would bring about curses or "pollutions" on other people.⁶ This suicide can be construed, however, as both acceptable as well as unacceptable because on one hand you are harming your enemies and keeping to a heroic value but on the other hand you are

⁴ Elise P. Garrison. "Attitudes Toward Suicide in Ancient Greece." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 121 (1974): 4.

⁵ Garrison 13-14. This source cites Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* 3.80.

⁶ Elizabeth Belfiore. *Murder Among Friends: Violation of Philia in Greek Tragedy*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000): 105.

openly admitting your lack of power to save yourself.⁷

With all of this in mind, can Ajax's suicide be acceptable within the context of fifth century Greek thought and values? Ajax does face both shame and dishonor and thus his life becomes unbearable. Ajax's heroic identity is challenged through the Greeks' repudiation of his honor from their refusal to award Achilles' armor to him. Ajax's shame and dishonor is similar to that which the Messenians would have felt in the accounts from Thucydides. Additionally, Ajax's suicide could be construed as a simple "vengeance suicide." He would be adhering to the heroic value of "harm your enemies," when he later calls upon the gods to smite his enemies down during his suicide speech (lines 930-42). Although the idea of that type of suicide carries both honorable and *dishonorable* connotations, Ajax is still reaffirming his heroic identity by adhering to the heroic code. The final scene in the play supports this view. At lines 1602-1605 (English trans.)⁸, Teukros says "Come you who called him friend, and work for this man's sake who was noble in all that he did. For while Ajax lived, I'd say there was no better man in the world." Because the play ends with an affirmation of Ajax's heroic status, one might infer that Ajax's honor has been restored.

The strongest evidence that Ajax's suicide restored his heroic status is found in the great speech given by Ajax at lines 717-769. Here, Ajax comes to the realization that the world around him is changing. The heroic age he excelled in has passed and he has been thrust into a new age in which the values and codes of old no longer apply. The primary interpretive difficulty concerns Ajax's intended audience: is the speech directed toward Tecmessa and/or the Chorus or is Ajax merely uttering a soliloquy? Most scholars take the former view, arguing that a deception

⁷ Ibid, 105.

⁸ Herbert Golder and Richard Peaver, trans. *Sophocles' Aias*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999): 77. All lines that are from the English translation refer to this source.

speech meant to hide his suicidal intentions would explain Ajax's self-isolation throughout the play.⁹ However, Bernard Knox¹⁰ challenges this position by asking an important question: "Why *should* he deceive his hearers [the supposed other characters on stage]?"¹¹ Knox argues that in the previous scene (with Tecmessa) that Ajax was actually very blunt and straightforward about his suicide.¹² In lines 609-658 (Eng. trans.), Ajax delivers a speech in which his intent to commit suicide is clear. Ajax refers to his –presumably imminent—burial (652-53, Eng. trans.) then he quickly ushers everyone away from him and he even gives instructions on what needs to be done when everyone arrives home; he does all this as if he was dying or about to die.¹³ Even after he states his intentions, the Chorus and Tecmessa seem to try to dissuade Ajax from taking any action whatsoever. Tecmessa says "I beg you...do not betray us!" (665-666, Eng. trans), but Ajax very quickly and promptly commands her to be quiet. Why would Ajax be purposely deceptive after he has already openly admitted his intentions?

Beyond the "why would he" question, there are also other issues to consider. Ajax is clearly not speaking to other characters on stage, but rather delivers a soliloquy.¹⁴ Knox points out that during the fifth century, the time when the play would have been performed in Athens, actors would have been wearing masks. These masks would give the audience no help in the way of expressions and sometimes no help with the direction of their address, thus making it *absolutely* imperative that the speaker clearly address any other characters on stage in the opening lines of a new scene for the sake of the audience. Knox continues on to say that usually in Greek plays they would utilize things such as choral introductions or vocative formulas or

⁹ Gregory Crane. "Ajax, the Unexpected, and the Deception Speech." *Classical Philology*, 85 (1990): 90. His article's purpose is to prove these points, however, he states his main thesis on this page.

¹⁰ Knox, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 12.

¹² *Ibid*, 12.

¹³ Golder, 47.

verbs in the second person in order to quickly and decisively make the connection that other actors are meant to be on stage for interaction with that primary speaker.¹⁵ Another key element to the argument, and probably the most conclusive as well as obvious, is that Ajax never addresses Tecmessa until the very end of the speech. In fact, when he does talk about her, he speaks of her in the third person as if she is not even there, saying “by this woman, I pity *her*.”¹⁶ Additionally, Ajax talks to himself as if he is alone during the speech just like when he *actually* is alone just before his suicide later in the play. All of these arguments strongly suggest that the speech is a soliloquy and not a speech of deception addressed to Tecmessa and/or the Chorus.

The content of the speech also supports the view that Ajax’s suicide restores his honor. One of the key pieces that underlines the main argument and point of this paper is the tragic irony that forces Ajax to choose from two decisive paths. The main purpose of the great speech that is delivered by Ajax is to inform the reader or audience of the realization to which Ajax has come to. Ajax is the last of the great Homeric era heroes, a new age is upon the world and this new age has no room for the heroic code of the old days. Ajax begins his great speech with “Great, unfathomable time brings dark things...” (712. Eng. trans.). The dark things which Ajax is referring to is the new system of values that have come as a result of “time.” The use of time plays an interesting role in the tragedy. The idea of time is expressed through the use of the Greek word *chronos* (χρόνος); within the context of Sophoclean tragedy it carries a meaning that is bit different from its conventional meaning of “indefinite time”, instead it carries the meaning of “an age”.¹⁷ The idea of time in this sense correlates directly with the idea of

¹⁴ Knox, 13.

¹⁵ Knox, 13. Citation includes previous sentence as well.

¹⁶ Ibid, 13.

¹⁷ H.G. Liddell and Robert Scott. *Greek-English Lexicon*. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press: 1889): *χρόνος* 896.

change.¹⁸ The play makes a distinct separation between the ideas of changing and unchanging things through the use of *aei* (αεί) or always, and *ouποτε* (ουποτε) or never. This language is used to “contrast between time and eternity, between man’s changing life and divine immortality.”¹⁹ Ajax comes from an age where things are set in stone and where things may remain forever. He constantly uses this language in the play. He sees Odysseus as “the instrument of evil *always*.” (379-380. Greek text); he asks Athena “to *always* stand by me as an ally.” (117. Greek text).²⁰ Quickly, Ajax realizes that his age of time has passed and that *aei* (αεί) no longer has meaning to humans. He soon realizes that there is nothing in human life that the idea of *aei* (αεί) can be properly applied to. This word has no meaning to mortal men and mortal men are subject to time and change and thus what they once were will ultimately change, not always staying forever, as it once had in Homeric times.²¹ With this Ajax has finally come to the stark reality that an individual who refuses to change begins to transcend that boundary between *chronos* (χρόνος) and *aei* (αεί) and that the individual is no longer thinking as a man or human would, but is thinking like an immortal god.²²

Ajax continues on to say that “[Great, unfathomable time brings dark things] into the light and buries the bright in darkness.” Here, the old Homeric values, symbolized through the use of the word “light”, have been buried. Of interest here is Sophocles’ use of the word *krupteio* (κρυπτει). Normally, the verb means ‘to bury,’ but in Sophoclean tragedy, it means ‘to cover, put or hide away.’²³ Sophocles seems to use this verb to show that the old system of

¹⁸ Ivan Linforth. “Three Scenes in Sophocles’ Ajax.” *University of California Publication in Classical Philology*, 15 (1954): 12.

¹⁹ Knox, 18.

²⁰ Ibid, 18.

²¹ Knox, 20.

²² Ibid, 20.

²³ LSJ s.v. κρυπτειω, 452

values and ideologies are being covered or put or hidden away from the world, just as a society might put or hide away laws and rules that are no longer valid to their time. Ajax continues on to say that “time seizes the most dread oath, the most hardened mind.” (715-717. eng. trans.). For this, Sophocles uses the verb, *haliskomai* (αλισκομαι), which strongly conveys the message that time and change have ‘conquered, overcome or vanquished’²⁴ even the most sacred of things (i.e. oaths that all Greeks swore to fight for the kings of Greece). Here we find a clear indication that the world is indeed changing: The oath which Ajax swore, and subsequently broke, would not have happened if others had not denied him the *time* (τιμή) that he had earned through his heroic actions in the war. So, essentially Ajax comes to an austere realization: he realizes that not even the most sacred of oaths and the most hardened minds can stop “time” and that *every and all* things are subject to change.

One of the primary purposes of this speech is to show Ajax’s realization that the world is no longer governed by the rules of the Homeric code. Starting in lines 739-759 (eng. trans.), Ajax states exactly *how* the world has changed. He states that eventually “we will know how to yield to the gods and bow before the Atreidai.” (740-741). Ajax continues drawing analogies and other examples of powerful things yielding to authority. He draws many of these examples from the forces of nature submitting to their respective opposites: winter gives way to summer, night is brightened by day, wind calms the sea, and sleep gives way to being awake. Because of his dedication to the heroic code, which is ultimately a black-and-white worldview, Ajax cannot possibly adhere to this new idea of yielding to gods and bowing before kings. To do this would be to “renounce all his pride, humble himself, and beg for mercy,”²⁵ which would be the exact opposite of the Homeric, Achillean archetype that makes up Ajax’s identity. He points out that

²⁴Ibid, αλισκομαι, 36

the code of “help your friends and harm your enemies” no longer is valid, and he faces up to the fact that he now lives in a world where your friends can easily become your enemies, and those whom you called foe can quickly become a friend. He describes this realization of the new code of friendship as “a treacherous harbor [for most mortals]” (758-759, Eng. trans.). Ajax is quickly seeing that even he, in such a world, would have to bend and give way.²⁶

Towards the end of his speech, Ajax poses a rhetorical question: “εξ ἴσῃ εἴη;” or “In such a world how shall I not be forced to learn discipline?” It is here that Sophocles uses two words to help show Ajax’s realization that for him there is no alternative to a “heroic suicide,”²⁷ *gignosko* (γινωσκω) and *sophroneo* (σωφρονεω). In Sophoclean tragedy, *gignosko* (γινωσκω) means ‘to learn against one’s will,’ and *sophroneo*(σωφρονεω) connotes the demonstration of discipline, such as a subordinate would show to an officer.²⁸ In this passage Sophocles suggests that in order for Ajax to move with time and change he must submit himself to the level of a subordinate and force himself to learn to show discipline. By doing this, Ajax would be violating the values of the Homeric age. Even the great Achilles never quite yielded to Agamemnon or to the gods. Ajax adheres to the same ideas, never listening to Athena or to the commands of the Atreidai; his persona is one of prideful excellence and constant competition to secure his *time* (). Becoming subservient to another, especially to mortals, such as the Atreidai, would mean Ajax’s rejection of this egocentric, hubristic drive for excellence. With this, it is clear to see that to Ajax, changing with the world and staying alive would be the *real* death of himself, but by committing suicide and clinging to his heroic identity he would be able to, in death, transcend time and change and stay honorable and heroic for all eternity.

²⁵ Knox, 16.

²⁶ Ibid, 16.

²⁷ Knox, 17.

The last line of Ajax's speech is probably the most compelling piece of evidence yet. In line 691 (Greek text),²⁹ Ajax says "εἰ νῦν, εἴ" or "though I am now unfortunate, I have been preserved." The compelling thing about this very last line of the speech is the word *sesomenon* (σεσωμενον). This word holds a dual meaning that is relevant to both Sophocles' works and tragedy in general. Within in the context of Sophocles, *sesomenon* (σεσωμενον) simply means 'to preserve oneself,' which is most certainly what Ajax was trying to convey. The interesting thing, however, is that this word holds a second meaning within general Greek tragedy itself: 'keeping or preserving laws, customs and values.'³⁰ To an Athenian audience of the fifth century, this one single word would have had a literal meaning as well as a deeper one. The audience would have recognized that Ajax was simply stating that he was intending on preserving his identity, but they would have also recognized that his intentions (his suicide) would also be preserving the Homeric code and values. Ajax is the last of the great Homeric age heroes and with his death, that age ends, and subsequently, as Sophocles is most certainly implying, his death not only will immortalize Ajax's identity, but will also immortalize the values of the Homeric age.

So, how does Ajax maintain his heroic identity? During his suicide speech, Ajax begins by stating that he has "set" his sword in the ground, "The killer, the sacrificial knife is set now to be most cutting..." (908-910. Eng. trans.). Here, Ajax is reestablishing his heroic identity by using the sword of Hector as the instrument of his suicide. Sophocles personifies the sword using the word *sphageus* (σφαγευς) or 'killer' or 'butcher.'³¹ He also notes that the sword has been planted in the "hostile Trojan soil," or "νῦν ἐν εἰς," and with this Ajax emphasizes the sword's

²⁸ Ibid, 17. This citation covers the meanings of εἰς and εἴ, both the normal and the Sophoclean meanings. Additionally, this citation also includes the lexicon entries. For this view: LSJ_{S.V.} κρυπτεω, 165., σωφρονεω 789.

²⁹ Hugh-Lloyd Jones, trans. *Sophocles: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1994): 90. All Greek text citations refer to this source.

³⁰ LSJ_{S.V.} This citation also includes the previous sentence

identity as the sword of Hector.³² By doing this Sophocles recalls the battle of Hector and Ajax from the *Iliad*, thus creating an atmosphere of heroic confrontation and making Ajax's death the result of a heroic battle rather than an "unambiguous act of self-destruction."³³ Ajax also asserts his heroic identity when he calls out to the Furies to avenge his death (932-944). He keeps to the code of "help your friends and harm your enemies." Even in death, Ajax will maintain his hatred for Odysseus and the Atreidai. Knox supports this argument by saying that Ajax has already chosen to die and that now he must choose what *mood* to die in.³⁴ Knox also points out that with perpetual hate in his heart, Ajax kills himself and it is that hate that will remain there for all time, thus preserving his heroic nature.³⁵

Ajax's honor and heroism is again reinforced by the fact that Ajax strived for excellence all the way to his death. His realization of the changing world and his decision to preserve his heroic nature in the face of a changing age shows Ajax's perceptive excellence. Ajax realized the implications time and change has on man, like no other could have from his own time.

After his death, Ajax's honor is yet again reaffirmed by his peers, namely Odysseus. This man, for whom Ajax had the utmost hatred, reestablishes Ajax's *time* (τιμή), by saying such things as "But though he held his enmity, I would not repay him now with dishonor." (1508-1510. Eng. trans.). Odysseus has recognized Ajax's adherence to the old code and thus honors him for doing so. He goes on to call him "the greatest of all who came, second only to Achilles." (1512-1513. Eng. trans.). By saying this, Odysseus reestablishes Ajax's former glory of being the second best among the Greeks, something which Ajax is proud of and boasts of

³¹ Ibid, 784.

³² David Cohen. "The Imagery of Sophocles: A Study of Ajax's Suicide." *Greece and Rome*, 25 (1978): 32.

³³ Cohen, 34.

³⁴ Knox, 28.

³⁵ Ibid, 28.

during the Trojan War.³⁶ Repeatedly, Odysseus refers to Ajax's "greatness" (1537. Eng. trans.) and the fact that he "was moved" by it. This acknowledgement of Ajax's greatness by Odysseus helps to restore Ajax's honor. Even the Atreidai, who want to leave his body to rot, are eventually persuaded to see the honor in letting Ajax be buried, despite their hatred for him.

By the end of the play, Ajax has finally reacquired his *time* (τιμή) and has preserved his heroic identity. Although Ajax is often portrayed not as a man of words but as a man of actions, Sophocles is able to effectively show us an Ajax that is honorable and heroic in both his actions as well as his words. The tragedy of this play was not Ajax's shame nor his suicide, but rather his conflict between his identity and the new age that he was thrust into. For the first half of the play Ajax is shamed and embarrassed as a result of this conflict. But as Sophocles shows us, Ajax is not only a man of action, but a man of words. He eloquently and poetically states his realization that his identity no longer can work within the context and boundaries of this new age and that in order to maintain that very identity he must end his life and transcend the very boundaries of time and change. It is within the speech before his suicide that Ajax makes that transition from mortal man to an immortal hero. He keeps to his Homeric code by renouncing his enemies, calling upon the gods to smite them; he keeps to his hatred, a value that is the backbone of his heroic identity. When Ajax kills himself, his hatred and his heroic code are perpetually burned within his heart. It is with death that Ajax finds his immortality; he finds his way to maintain his honor and not be subject to time and change. Only upon this death, do others realize and recognize Ajax's honor and heroism. Even his enemy Odysseus openly reasserts Ajax's heroic title as second best among the Greeks. So finally Ajax can rest beyond time and beyond change.

³⁶ L.V. Hinkley. *Ajax and Achilles: Their Literary Relationship from Homer to Sophocles*. (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado at Boulder, 1974): 387.

He has finally forever preserved his honor, his heroic identity and the Homeric code which he lived by.

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