Ancient and Modern Lessons from Sophocles’ *Ajax*

*Caitlin Outterson*

Ajax’s story was familiar to Greeks before Sophocles put pen to paper. He didn’t need to surprise his audience with unusual plot twists or characters. *Ajax*, like other Greek tragedies, was intended to educate Athenian men on the characteristics of the ideal citizen. All citizens were expected to serve in the military and family was also highly valued: adults took responsibility for their aging parents, as well as their children. A final, distinctly Athenian aspect of education was rhetoric. Although this characteristic is not as immediately obvious as the others, its presence is noticed. Dramatic stories, like Ajax, explore the inner workings of a soldier’s mind to help the audience empathize with him. What is astonishing is that the themes in *Ajax* are still relevant more than 2500 years later. Through Ajax’s exploration of the turmoil in his family, the military, and the world, Sophocles emphasizes, to both an Athenian and modern audience, the importance of safely navigating the intersection of familial dedication, honor, and compromise.

Ajax is structured around three overlapping themes—family, public life, and the military. Ajax, like any Athenian citizen, has responsibilities to all three spheres. As the eldest son, he is responsible for his aging parents, his son, Tecmessa, his war bride, and his slave. He constantly feels the pressures of maintaining honor and devotion to the family legacy because his father, Telamon, was a famed war hero from the previous Trojan War. These expectations exert unrelenting pressure up until the moment of his death. Ajax says to Helios, “announce the desperate acts/I have done… to the old man, my father, and the hapless woman who nursed me” (847-9). He is aware of his duties to his family even though he is not persuaded by Tecmessa to remain alive for the sake of his son. Ajax is less comfortable in his militaristic and public roles. The military places high value on physical prowess in combat, at which Ajax greatly succeeds: being called “the dreaded, mighty, raw-powered Ajax” (205). Still, a good soldier must also cope with the exhausting demands of battle and the responsibility of surviving another day. Ajax is unable to cope with the stresses and atrocities of war, and consequently defeats himself in the process.
In fifth century Athens, public life was just as significant as the military. Persuasive orations, public debate, and an openness to various arguments was the norm in Athenian public society, and were essential in defining ideal citizenship. Odysseus embodies the characteristics of Athenian rhetoric with his unique ability to understand Ajax, even though he is Ajax’s enemy. Because of his strength and confidence, Ajax is unaffected by rhetoric, but he is able to successfully use it against those who are weaker. By observing Sophocles’ text, one can conclude that Ajax accurately reflects the state of Athenian culture and society in the fifth century.

One emotionally moving episode occurs when Tecmessa describes Ajax’s delusion after the wild slaughter of the sheep and cattle. She asks him, “What on earth are you doing, Ajax?” (288). He unkindly replies, “Women should be seen, not heard” (293). He is undoubtedly disturbed by recent events and by his delusional wrath. A “madness… seiz[es] him,” (216) to make him slaughter and torture the animals, shouting “bitter insults/which some god, not a mortal, taught him,” thinking they were his fellow Greeks who had betrayed him (243-4). As he slowly comes back to his senses, Ajax “just [sits], speechless,” (311) and then demands that Tecmessa tell him what has happened. To her astonishment, Ajax “[explodes] in long sighs of sorrow, / sighs such as [she’d] never heard from him before” (316-7), even though he had “always insisted that such plaintive lamentations/were the mark of a cowardly and heavy-hearted man” (319-20). Worried, Tecmessa tells the chorus of soldiers to “go in and support him” (329), as “clearly he wants to do some dreadful deed” (326). When Ajax submerges, he laments, “Alas the howling laughter! Alas the utter humiliation!” (367). He does not care about having attempted to kill his fellow Greeks, but rather about “[letting] those god-damned fiends/slip from [his] hands!” (372-3). He disparagingly compares himself to his father: “Father, after having won… the first prize of all the army… returned home…crowned with glory. / But I… I die in such disgrace, stripped of honor by the Greeks” (434-40). Ajax is bewailing his utter humiliation in front of his peers in the army and is mortified to imagine what his father’s reaction might be, wondering, “What face shall I show when I appear before my father, Telamon?” (463-4). Since Ajax did not successfully win Achilles’ arms, he has lost honor in the eyes of the army and his father: which he, being the ultimate soldier, values above all. Considering different options for proving he is “no gutless coward” (472). Ajax finally determines that a noble man must choose “to live with honor or die with honor” (479).

Tecmessa attempts what veterans’ loved ones have tried to do: persuade a soldier, specifically Ajax, that there is life beyond war and the military. She, the “bedmate captured by his spear” (212) and the mother of his son, with whom “impetuous Ajax is constant in his affection” (211), reminds him of what will happen to her and their son if he kills himself. She says, “Be sure that on that selfsame day I shall be seized / and man-handled by the Greeks, and, together with your son, / shall eat the nurturing bread of
bondage” (497-9). She tries to convince him that the enslavement of his wife and son will be more shameful than continuing to live, just as would it would be if he abandoned his father and mother “in grim old age” (509). Finally, Tecmessa reminds Ajax of all she has done for him. She says, “Surely for a true man / it is right to cherish memory, if perhaps he has enjoyed some pleasure” (522-3). Tecmessa is the voice of the polis and of society, trying to move Athens beyond Sparta. Knowing that Telamon’s opinion of him is very important, she tells him to “respect and honor your father—feel shame before him. / Don’t abandon him in grim old age” (508-509). She knows that Telamon would be more ashamed if Ajax abandons the care of his father than if he lost the competition. Although Tecmessa deftly uses several persuasive techniques, including appeals to family, sex, and shame, a persuasive argument is not enough for Ajax to change his mind. He ultimately fails to let go of his principles.

Ajax is not able to recognize the value of Tecmessa’s words, yet he is able to trick other people by telling deceptive stories. In this skill he compares to his bitter enemy Odysseus. After Tecmessa is finished speaking, he asks to see his son, Eurysaces. Ajax gives him his “seven-fold leather-laden spear-proof shield” (576) and names his brother Teucer to “bring this boy to my home and show him / to Telamon and to my mother” (568-9). His words begin to worry Tecmessa, who begs him “by your very own son and by the gods, do not betray us!” (588). In an apparent sudden reversal, Ajax gives a speech about his changes: “For even I—who was lately so fierce and firm… yes, my speech has become womanish and weak / and my sharp edge smoothed by this lady here. / I feel pity at leaving… behind… a widow and her orphaned son” (650-4). He continues on to say, “For even… winter’s snow-strewn streets give way / to summer’s fruit-laden harvest; and the endless rotations / of night… stand aside for… dawn… So how shall we not learn moderation and good sense?” (669-677). However, he concludes ominously: “For only now do I understand / that… to most men/the harbor of fellowship is treacherous and untrustworthy. / So, as regards my intentions, all will turn out well” (678-684) and “even though I am unhappy now I have been saved” (692). Tecmessa and the chorus of soldiers believe that they have “found a respite from unremitting griefs” (788). However, the audience realizes Tecmessa’s claims are not powerful enough to counteract Ajax’s obsession with military honor and respect. Ajax is unable to contemplate living a life of shame, a life that offers him no prospective opportunity to repair his reputation.

To Sophocles’ Athenian audience, of the competing issues in Ajax’s life would have been familiar and present in their own lives. Watching Ajax would be a reminder of the darker, less heroic aspect of war. The title character saved the Greek fleet of ships from destruction, rescued Achilles’ body from the Trojan attackers, was considered the ‘great defender’, and was the greatest soldier of the Greeks after Achilles, yet so profound was his sense of shame that he was willing to commit suicide. Ajax died because he was stubborn and refused to sacrifice his belief military honor had a greater claim in him than
This lesson on the necessity of balance could only come from Athens, the polis that valued rhetoric and the poets as highly as military prowess. Most importantly, Sophocles’ *Ajax* demonstrates the darker side of Athenian society and culture by illustrating the tension between Ajax’s suicidal tendencies and the Athenian army’s strict emphasis on militaristic duties. Although direct experience is important in life, it was much better for soldiers to understand Ajax’s fate and to come to terms with it through *catharsis* before they contemplated killing themselves.

Modern audiences also draw distinct lessons from the play. Today, in contrast with fifth century Greece, there is a large disconnect between the general public and the military. Most modern audiences understand and identify with Tecmessa more than Ajax, unless they have fought in battle. The difference between Ajax’s intentions in his final speech and what Tecmessa perceives illustrates the apparently insuperable gap between modern veterans and their loved ones. Ajax and Tecmessa’s fatal disconnect reminds the audience that communication with loved ones in times of suffering is crucial in order to survive. As Tecmessa and Eurysaces learn first-hand, the consequences of one person’s actions reaches out further than initially perceived.

By examining Ajax’s motivations for suicide, Sophocles is able to consider several important issues that are relevant to readers today. Ajax is so rigidly indoctrinated in the culture of honor that he cannot break free even if it costs him his life. As he grapples with what course of action to take, both the ancient and modern audiences are reminded that in order to survive, we must change and adapt. The culture of honor is especially emphasized as something to avoid, since such an extreme worldview can only lead to extreme consequences. We are also reminded that war veterans can never completely communicate their actions and experiences, even to their loved ones at home. Although veterans will always be able to relate to each other, Sophocles shows us that we must try to communicate and understand those who are suffering in war. Finally, it is important to recognize the modernity of Ajax’s perspective. Modern society places high regard on the individual and his desires; since Ajax decides to do what he wants by dying to regain his honor rather than by following his duty, he must suffer the consequences. Sophocles manages to craft a play that not only teaches the original Athenian audience about citizen-soldiers and the importance of compromise, he also speaks to audiences in the 21st century: moving military audiences to tears with the piercing reality of what is portrayed in front of them.

*Page numbers in this essay refer to Stephen Esposito’s translation of Ajax (Focus, 1998).*