

The Soldier and the Sophists:  
Deceitful Language in Sophocles' *Ajax* (vv. 646-692)

Scholars have long understood Sophocles' *Ajax* to be a tragedy of inversions. These inversions come in a variety of forms: the physical intransigence that won Ajax so much *kleos* on the battlefield becomes a philosophical one, and ultimately his *hamartia*; the Greek chieftains that he fought so nobly to protect behind his "wall" become his fiercest persecutors and seek to inflict the worst of maltreatments upon his corpse; Ajax's suicide, the veritable climax of the story, comes closer to the beginning of the play than it does to the end. At the headwaters of these many inversions lies a fundamental one—the shifting of value between the worth of *logos* and *ergon*. If Ajax can be understood as a paradigm of the old ideal, where a hero is a doer of deeds first and a speaker of words second, then Sophocles' tragedy represents his baptism in and incompatibility with an emerging set of ideals (Blundell 1990). Ajax's relationship with the kind of beguiling speech that cost him the arms of Achilles, however, is not a simple one. While one might expect Ajax to reject deception as unbecoming of a man of honor and war, in his parting words with Tecmessa, Eurysaces, and his choral sailors he indulges in exactly the kind of guile that is the source of his own tragedy.

This paper will provide a close reading of Ajax's farewell address (vv. 646-692) and identify elements of sophism similar to those that appear in the works of more wily writers such as Gorgias and Isocrates, especially within the context of the emerging phenomenon of sophistry in the Athenian polis. I begin with a comparison between the farewell address and Ajax's earlier speeches, both in Sophocles' tragedy (vv. 545-577) and in the *Iliad* (7.199-207, 7.237-243, 9.642-665). The simple language and uncomplicated structure of these speeches provide a stark contrast to the marked changes in the farewell address in the *Ajax*. Next, I examine Sophocles' use of intentionally ambiguous language (e.g. v. 657 κρύψω-- Ajax will indeed "bury" the black sword of Hector, but not in the place or way implied to Tecmessa) alongside similar examples from sophistic writers. Finally, I identify and discuss the ironic tension between nearly synonymous verbs in parallel constructions (e.g. vv. 665-6 εἰσόμεισθα μὴ θεοῖς εἰκεῖν vs. μαθησόμεισθα δ' ἰσθμίδας σέβειν-- to whom exactly will he yield, and who is to be worshiped?) that shroud and redirect Ajax's true meaning, a distinguishing characteristic of sophistic language.

I conclude by considering the implications of the presence of deceitful speech in the *Ajax*—especially on the lips of a hero famous for his silence (*Odyssey* 11.563)—and the glimpse it provides into the complicated relationship between sophistry and the Athenian polis. While it is tempting to understand Sophocles' *Ajax* as a purely anti-sophistic work, Ajax's parting words to his family belie Sophocles' more complicated relationship with sophism. If Athenian drama, especially at the Greater Dionysia, can be understood as ritualized discourse between the polis and the individual minds and spirits that constitute it (Goldhill 1997), then the playwrights who provide tragedy as the medium shoulder a great responsibility. As a wordsmith by trade, Sophocles had a major stake in the debate between those who saw sophism as an eroding force

upon the conservative purity of the past and those who understood it as a pragmatic reality of the present. Perhaps the *Ajax* can be understood as a reconciliation between the two.

#### Working Bibliography

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