

Narrative Negotiations in Sophocles *Ajax*

Sophocles *Ajax* is shaped by debate in the text over what exactly happened, what could have happened, and what the consequences are. These debates serve to form individual character narratives, defined by how each character navigates their individual narrative through the potential happenings of the past, present, and future. By analyzing the play in narratological terms, I will show how these narrative negotiations form the framework of personal narratives in *Ajax*. Whether or not narratology can be useful applied to drama, or only to parts of drama, is still an unsettled question within classics and narratology studies in general (c.f. especially de Jong 1991, 2014; Emde Boas 2017, Goward 1999; Grethlein et. al. 2019; Markantonatos 2002, 2012). In this paper I will argue that it can be appropriate to apply narratological theory to drama, and that one useful way of doing so is to discuss how narratives develop within characters through how characters express specific figures of thought. The figures of thought I am concerned with in particular are gnomic statements, wishes, discussions of potential scenarios/imaginings of the future, and contrary-to-fact statements. My focus in this talk will be on how these different “unreal” or counterfactual elements of narrative thinking feature in the *Ajax*, and how these elements work together to shape individual self-narratives.

In the prologue, Odysseus emphasizes to Athena his *aporia* with respect to the events of the night before: “I shot directly toward his track, and I understood some things, but by other things I am stumped, and I have not really learned anything.” εὐθέως δ’ ἐγὼ κατ’ ἴχνος ἄσσω, καὶ τὰ μὲν σημαίνομαι, τὰ δ’ ἐκπέπληγμαι, κοῦκ ἔχω μαθεῖν ὅπου. (31b-33, all translations are mine). As Athena guides him to Ajax and to an understanding of the situation, he reacts in shock at how differently he and Ajax are experiencing the world as Athena obstructs Odysseus from

Ajax's view: "How can this be, if he sees with the same eyes?" (πῶς, εἴπερ ὀφθαλμοῖς γε τοῖς αὐτοῖς ὄρᾳ, 84). He follows this question up by expressing a gnomic statement: all things could happen with a god orchestrating" (γένοιτο μὲντ' ἅν θεοῦ τεχνωμένου, 86), then uttering a wish that he was not there (ἤθελον δ' ἂν ἐκτὸς ὦν τυχεῖν, 88). This wish for an alternate reality requires Odysseus to devise a narrative he can be part of. Finally, he expresses pity for Ajax in his famously gloomy remark that situates his narrative in a pessimistic outlook that nonetheless grounds his argument for Ajax's burial in the second half of the play: "I pity the unfortunate man anyway, even if he is my enemy, because he has been a forced partner to an evil deception, looking more at me than his own interest. For I see that we who live are nothing other than an image, or a vain shadow." (ἐποικίρω δέ νιν δύστηνον ἔμπαρ, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ, ὀθοῦνεκ' ἄτη συγκατέζευκται κακῆ, οὐδὲν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦμὸν σκοπῶν. ὄρω γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν εἶδωλ' ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν ἢ κούφην σκιάν, 123-126). This opening scene illustrates how Odysseus progresses through negotiating his own narrative in a systematic way: confused about his own narrative and about how differently Ajax is constructing a narrative, he begins a narrative negotiation by pronouncing a gnomic statement to try to minimize the seriousness of the situation in order to depersonalize it and start to understand it. As the prior night's events are made clear, he wishes that he were not there, unable to incorporate the situation into his narrative. Finally, empathizing with Ajax, he utters a gnomic statement that serves to define his reaction and personal narrative, influencing his actions in the burial debate with Teucer, Agamemnon and Menelaus. This paper will begin to explore how these narrative negotiations, along with others in *Ajax* can be better understood through a lens of narrative psychology.

Works Cited

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