

Sopocles' Ajax: A Tragedy of Deception

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Abstract

Greek tragedy is a tragedy of fate that brings the downfall of the central figure. Greek playwrights were masters of storytelling and tried to bring purgation of human emotions. Man is indeed responsible for his prosperity and downfall, but no one can deny the role of destiny in man's life. Sophocles was one of the greatest Greek Playwrights who produced considerable tragedies in Greek literature. Sophocles' plays were performed on the stage during the ancient time. His most horrible tragedy is *Oedipus Rex* in which Sophocles presents the cruelty of destiny that brings Oedipus's downfall. Ajax is a tragedy of the central character Ajax who is presented as a noble warrior in the play but his rivalry with Odysseus for the armour of Achilles invites his downfall. In Ajax, Athena, a Greek goddess is presented as a villain in the play. Athena blurs the vision of Ajax and makes him believe that he has killed his rival Odysseus and Greek leaders but later on, he comes to know that he has killed the innocent cattle under the influence of Athena's false vision. When Ajax comes to know about his sin, he commits suicide at the end of the play. Athena's deception brings downfall to Ajax.

Keywords: Greek tragedy, Sophocles, Ajax, Odysseus, Armour, Achilles, Deception

Introduction

Sophocles wrote over a hundred plays for the Athenian theatre during his lifetime. Sophocles is mainly famous for his Theban plays based on the theme of the tragic fate of Oedipus. He influenced English drama greatly. Sophocles also developed his characters to a greater extent than earlier playwrights. Ajax or Aias is a tragedy of the central figure Ajax and his strengths and weaknesses, Ajax is a mythological character found in the Illiad and the Trojan war. Sophocles produced Ajax around the 5th century BCE. Ajax appears in The Illiad and other myths as a heroic figure, a rugged giant with strength, courage and the ability to think quickly beyond the normal standards of mankind. According to Lioyd Jones, “Ajax is being portrayed heroically in defiance of unjust and capricious gods.” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajax) It seems that Ajax is merely a puppet in the hands of destiny. Despite his merit, Ajax is not honoured by the Greek leaders which makes him furious and invites his own downfall.

Ajax's Determination

The play begins with a dialogue between Athena and Odysseus about Ajax's rivalry for the armour of Achilles. Athena favours Odysseus for getting the armour of Achilles. Achilles was a Greek warrior who died in the Trojan War but it would be an honour to have the armour of Achilles. Greek leaders Menelaus and Agamemnon awarded the armour of Achilles to Odysseus. Ajax has decided to take revenge on Odysseus and the leaders. Robert Bagnall and James Scully point out that the play is composed of two parts; the first is steeped in the world, a world of kings and heroes and the second part resembles more the democratic marked by imperfect debate of contending ideas. Lioyd Jones thinks that Ajax's murderous intentions are softened by Sophocles but the difficult aspects of his character are fully depicted.

It is believed that the wheel of fate always works behind man's action and whatever happens to man is predestined. Omar Khayyam, a Persian poet accepts the role of destiny in man's life. Man's actions are responsible for good or bad consequences.

The Moving Finger writes; and, having write,

Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit

Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,

Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

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Like other Greek tragedians, Sophocles presents bad consequences of man's wrong deeds. Ajax is presented as a warrior in the play but he is unable to get rid of his ambition to have the armour of Achilles and invites his own downfall. Greek warriors are not afraid of death for their honour but Ajax though a valiant warrior neglected by Greek leaders leads him to do inhuman act.

Athena's Deception

Athena is considered the Goddess of wisdom and warfare in Greek mythology. In Ajax, she seems to favour Odysseus for his wisdom and valour. It is Athena who provides the false vision to Ajax and makes him believe that he has killed Odysseus and Greek leaders but he has killed the cattle. Athena's deception is seen in a conversation between Athena and Odysseus:

Odysseus: What held his hand

Back from the brink of slaughter?

Athena: It was I that bulked him

Of that fell triumph, darkening his vision

With a veil of fantasy, which

Overpower him so that he turned

His wrath upon the cattle. (Sophocles, p.19)

As Athena wants to save Odysseus, she ruins the life of Ajax. After believing that he has killed Odysseus and the Greek leaders, Ajax returns victorious to Athena and expresses his feelings before her.

Athena: They are dead?

Ajax: Dead! Yes, they are dead.

Now let them show me

Whether they'll take away

My prize, my armour! (Sophocles, p.21)

It is Athena who darkens the mind of Ajax and makes him unaware of the inhuman act. Liloyd Jones considers various lines that have been taken by critics interpreting the play and finds that some consider that the Greek gods are being portrayed by Sophocles as just and that when Ajax suffers it is a learning experience for the character and the audience. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajax)

Ajax's Remorse and Suicide

When Ajax learns that he has killed the cattle under the influence of a false vision of Athena instead of Odysseus and Greek leaders, he is ashamed of himself and repents a lot. Ajax confesses his guilt before his wife in the following manners:

Here is the bold, the strong,

The fearless fighter in the line!

Among these innocent dumb beasts,

And laugh, laugh at his shame. (Sophocles, p.30)

Sophocles presents a long conversation between Ajax and Tecmessa in the play.

Tecmessa believes that Ajax is not responsible for his inhuman act of killing the cattle and

she tries to console him but he is unable to forget his sin even though he is afraid that when others know about his inhuman act, they may laugh at him. He may lose his name and fame. God is responsible for man's happiness and sadness. Ajax seems completely heartbroken after sinning and he has no hope for mercy from God. He prays to Athena for death.

One irresistible

Daughter of Zeus

Haunts me to death. (Sophocles, p.32)

On hearing this, Tecmessa expresses her anguish in the following manners:

On the day you die,

And dying leaves me helpless, think of me.

That same day roughly carried off by Greeks.

Your son to a life of slavery. (Sophocles, p.35)

Ajax condemns Tecmessa and tells her that he is unable to change his nature as he believes time reveals everything to everybody. Sophocles talks about the cynical nature of time in the following manners:

The long unmeasured pulse of time moves everything.

There is nothing hidden that it cannot bring to light.

Nothing once known that may not become unknown. (Sophocles, p.40)

Ajax thinks that he cannot his sin from anybody and that he has to pay the price for his sin. Ajax has handed over his armour to his son and departs from home to commit suicide. Teucer, a half-brother of Ajax has gone in search of him but found the dead body of Ajax. Ajax throws himself upon the sword and dies. According to Tecmessa, Ajax has chosen the punishment for himself but his death cannot bring joy to his rival and it is only bitter grief for himself. Teucer urges the Greek leaders to the funeral of Ajax but they deny it. Menelaus forbids lifting the body of Ajax. Agamemnon supports Menelaus for the same. It is

Odysseus who tries to convince the Greek leaders for the funeral of Ajax as it considers justice to him.

You cannot leave this man to rot unburied.

You must not let your violent will persuade you.

Into such hatred as would tread down justice. (Sophocles, p.63)

Odysseus considers Ajax as the bravest man of Greece and a dead man is an enemy of none.

He deserves the last rite from them. The play ends with the funeral of Ajax.

Conclusion

Ajax is undoubtedly a tragedy of deception. Athena's deception ruins the life of Ajax. Ajax appears like a brave warrior in the play but devoid of honour among other Greek warriors. Sophocles depicts the harshness of destiny in the case of Ajax yet Athena's cruel trick on him cannot be neglected. However, Ajax was the right man for the armour of Achilles, the Greek leaders had chosen Odysseus. Anger was a weakness of Ajax that made him blind and dumb.

Sophocles also reveals his sensitiveness and realization of guilt in the play. Athena has also chosen Odysseus as a worthy man for the armour of Achilles hence she has deceived Ajax.

After killing the cattle, Ajax thought that his crime would not be hidden and he would be punished in the eyes of warriors. Ajax has neglected his wife and the child. Ajax has committed suicide for his sin at the end of the play.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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