

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 47 (1990)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Sophocles, Ajax 799 and 802

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-36897>

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Sophocles, Ajax 799 and 802

By Archibald Allen, University Park, Pennsylvania

I offer here some conjectures on two lines of the Ajax, printed below as they appear in R. D. Dawe's Teubner text of the play (Sophoclis Tragoediae I, Leipzig 1975).

Tecmessa has asked the Messenger where Teucer is and why he has ordered Ajax to be kept in his tent. He replies:

πάρεστ' ἐκεῖνος ἄρτι· τήνδε δ' ἔξοδον
799 † ὀλεθρίαν Αἴαντος ἐλπίζει φέρειν †

Dawe's critical note on 799 reads: "ἐλπίζοι N^{sc} ἐλπίζων Q ἐλπίζειν A φέρειν] πέλειν Blaydes, et infinitivi aliis alii placent: φρενί mavult Dawe, sed si error ex φέρει (802) ortus est, possis ex. gr. etiam πάλαι supplere. at cave ne Αἴαντος glossema sit quod veram lectionem expulerit: ex. gr. ὀλεθρίαν τιν' αἴσαν." Heeding the latter warning, I suggest that Sophocles wrote:

ὀλέθριόν τι τάνδρὸς ἐλπίζει φέρειν

Teucer then will be said to expect that the forbidden exit brings 'something destructive of the man'. For the objective genitive with ὀλέθριος, one may compare Aesch. Ag. 1156, γάμοι Πάριδος ὀλέθριοι φίλων (Kühner-Gerth 1, 371). The crasis τάνδρὸς = Ajax is found elsewhere in the play, at 119. 220. 806; it will have elicited a gloss here because of its proximity to ἐκεῖνος = Teucer in the preceding line. When Αἴαντος displaced τάνδρὸς, τι too was lost, and ὀλέθριον became feminine, after ἔξοδον.

To Tecmessa's next question, on the source of Teucer's information (800, τοῦ ποτ' ἀνθρώπων μαθών;), the Messenger answers:

τοῦ Θεστορείου μάντεως καὶ ἡμέραν
802 † τὴν νῦν ὅτ' † αὐτῶι θάνατον ἢ βίον φέρει.

That the subject of φέρει cannot be the destructive ἔξοδος mentioned in 798 – as, for example, Jebb and Kamerbeek supposed¹ – is clear from the alternance of the verb's objects, death and life. Nor can the seer Calchas be the subject, since φέρει must then mean 'portends' or 'intimates'², a meaning without parallel.

1 See Jebb's discussion in his large edition of the play (Cambridge 1896), and J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles I: The Ajax* (Leiden 1963) ad loc.

2 So L. Campbell, *Sophocles II* (Oxford 1881) ad loc. ("This very day, in which he intimates that life or death is in store for him"). To obtain a proper reference to Calchas' prophetic utterance, Blaydes emended φέρει to ὑποεῖ (in his edition of 1875), but the corruption would be unlikely.

Dawe felt that the subject can only be ἡμέρα: “one thinks of the similar idea at O.T. 438 ἡδ’ ἡμέρα φύσει σε καὶ διαφύρει. Some of our MSS felt this, and wrote unmetrical sense by substituting ἡτ’ for ὅτ’ ...” (*Studies on the Text of Sophocles I*, Leiden 1973, 152). Hence his obelised τὴν νῦν ὅτ’, along with this suggested emendation: τήνδ’, ἡτις αὐτῶι θάνατον ἢ βίον φέρει³. But τὴν νῦν, after καθ’ ἡμέραν, sounds just right; compare, for ‘this very day’ here, O.C. 2–3, καθ’ ἡμέραν / τὴν νῦν.

I would suggest, therefore, that the ὅτε clause should stand, but that its subject is Ajax himself, and that Sophocles wrote not φέρει but τρέφει at the end of the line. Read:

τὴν νῦν ὅτ’ αὐτὸς θάνατον ἢ βίον τρέφει

‘... when he will have death or life as his very own.’ Emphatic αὐτὸς will stress self-determination⁴; on hearing the Messenger’s words, Tecmessa realises immediately that Ajax is bent on *self*-destruction, that she was deceived earlier by his apparent rejection of suicide (cf. 807, ἔγνωκα ... ἠπατημένη). And τρέφει will be a ‘futuristic’ or ‘prophetic’ present (Schwyzer, *Griech. Gramm.* 2, 273). Sophocles’ figurative use of τρέφειν is notable (cf. LSJ s.v. II 6). It is a *vox Sophoclea*, says Kamerbeek of τρέφει at Ai. 503, οἷας λατρείας ... τρέφει (‘what menial tasks are hers’, in Jebb’s translation); and at 1124, ἡ γλῶσσά σου τὸν θυμὸν ὡς δεινὸν τρέφει (= ‘only in your speech do you have courage’), he notes that “Soph. has a special liking for τρέφειν in the sense of a somewhat dynamic ἔχειν”, comparing O.T. 356 (τάληθες γὰρ ἰσχυρὸν τρέφω) and Ant. 897 (κάρτ’ ἐν ἐλπίσιν τρέφω). One may also compare Tr. 817, ὄγκον ... ὀνόματος ... τί δεῖ τρέφειν, cited by Jebb on Ai. 503 (see above), and O.T. 374, μιᾶς τρέφει πρὸς νυκτός, cited by W. S. Barrett on Eur., Hipp. 367 (ὧ πόνοι τρέφοντες βροτούς) with this note: “Soph. in particular allows τρέφω to extend from ‘maintain, keep’ (living creatures, animal and human) to ‘have as one’s own’ in a variety of ways ...” Even when used figuratively, however, τρέφειν must carry connotations of ‘nourishing’ or ‘nurturing’, and those would not be out of place in the present line⁵. Ajax will ‘nurture’ death in his suicide.

If ὅτ’ αὐτὸς ... τρέφει is what Sophocles wrote, τρέφει was easily mis-copied as φέρει, especially after the occurrence of φέρειν at the end of 799, and αὐτὸς was then changed to αὐτῶι to provide an indirect object for the verb.

3 He notes that ἡτις “is a gloss in some MSS which hopefully offer ἡτ’ for ὅτ’ ...” (*Studies I* 152).

4 Cf. 1099, οὐκ αὐτὸς ἐξέπλευσεν ...; (‘of his own accord’), cited by A. C. Moorhouse, *The Syntax of Sophocles* (Leiden 1982) 139, s.v. αὐτός.

5 W. B. Stanford (*Sophocles, Ajax*, London 1963) traces what he calls a “nurture theme” in the play. So, for example, Tecmessa will have a slave’s livelihood (499, δουλίαν ... τροφήν) and will ‘nurture’ servile chores (503, λατρείας ... τρέφει) when deprived of the protection or ‘nurture’ of her husband; Ajax will entrust Eurysaces to Teucer who will be steadfast in the boy’s τροφή (562ff.); and Ajax bids farewell to the springs, rivers, and plains of Troy, τροφῆς ἐμοί (863).