

Giuseppe Zanetto (Università degli Studi di Milano), *How to kill oneself like an Ajax*

How was the suicide of Ajax staged in the Sophoclean tragedy? To this question our workshop in Pisa has tried (and is still trying) to give an answer. But in whatever way Ajax's suicide was performed in front of the Athenian audience (with what scenery, in which area of the scenic space, to what extent 'visible' to the spectators), there is no doubt that the whole action of the play, in its first part, is constructed around the 'idea' of the suicide<sup>1</sup>. So, whatever answer we give to the question, we can agree on this point: the plot revolves around the story of a hero who becomes aware that life is no longer possible for him, decides to kill himself, reinforces his decision by discussing it with friends and relatives, and finally kills himself with clear mind and firm hand.

The motif of suicide is of course very common in Attic tragedy<sup>2</sup>. One need only to think of the examples of Deianeira, Jocasta, Eurydice, Antigone, Haemon – if we look at Sophocles' plays – or those of Phaedra, Menoecus, Evadne, if we extend our search to Euripidean drama. But the standard treatment of the suicide theme, both in Sophocles and in Euripides, is a Messenger speech in which in a more or less detailed report the news of the death is given to the characters on stage. We know that this was the solution adopted by Aeschylus in his *Thressai*: a very famous (and widely quoted) scholion to the *Ajax* tells us that the reason why Sophocles conceived his striking presentation of the hero's suicide was to move away from his predecessor and to arouse surprise among the spectators.

schol. vet. ad Soph. *Aj.*, 815 (p. 69, 16-22 Papageorgius)

ἔστι δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα παρὰ τοῖς παλαιοῖς σπάνια· εἰώθασι γὰρ τὰ πεπραγμένα δι' ἀγγέλων ἀπαγγέλλειν. τί οὖν τὸ αἴτιον; φθάνει Αἰσχύλος ἐν Θρήσσαις τὴν ἀναίρεσιν Αἴαντος δι' ἀγγέλου ἀπαγγείλας. ἴσως οὖν καινοτομεῖν βουλόμενος καὶ μὴ κατακολουθεῖν τοῖς ἑτέρου <...>, ὑπ' ὅψιν ἔθηκε τὸ δρῶμενον ἢ μᾶλλον ἐκπλήξαι βουλόμενος.

Such things [i.e. a violent death enacted in front of the audience] however are uncommon among the ancients, for they use to report the events by means of messengers. Why did he this? Before him Aeschylus in the *Thracian Women* had

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I would like to thank Glenn Most, for inviting me to the Pisa workshop, and the other participants, for creating a very enjoyable environment for discussion; I wish also to express my gratitude to Ewen Bowie, who read the final version of my contribution and gave me very useful suggestions.

1 GARRISON 1995, p. 46: «His [i.e. Ajax's] spectacular and moving act of suicide creates a pivotal action in his play [...]».

2 KATSOURIS 1976, pp. 5-22; LORAUX 1991, p. 4; GARLAND 2001, p. 164..

announced the death of Ajax through a messenger. So perhaps it was because he wanted to do something new and not follow in his predecessor's footsteps that he made the action visible; or rather because he wanted to shock his audience.

But the novelty (and the uniqueness) of the *Ajax* lies not only in the fact that the suicide is acted, and not merely reported<sup>3</sup>. The dramatist has conceived his play as the *mise en scène* of Ajax's approach to his death. Thus his suicide is not incorporated in the plot through a witness, but it is theatricalised through a sequence of episodes, in which the idea of self-killing is continually re-thematised<sup>4</sup>.

Already at 262 we are told (by Tecmessa) that Ajax now realises what he has done and that this «lays sharp pangs to the soul» (μεγάλας ὀδύνας ὑποτείνει)<sup>5</sup>. At 326-7, after telling of his mindless massacre of the herds and his painful awakening from madness, Tecmessa is more explicit: «And it is clear that he's planning some terrible action: for such things, I suppose, he both speaks and laments» (καὶ δῆλός ἐστιν ὥς τι δρασείων κακόν, τοιαῦτα γάρ πως καὶ λέγει κώδύρεται). Her fear is confirmed by Ajax self, as he enters the stage and sings of his desperation; at 394-9 he addresses Hades to express his alienation from life, presenting himself as a living dead:

ἰὼ σκότος, ἐμὸν φάος,  
 ἔρεβος ᾧ φαεννότατον, ὡς ἐμοί,  
 ἔλεσθ' ἔλεσθέ μ' οἰκήτορα,  
 ἔλεσθέ μ'· οὔτε γὰρ θεῶν γένος  
 οὔθ' ἀμερίων ἔτ' ἄξιος  
 βλέπειν τιν' εἰς ὄνησιν ἀνθρώπων.

*Io* darkness, my light, o Erebus, most bright for me. Take me, take me as your inhabitant, take me! For I am no longer fit to look to the race of gods or mortal men for any help.

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3 FINGLASS 2011, p. 39: «Sophocles allows his audience to watch Ajax's last moments alive [...] There were parallels for this in epic and art, but it had not previously been attempted in drama».

4 The treatment of the scenic space, which in the *Ajax* is very unusual, is also intended to stress the crescendo of Ajax's self-destructive thoughts; cf. MEDDA 2013, p. 26: «Non abbiamo modo di verificare se nella produzione perduta di Sofocle si incontrassero altri casi come questo, ma un simile addensarsi di forzature nella tecnica drammatica difficilmente può essere attribuito al caso. Esso testimonia una vitale ricerca del poeta, che puntava a tradurre in dato visuale e in concreta organizzazione dello spazio scenico l'eccezionalità della natura di Aiace e il suo progressivo, ineluttabile distacco dagli altri esseri umani».

5 The English translations of the *Ajax*'s passages are taken (with some adaptations) from the Commentary of FINGLASS 2011.

Some lines later, analysing his situation in his first *rhexis*, the hero explains that he has no way out; he can neither go home (how is he to face Telamon, coming back so ingloriously?) nor keep fighting against the Trojans (this would delight his most hated enemies). The conclusion is obvious: if life is impossible or shameful, death must be sought.

Soph. *Aj.*, 470-80

οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτα. πειρά τις ζητητέα  
 τοιάδ' ἀφ' ἧς γέροντι δηλώσω πατρὶ  
 μὴ τοι φύσιν γ' ἄσπλαγχνος ἐκ κείνου γεγώς.  
 αἰσχροὺν γὰρ ἄνδρα τοῦ μακροῦ χροῖον βίου,  
 κακοῖσιν ὅστις μηδὲν ἐξαλλάσσεται. [...]  
 οὐκ ἂν πριαίμην οὐδενὸς λόγου βροτὸν  
 ὅστις κεναῖσιν ἐλπίσιν θερμαίνεται.  
 ἀλλ' ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκένα  
 τὸν εὐγενῆ χροῖ. πάντ' ἀκήκοας λόγον.

This cannot be. Some enterprise must be sought from which I may show my aged father that I, his son, am no coward. For it is shameful that a man should desire a long life, if he experiences no variation in his misfortunes. [...] I would not buy a man for any price who is warmed by empty hopes. But the noble man must either live well or die well. You have heard the whole story.

«You have heard the whole story»; this sentence seems to close any further evolution in the plot. But Sophocles still wants to exploit the motif of suicide, presenting the reactions of Tecmessa and her attempt to dissuade her man. This is a way to encourage the spectators to reflect on Ajax's arguments (and to consider the ideological implications of the story<sup>6</sup>), but it is also a dramatic device which allows the playwright to theatralise the suicide further. Tecmessa tries to remove Ajax's mind from an egocentric perspective: he should take in consideration not only what will happen to him, if he accepts the alternative of living, but what will happen to his loved ones if he refuses to live. Ajax doesn't react to Tecmessa's speech; he seems not even to have heard her words and his answer is nothing else than a farewell to his son Eurysaces and a list of instructions on what to do after his death. The audience is now misled into thinking that any discussion is over: suicide has been decided, then questioned, then definitely reaffirmed. But the following episode, with the Ajax's *Trugrede*, re-opens the action: the audience is tempted to believe that the hero has changed

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6 GARLAND 2001, p. 96: «It is the *Ajax* of Sophocles that provides the most detailed discussion of the ethics of self-destruction».

his mind and that a milder solution is after all possible. Suicide seems once again to be questioned: the chorus express their hope that life can prevail over death. But the episode ends with the ambiguous image of Ajax who leaves the stage holding his sword, which he intends to «hide in the ground where no one will see it» (κρύψω τόδ' ἔγχος τοῦμόν [...] ἔνθα μή τις ὄψεται), so that Night and Hades may take care of it (658-60).

The last monologue of Ajax is the episode in which the motif of suicide is led to its climax and its conclusion. The act of killing oneself, which has been thematised by the characters in the previous scenes as something to be sought or avoided, to be desired or hated, is now directly presented to the eyes of the spectators. The expressive power of the monologue lies in its ability to evoke visual emotions: after listening to talks about suicide, the audience now 'sees' a man committing suicide, looks at his gestures, shares his thoughts. Special emphasis is given to three points:

1. the sword: Ajax describes (815-22) how he has planted his sword to the ground, and tells how he came into possession of the weapon; it is very likely that, while the hero speaks of it, the sword is clearly visible to the audience; so, insisting on the sword is a way to connect the visual experience of the audience to what is happening on the stage<sup>7</sup>;

2. the leap on the sword (cf. 833 ξὺν ἀσφαδάστῳ καὶ ταχεῖ πηδήματι «with a swift and spasmlless leap»): the language of this passage is rather surprising, because words meaning «jump, jumping» are usually not associated with the notion of «attacking, assaulting» in a military context<sup>8</sup>. This unusual wording is to stress the novelty of a warrior who willingly throws himself upon his sword: the poet wants to create in the mind of the audience the image of the fatal blow, which will not be shown on the stage;

3. the address to the Sun, whom Ajax entrusts with the task of announcing his death to his parents in his homeland (and the light of the day is again addressed in the final lines, as a symbol of life). Here too we can trace a direct

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7 SEGAL 1980, p. 127: «A chilling and powerful stage-presence, it [i.e. the sword] massively controls the opening of the scene»; cf. SEALE 1982, pp. 163-4. On this point I can only agree with Franco Ferrari and Vayos Lapis, who in the workshop have underlined the contradictions and difficulties which arise if it is assumed that Ajax has no sword in his hand as he enters at 815.

8 With the same word, πηδημα, Andromache describes the fatal fall of Astyanax from the walls of Troy in Eurip. *Tr.*, 755-6 λυγρὸν δὲ πηδημ' ἐς τράχηλον ὑπόθεν / πεσὼν ἀνοίκτως πνεῦμ' ἀπορρήξεις σέθεν («One dreadful headlong leap from the dizzy height and you will dash out your life with none to pity you!»); *Aj.* 833 is probably the model of Euripides' passage, since the complex relationship between Ajax and Hector is a key point of the *Ajax's* imagery.

connection between the spectators, who are sitting in the sun (which is shining over the theatre) and the action on stage.

Soph. *Aj.*, 845-51

σὺ δ', ᾧ τὸν αἰπὺν οὐρανὸν διφρηλατῶν  
 Ἕλιε, πατρώαν τὴν ἐμὴν ὅταν χθόνα  
 ἴδης, ἐπισχῶν χρυσόνωτον ἠνίαν  
 ἄγγελον ἄτας τὰς ἐμὰς μόρον τ' ἐμὸν  
 γέροντι πατρὶ τῇ τε δυστήνῳ τροφῶ.  
 ἧ που τάλαινα, τήνδ' ὅταν κλύη φάτιν,  
 ἦσει μέγαν κωκυτὸν ἐν πάσῃ πόλει.

And you, who drive your chariot through the lofty heaven, the Sun, when you catch sight of my ancestral land, check your golden rein and announce my ruin and my death to my aged father and the wretched woman who nursed me. Wretched woman, I suppose that when she hears this message, she will raise a great lamentation in the whole city.

To sum up. The *Ajax* is a challenging play, in which the death of the protagonist is enacted in a very innovative way<sup>9</sup>. Sophocles chooses to dramatise the suicide of the hero not indirectly, but visualising it step by step. His model is not to be traced in the theatrical tradition (we have seen that Aeschylus' treatment of the same subject was very different), but in the fine arts. Scholars have noticed that the scenery evoked in the last monologue has a close parallel in a black-figure amphora painted by Exekias<sup>10</sup>, where Ajax is fixing the sword in the earth, kneeling on the ground, completely alone (the scene is framed by a palm tree on the left and the hero's weapons on the right): «Both Exekias and Sophocles show Ajax taking obvious care in this last ordinary but dreadful action; but whereas Exekias emphasises his anxiety by the lines on his brow, Sophocles' Ajax feels an almost workmanlike pride in the sturdiness of his arrangement»<sup>11</sup>. The amphora by Exekias (who was active in Athens in the forties of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century) is almost one century earlier than the *Ajax*; even if this iconographic scheme doesn't seem to have had great success among Attic vase painters (Exekias' vase is a *hapax*), it is certainly possible that Sophocles knew it; one is tempted to say that he tried to compete with the painter in producing a play that 'depicted' the suicide with the same intensity.

9 SEIDENSTICKER 1983, p. 125: «Nirgends bei Sophokles, nirgends in der (enthaltene)n griechischen Tragödie, ja, kaum einmal, soweit ich sehe, in der langen abendländischen Geschichte der Gattung, steht der Selbstmord des Helden so im Mittelpunkt eines Dramas».

10 Boulogne, Musée Communale 558; *ABV* 145, 18.

11 FINGLASS 2011, p. 40.

Since the sophisticated and vigorous thematization of suicide is one of the most remarkable features of the *Ajax*, it is not surprising that this drama becomes a literary model for later writers who tell stories of self-killing, particularly if they want to look at the suicide as a problematic situation. In my paper I would like to analyse two examples taken from the novelist<sup>12</sup>: the (intended) suicide of Anthia in book 3 of Xenophon Ephesius' *Anthia and Habrocomes* and the quasi suicide of Callirhoe in books 2 and 3 of Charito's *Chaireas and Callirhoe*.

In the Greek novel suicide is a very common feature. It happens very often that the protagonists of these stories look at suicide as at the obvious way to escape from situations of difficulty or trouble. Suzanne MacAlister points out that the characters of the novels find their identity in a concept of life which has love and marriage as central values. If the oppressive action of *tyche* prevails and they think that any hope of attaining their love or re-establishing their ideal ménage of conjugal life is lost, the immediate consequence is a desire for death<sup>13</sup>. A good example is the romance of Heliodorus, whose male protagonist, Theagenes, attempts to kill himself every time that he thinks that his beloved Charicleia has perished<sup>14</sup>. But no different are the reactions of Chaireas and Callirhoe in Chariton's novel, on the several occasions on which one of them is convinced that he (or she) has been deprived for ever of his (or her) partner<sup>15</sup>; and it is noteworthy that in many cases, when they intend to kill themselves, they seize a sword or search for a sword: sword seems to be, both for men and for women, the standard device for suicide in the Greek novel.

That said, I would like to analyse more extensively a passage of Xenophon Ephesius in which suicide is not only attempted or threatened but 'carried out' (though not, of course, resulting in a real death). I refer to the episode of Anthia's *Scheintod* in book 3. Anthia, captured by Hippothous and his bandits, has been rescued by the governor of Cilicia Perilaus, who falls in love with her and wins from her a promise of marriage. She obtains a thirty-day delay but in the end she must deal with the preparations for a new marriage. This prospect is of course unsustainable for the young woman, who decides to kill herself. The suicide is conceived, prepared and performed; in other words, it is thematised

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12 As scholars do not fall to notice, Greek tragedy is one of the genres which are most widely exploited by the Greek novelists for their intertextual play: cf. FUSILLO 1989, pp. 33-42; ROBIANO 2000, p. 514; MORGAN 2008.

13 MACALISTER 1996, p. 17: «And ultimately, when all hope of resolution is perceived as lost, death is desired or sought in the protagonist's numerous 'suicide' threats, actions or provocations»; cf. SCHMELING 1980, pp. 40-1.

14 Hld. 2, 2, 1; 2, 5, 1.

15 Charito 3, 5, 6; 5, 10, 6; 6, 2, 8; 6, 2, 10; 6, 2, 11; 7, 1, 6; 8, 1, 4 (Chaireas); 3, 1, 6; 6, 5, 6; 8, 1, 6 (Callirhoe); cf. RONCALI 1996, p. 177 n. 8.

with an intensity and an attention which are unique in the whole *corpus* of the ‘big five’. Let us go through the text of the episode and de-construct it in order to single out the primary elements of the story.

Anthia is distressed, because the time granted by Perilaus is up and there is no chance for her to avoid the new marriage. She cries all the time and reflects on her desperate situation. She accuses herself of treason, because whereas Habrocomes has faced any torture to remain faithful to her, she is now ready to replace him with another husband. The only solution is death.

X.Eph. 3, 5, 1-4

ἐπαύετο δὲ οὔτε νύκτωρ οὔτε μεθ’ ἡμέραν δακρύουσα, ἀλλ’ ἀεὶ πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν εἶχεν Ἀβροκόμην. ἐνενοεῖτο δὲ ἅμα πολλά, τὸν ἔρωτα, τοὺς ὅρκους, τὴν πατρίδα, τοὺς πατέρας, τὴν ἀνάγκην, τὸν γάμον. καὶ δὴ καθ’ αὐτὴν γενομένη, καιροῦ λαβομένη, σπαράξασα τὰς κόμας «ὦ πάντα ἄδικος ἐγώ» φησι «καὶ πονηρά, ὡς οὐχὶ τοῖς ἴσοις Ἀβροκόμην ἀμείβομαι [...] τὸν ὑμέναιον ἄσει τις ἐπ’ ἐμοί, καὶ ἐπ’ εὐνήν ἀφίξομαι τὴν Περιλάου. ἀλλ’, ὦ φιλάτη μου πασῶν Ἀβροκόμου ψυχῆ, μηδέν τι ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ λυπηθῆς, οὐ γὰρ <ἄν> ποτε ἐκοῦσα ἀδικήσαιμί σε· ἐλεύσομαι, καὶ μέχρι θανάτου μείνασα νύμφη σή».

But she didn’t stop crying day or night, and she kept picturing Habrocomes. She thought about everything at once: her love, her oaths, her city, her parents, how she was being forced against her will, her marriage. When she was alone and had a moment, she tore at her hair and said: «What an unfair and horrible person I am. I’m not living up to my side of the bargain with Habrocomes [...] Some one will sing the wedding hymn to me and I’ll go to Perilaus’ bed. No! Soul of Habrocomes, dearer to me than all else, don’t feel any pain because of me. I’ll never willingly hurt you. I’ll come join you and remain your bride till death»<sup>16</sup>.

Once suicide has been decided, Anthia reflects on the most suitable way to perform it and turns for help to Eudoxus, an Ephesian doctor who has arrived in Tarsus after a shipwreck and has been sent by Perilaus to Anthia to make her feel less homesick: she asks him to bring her a deadly poison in exchange for a generous reward. The conversation with Eudoxus is for Anthia the occasion to explain her reasons and discuss her decision: she doesn’t cry any more, she doesn’t dishevel her hair but talks with clear mind: she tells him what has

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16 The English translations of Xenophon Ephesius and Chariton are taken from TRZASKOMA 2010b.

happened to her and speculates on other possible courses of action but comes to the conclusion that her situation has no other way out than death.

X.Eph. 3, 5, 6-7

λέγει δὴ αὐτῷ τὸν Ἀβροκόμου ἔρωτα καὶ τοὺς ὄρκους τοὺς πρὸς ἐκεῖνον καὶ τὰς περὶ τῆς σωφροσύνης συνθήκας. καὶ «εἰ μὲν ἦν ζῶσαν» ἔφη «με ἀπολαβεῖν ζῶντα Ἀβροκόμην ἢ λαθεῖν ἀποδράσασαν ἐντεῦθεν, περὶ τούτων ἂν ἐβουλευόμην, ἐπειδὴ δὲ ὁ μὲν τέθνηκε, φυγεῖν δὲ ἀδύνατον καὶ τὸν μέλλοντα ἀμήχανον ὑπομεῖναι γάμον (οὔτε γὰρ τὰς συνθήκας παραβῆσομαι τὰς πρὸς Ἀβροκόμην οὔτε τὸν ὄρκον ὑπερόψομαι), σὺ τοίνυν βοηθὸς ἡμῖν γενοῦ, φάρμακον εὐρών ποθεν ὁ κακῶν με ἀπαλλάξει τὴν κακοδαίμονα».

She told him about her love for Habrocomes and her oaths to him and their agreement about being faithful. «If I could be alive and get back my Habrocomes also alive, or if I could get away from here without being caught, I'd be busy figuring out how to do just that. But since he's dead and escape is impossible, and at the same time there is no way for me to submit to my upcoming marriage – I won't break the agreements I made with Habrocomes or ignore my oath – you've got to help me. You have to find a poison somewhere that will free me, ill-starred as I am, from my troubles».

Anthia promises the doctor that she will give him the funds to return home, so that he, immediately after delivering the poison, will be able to leave and come back to Ephesus, where he will join his family and live in peace for the rest of his days. But Anthia entrusts him with one last task: once arrived in Ephesus, he has to seek out her parents and tell them that she and Habrocomes have perished.

X.Eph. 3, 5, 8

«δυνήση δὲ πρὸ τοῦ πυθέσθαι τινὰ ἐπιβάς νεῶς τὴν ἐπ' Ἐφέσου πλεῖν. ἐκεῖ δὲ γενόμενος, ἀναζητήσας τοὺς γονεῖς Μεγαμήδη τε καὶ Εὐίππην ἄγγελλε αὐτοῖς τὴν ἐμὴν τελευτὴν καὶ πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἀποδημίαν, ὅτι Ἀβροκόμης ἀπόλωλε λέγε».

«You'll be able to get on a ship and sail to Ephesus before anyone finds out. Once there, find my parents, Megamedes and Equippe, and tell them about my death and everything else about my travels. And tell them that Habrocomes is dead».

Eudoxus, who is in desperate need of money to fulfil his desire to return home, agrees to Anthia's requests; but instead of a poison he gives her a powerful

soporific drug. On the very night of the wedding, while Perilaus is celebrating with his friends, Anthia is being led to the bridal chamber; talking to herself she states once again her firm decision not to betray her beloved: «Will you wrong Habrocomes, your husband, the man you love, the man who died for you? I'm not so cowardly or frightened in the face of trouble. Let's get this over with once and for all. Let's drink the poison (δεδόχθω ταῦτα· πίνωμεν τὸ φάρμακον). Habrocomes must remain your husband. I choose him, even if he is dead»<sup>17</sup>. A few minutes later, when she has been left alone in the chamber, she seizes the cup with the drug and before drinking it she addresses Habrocomes pronouncing a farewell to life.

X.Eph. 3, 6, 4-5

καὶ δὴ μόνη μὲν ἐγεγόνει [...] καὶ δὴ κομισθέντος ἐκπώματος, λαβοῦσα οὐδενὸς ἔνδον αὐτῇ παρόντος ἐμβάλλει τὸ φάρμακον καὶ δακρῦσα «ὦ φιλτάτη» φησὶν «Ἄβροκόμου ψυχή, ἰδοὺ σοι τὰς ὑποσχέσεις ἀποδίδωμι καὶ ὁδὸν ἔρχομαι τὴν παρὰ σέ, δυστυχή μὲν ἀλλ' ἀναγκαίαν. καὶ δέχου με ἄσμενος καὶ μοι πάρεχε τὴν ἐκεῖ μετὰ σοῦ δίαιταν εὐδαίμονα». Εἰποῦσα ἔπιε τὸ φάρμακον, καὶ εὐθὺς ὕπνος τε αὐτὴν κατεῖχε καὶ ἔπιπτεν εἰς γῆν.

And then she was all alone [...] When a cup was brought, she took it and put the drug in it when no one was around. Tearfully she said. «Beloved soul of Habrocomes, look! I'm doing what I promised! I'm making the journey to join you. It's a sad journey but a necessary one. Receive me happily and allow me to share a happy life with you there». She drank the drug. Immediately sleep overcame her, and she collapsed to the floor.

To sum up. Anthia, like Ajax, sees that her situation has no other escape than suicide; Ajax explains his point of view to Tecmessa, insisting on the need to kill himself and excluding other options (going back to the fatherland without glory or booty, attacking the walls of Troy in search of a glorious death); Anthia does the same in her conversation with the doctor, ruling out any other possibility (she will not get back her beloved, who is surely dead, and will not be able to get away from Perilaus' house). When the cruelty of their situation becomes clear, both characters indulge in acts of desperation: Ajax (so Tecmessa says) sobs and wails loudly, refusing food and drink; Anthia cries and

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17 X.Eph. 3, 6, 3.

tears her hair<sup>18</sup>. In his final monologue Ajax asks the Sun to halt his chariot, as he arrives at the island of Salamis, and give the news of his death to his father and his mother, who will fill the city with her lamentations; this prayer to the Sun has its equivalent in Anthia's address to the doctor, as she begs him to visit her parents in Ephesus.

There is no doubt, in my opinion, that Xenophon Ephesius's narration of Anthia's suicide is modelled on Sophocles' tragedy. Among the many 'suicides' which punctuate the Greek novels this episode is the only one in which a complete report is given of how the character takes the decision to kill herself, how she prepares for her death through debates and talks, how she performs her suicide. I would say that Anthia's suicide is shown, rather than narrated, to the readers: it is presented to them in a theatrical way, through scenes which point to visual effects. And each element of this *Inszenierung* finds its equivalent in the action of the *Ajax*. As is the rule in Xenophon Ephesius<sup>19</sup>, the literary imitation is marked neither by extended quotations nor by verbal echoes; nevertheless the presence of a Sophoclean intertext can hardly be denied<sup>20</sup>.

As Stephen Trzaskoma has pointed out in a recent contribution<sup>21</sup>, the model of Ajax's suicide is also active in books 2 and 3 of Chariton's novel, where the heroine of the story, Callirhoe, is forced to accept a new marriage; she hesitates for a long time, being torn between conflicting thoughts: in her desperation, self-killing seems to be an eligible option. Again, we have to do with a story of suicide; but in this case the Sophoclean hypotext is not only alluded to but explicitly announced through a verbal quotation<sup>22</sup>.

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18 Ajax too, according to Tecmessa's report, expresses his frustration with the same gesture: «[...] grasping his hair tightly in his hands with his nails» (310 κόμηην ἀπρὸς ὄνυξι συλλαβῶν χερσί).

19 ZANETTO 2012, p. 901: «Anche Senofonte Efesio mostra di essere sensibile al modello tragico, benché la quasi totale assenza di riprese verbali o lessicali suggerisca molta cautela, quando si tenta di tracciare i contorni di questa *imitatio*. In alcuni casi, peraltro, la corrispondenza tra situazioni tragiche e episodi del romanzo è così stringente, che riesce difficile non pensare a un consapevole gioco intertestuale».

20 Intertextuality is not usually sought in the novel of Xenophon Ephesius, who belongs to the so-called 'pre-sophisticated' period of the Greek romance. However, in the last years scholars are reassessing the literary status of the *Ephesiakà* and there is a growing body of work on this issue: cf. WHITMARSH 2011, pp. 25-68; TAGLIABUE 2012. The presence of Euripidean intertexts in Xenophon Ephesius is investigated by GIOVANNELLI 2008; see also TRZASKOMA 2010b, p. xxxi; ZANETTO 2012, pp. 901-4.

21 TRZASKOMA 2010a.

22 The presence of tragic quotations or allusions in Chariton is discussed by SCHMELING 1974, pp. 46-51; RUIZ MONTERO 1994, pp. 1018-20; KAIMIO 1996, pp. 56-7; HIRSCHENBERGER 2001.

Let us look at the situation. Callirhoe has been kidnapped by the tomb robbers and taken to Miletus, where her new master Dionysius has fallen in love with her and is trying to persuade her to love him in return. So, her situation is not different from that of Anthia in Perilaus' house. Callirhoe is of course determined to remain faithful to her husband Chaireas, resisting any attempt on her virtue. But suddenly the story takes an unexpected turn (2, 8, 4 «Fortune laid a plot against the woman's faithfulness»).

At 2, 8, 6 Callirhoe discovers she is pregnant; her first reaction is desperation, because she can't bear the thought that her child will be a slave from birth. Alone in the night she seriously takes into consideration the option of killing her baby by abortion. But a few minutes later she changes her mind and reflects that destroying her child would make her even more cruel than Medea:

Charito 2, 9, 3-4

«βουλεύη τεκνοκτονῆσαι; πασῶν ἀσεβ<εστάτη, μ>αίνη, καὶ Μηδείας λαμβάνεις λογισμούς; ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς Σκυθίδος ἀγριωτέρα δόξεις· ἐκείνη μὲν γὰρ ἐχθρὸν εἶχε τὸν ἄνδρα, σὺ δὲ τὸ Χαιρέου τέκνον θέλεις ἀποκτεῖναι καὶ μηδὲ ὑπόμνημα τοῦ περιβοήτου γάμου καταλιπεῖν».

«Are you planning to kill your child? You're the most godless of women! Are you crazy? Are you thinking like Medea? No, I think you're even more savage than that Schytian woman. Her husband was her enemy, but you're planning to kill Chaireas' baby and leave behind no reminder of your celebrated marriage».

All night long she struggles with these thoughts; as she finally falls asleep, in a dream she sees Chaireas, who tells her to keep the baby.

At 2, 11 Callirhoe is again struggling with herself. She has been told that the only possibility for her to give birth to the child and to raise it in the house is accepting a new marriage with Dionysius. But doing this would mean betraying her fidelity to Chaireas, and fidelity is her paramount concern. Callirhoe, alone in her room, locks the door and discusses the whole matter in a sort of family council, where the other participants are the unborn child and Chaireas, whose portrait lies on the woman's belly. She is the first to speak: surprisingly enough she is now thinking of suicide as a solution for her troubles:

Charito 2, 11, 1

«ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν πρώτη τὴν ἐμὴν γνώμην ἀποφαίνομαι· θέλω γὰρ ἀποθανεῖν Χαιρέου μόνου γυνή. τοῦτό μοι καὶ γονέων ἡδίων καὶ πατρίδος καὶ τέκνου, πειραν ἀνδρὸς ἐτέρου μὴ λαβεῖν».

«I'll pull forward my opinion first. I want to die the wife of Chaireas alone. This – not to know the touch of another man – means more to me than my parents, my home, my child».

Things have changed: the issue is no longer to decide whether to kill the baby or not; the stakes are higher, because the new marriage would give Callirhoe the chance to save the child but would also force her to give up her identity (*sophrosyne*, i.e. fidelity, is the key value for her: ceasing to be Chaireas' wife she would lose her mental and emotional balance). In Trzaskoma's words: «There is one further crucial development in Callirhoe's reasoning at this stage: she is actually no longer talking merely about aborting her child; by 2, 11, 2 Callirhoe has now resolved not only to destroy her child but also herself. She will poison herself, and the child will simply be collateral damage»<sup>23</sup>. Ajax, the suicide *par excellence*, is taking the place of Medea in Callirhoe's mind, as will be clear later.

The family council goes on with the voice of the child, who – answering its mother's question – asks to live and have the chance of growing up strong and beautiful. The last voice is Chaireas's, who has already spoken in Anthia's dream entrusting his son to her care: his vote is decisive, and Callirhoe has to comply with the decision of the majority (2, 11, 3: «I call you as a witness, Chaireas: you are giving me away in marriage to Dionysios»). In this way suicide has been set aside, it has ceased to be a possible choice. To be precise, Callirhoe does threaten suicide again at 3, 1, 6, when the terms of her marriage with Dionysios are being discussed<sup>24</sup>, but Dionysios immediately agrees to her terms, and from this moment on self-killing is no longer an available option for her.

Callirhoe is no longer tempted to act like an Ajax, the model of the tragic Ajax is definitely no longer in play, but – surprisingly enough – just a few chapters later, when the child is born and an overjoyed Dionysios has provided a feast for the whole city of Miletus, an overt allusion to the *Ajax* reminds the readers of the tragic interplay which has marked the previous episode. The feast is going on, and in a quiet moment Callirhoe takes her baby into the temple of Aphrodite, holds him up in her hands and prays:

Charito 3, 8, 8

«δὸς δὴ μοι γενέσθαι τὸν υἱὸν εὐτυχέστερον μὲν τῶν γονέων, ὅμοιον δὲ τῷ πάππῳ».

<sup>23</sup> TRZASKOMA 2010a, p. 222.

<sup>24</sup> Her words are reported by another character (Plangon): so we can't be sure that this is in fact Anthia's position.

«Grant me that my son be more fortunate than his parents and like his grandfather».

Callirhoe's words are a quotation of Ajax's prayer for his son in Sophocles' tragedy, when the hero wishes for Eurysaces the same glory that Hector wishes for Astyanax at *Iliad* 6, 476-9:

Soph. *Aj.*, 550-1

ὦ παῖ, γένοιο πατρὸς εὐτυχέστερος,  
τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ὁμοῖος· καὶ γένοι' ἄν οὐ κακός.

My son, may you be more fortunate than your father, but in all other respects the same; and you would be no coward!<sup>25</sup>

The quotation from the *Ajax* is a cue for the readers: they are reminded of the other tragic allusion which they have encountered a few chapters above, when Callirhoe has presented herself as a new Medea. «By his two allusions to 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian tragedy Chariton has mapped out two alternative modes of behaviour for his heroine: following tragic models Callirhoe may kill her child or she may kill herself; she may become a Medea, or she may become an Ajax»<sup>26</sup>. So, we have here another episode of the Greek novel in which the Sophoclean Ajax is a marker and a model of suicidal behaviour<sup>27</sup>.

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25 For a comparative analysis of the two passages, cf. SMITH 2007, pp. 117-8.

26 SMITH 2007, p. 119.

27 An allusion to the *Ajax* can be seen also in Longus 2, 22, 3: PATTONI 2005, pp. 9-15, notes that the words of Daphnis («How can I take the steps that will lead me back to my father and my mother, without the goats, without Chloe?») are a conscious, and humorous, echo of *Aj.* 462-4 (with the comic substitution of ποῖον ὄμμα with ποίους ποσσίν).

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