

Sophocles' *Ajax* is an enigmatic play in many ways not least of which is its performance date. The majority of scholars date *Ajax* to the 440s BC based on a variety of metrical (especially Jebb) and historical (Robert, Whitman) reasons. None of the arguments for a date in the 440s is convincing on its own but the combined weight of these arguments has swayed most scholars so that a date shortly before the also insecurely dated *Antigone* has become generally accepted. However, a few bold adventurers have suggested on thematic grounds that the play may be later, possibly as late as the 420s. I also will venture to argue that the later date for *Ajax* is better based specifically on an analysis of the representation of Athena in the play and how this representation reflects ideological trends concerning the concept of justice in the Peloponnesian War era.

Appearances of Athena on stage in tragedy are not frequent but seem to follow a discernable pattern. In the plays in which she appears, she is always associated with the concept of justice. In *Eumenides* and *Ajax Locrus* (fragmentary), she appears as either an arbiter or judge in trial scenes, one with an Athenian jury, and the other with a jury of either Trojan women or Argive warriors. In two other plays, *Ajax* and *Trojan Women*, Athena invokes a type of retributive justice which she clearly disavows in *Eumenides* and may also in *Ajax Locrus*. It is not coincidental, I suggest, that both *Eumenides* and *Ajax Locrus* are early plays (450s) and *Trojan Women* is late (ca. 415). Rather, this chronological division reflects a shift in the way Athens perceived of her role as arbiter of justice in the Aegean. *Trojan Women* is often read as a commentary of Athens' rule over her *arche* and her behavior in the Peloponnesian War. I argue here that based on the similarities of Athena in *Ajax* to that of Euripides' play, we should consider it ideologically in the political climate of the Peloponnesian War era (as Kott and Rosenbloom do) and as such date *Ajax* to this later period.

Reading *Ajax* within the framework of the evolution of the Athenian empire may also help us understand that evolution better. Although it is difficult to securely date the decrees concerning maintenance of the empire, scholars (especially Mattingly) have begun arguing that the more oppressive measures like the coinage decree and decrees on weights and measures actually date to after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. The use of Athenian courts as a mechanism for controlling the empire may also fall under this category with controls over local judicial proceedings becoming increasingly more strict as fear of revolt increases culminating in the capture and destruction of Melos in 415 BC. This reconsideration of major decrees has led historians in recent years to re-think how the empire developed. Taking public works of art like tragedy into consideration can also help understand better the evolution of political thought and political ideologies in the fifth century.