**In Limine**

**Ajax in the Iliad**

The protagonist of Sophocles’ play and four of the main characters are among the heroes of the *Iliad*.

The action takes place shortly before the capture of Troy. Sophocles and his first audience knew their Homer well.

What ought we to know about the Homeric Ajax before hearing the play?

Everything goes back to the opening words of the *Iliad* — ‘the wrath of Achilles’.

When Achilles withdrew to his tent, the tide of battle turned against the Greeks.

Ajax emerged as the great defender. He was the ‘defensive wall’ (*herkos*). He was the ‘shield’ (*sakos*) which became his emblem.

He first came to the fore in *Iliad* VII, when he had the better of a single combat with Hector.

His two greatest moments came in the defence of the ships (XV) and the rescue of the body of Patroclus (XVII).

Most of what we know about Ajax derives from the narrative of his actions and from the epic similes describing them. But a great deal is conveyed directly, dramatically, in Ajax’s own words.

As a Prelude to Sophocles’s play, we are going to hear four of his speeches.
Scene 1. Ajax and Hector
Preliminaries to a Duel
(*Iliad* VII)

Hector has challenged any one Greek to single combat.

The Greek champion is to be chosen by lot.  
Nine heroes have put their sign on a potsherd (*klêros*)  
and dropped it into Agamemnon’s helmet.  
The whole army prays the lot will fall on Ajax.

**HOMER**
That is what they prayed.  
Nestor shook the helmet.  
Out leapt the tile they all wanted — Ajax’s.

Valiant Ajax knew his sign on the tile and rejoiced.  
Friends, the lot is mine, and my heart  
rejoices. I believe I shall  
defeat the noble Hector.  

While I arm, you pray to Zeus,  
son of Cronos, in silence  
so the Trojans don’t hear you – or  
aloud, since we fear nobody.

No man can make me flee against  
my will, by force or skill, since  
not without skills of my own  
was I born and raised in Salamis.

Ajax has the better of the ensuing duel,  
but it will be interrupted  
and will conclude with an exchange of gifts.  
Fatefully, Ajax receives Hector’s sword.

Scene 2. Ajax and Hector
The epic vaunt to Hector on the battlefield (*Iliad* XIII)

The Trojans are advancing on the ships.  
Hector has hurled ritual insults at the Greeks.  
Ajax answers with defiant words of his own.
He will end with two significant prophecies:
Hector will die after a vain flight from Achilles;
the fair city of Troy will fall.

You wretch! Come here! You want to scare Greeks?
Waste of time! We understand fighting,
but Zeus has cracked his whip against us.

No doubt you hope to destroy our ships
but we have hands to defend them.

Sooner will your crowded city fall,
and we shall sack it.

And as for you, the day draws near
when, fleeing, you will beg all the gods
to make your horses swifter than hawks
to carry you home to the city.

Scene 3. Ajax to his troops
‘Once more unto the breach,
dear friends, once more!’

Hector and the Trojans have burst through the outer defences.
All seems lost.
The ships will surely be destroyed by fire.

But Ajax rallies his men
with a resounding cry of ‘For shame’.

For shame, you Greeks! Now we must either die
or find safety by defending the ships
If Hector takes the ships, do you think
you can walk home?

Don’t you hear Hector
urging on his men to burn the ships?

He’s not inviting them to dance,
but to a battle.
Friends, be men; don’t risk disgrace.  
Shame on any who fail in battle.  
That shame keeps men alive, but those who flee find neither fame nor safety.
The Trojans did not pass
Indeed, the Greeks enjoyed a measure of success
thanks to Patroclus,
who left Achilles’s tent
and joined the battle, wearing his friend’s armour.

But now Patroclus is dead
and despoiled of that armour
(fatal to him as it will be to Ajax).

His body must be defended
lest it be thrown to the dogs.
(A similar threat will later be made
with regard to the body of Ajax).

Scene 4. Ajax to Menelaus — and to Zeus
‘Let us die in the light of day’
(*Iliad* XVII)

The struggle is taking place under a dark cloud,
sent by Zeus to help the Trojans.

Ajax is shielding the body of Patroclus.
He turns to Menelaus, close at his side,
and speaks his last significant words in the *Iliad*.

Well! It’s plain that Zeus is helping
the Trojans – any fool can see that.

All their weapons strike true; whether
thrown by brave man or coward,
Zeus makes them all fly straight,
while ours fall to the ground, useless.

Let’s think what’s best to do. We must
retrieve the body and get back
to bring some joy to our comrades.

But I need a comrade to go
swiftly to Achilles, for I fear
he has not heard of his dear friend’s death.
I can’t see any Greek to send:
mist is hiding men and horses.

Father Zeus, take away this darkness
and let us see the light. Kill us
in the light, if that’s your pleasure.

HOMER
So he spoke, and Zeus pitied his tears
and scattered the darkness and mist;
the sun shone, and the whole battle could be seen.

End of *In Limine*

There will be a short pause of 2-3 minutes
to allow latecomers to find their seats.
After the death of Patroclus and the loss of his armour, Achilles received new arms, divinely forged by Hephaistos at the request of his mother, Thetis.

So armed, Achilles avenged Patroclus by killing Hector, having pursued him round the walls of the city as Ajax had prophesied.

He dragged Hector’s corpse behind his chariot attached by the very sword-belt which Hector had received from Ajax in exchange for his sword.

At the Funeral Games for Patroclus, Ajax was twice worsted by the cunning and skill of Odysseus.

Not long afterwards, Achilles himself was killed, struck in the heel by an arrow, fired by Paris. It was Ajax who carried his body from the field.

The divinely forged armour of Achilles was to be awarded as a prize to the most deserving warrior among the Greeks.

After a council and a vote – and thanks to the intervention of Athene in favour of her protégé – the armour was awarded to Odysseus.

Such is the situation at the beginning of Sophocles’ play. The action will take place in front of Ajax’s quarters (klisia)
close to the shore at Troy,
where the ships of the Greeks are drawn up.

Ajax is maddened with anger at his humiliation.
At night he leaves his klisia,
intending to kill the leading Greeks
for failing to award him Achilles’ armour.
Specifically, he wants to be revenged
on Agamemnon and Odysseus.

Athene again intervenes to rescue Odysseus.
She afflicts Ajax with real madness.
In his delusion,
he mistakes a flock of cattle and sheep
for his intended victims.

He slaughters the animals and herdsmen,
singling out two dead rams for a ritual flogging.

These are the facts that are summarised,
through dialogue between Athene and Odysseus,
in the first 200 lines of Sophocles’ play.

The opening (omitted in tonight’s version)
is a theatrical tour de force
which culminates in the revelation of Ajax,
behind the door of his quarters (klisia),
still squatting amidst the carnage.

The first of our 12 scenes
is set outside the door of Ajax’s klisia.
His wife, Tekmessa, appears from within.
She is a Phrygian princess, a ‘spear bride’,
and the mother of his young son, Eurysakes.

Tekmessa addresses Ajax’s faithful followers,
the surviving crew-members of the twelve ships
that sailed to Troy from his native Salamis.

TECMESSA. Crewmen of Ajax, we who care
for the distant house of Telamon
share its grief: mighty Ajax lies
struck down by a storm of madness.