Ajax

In Limine

Ajax in the Iliad
The protagonist of Sophocles’s 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 marked their name 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.

Ajax Lorarius

The play by Sophocles

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 herdsman,
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.

CHORUS. What happened last night to make this day
worse? Tell us, Tecmessa, for Ajax
won you in war and loves you, so you
must be able to tell us.

TECMESSA. How can I tell what is beyond words?
The disaster is as bad as death.
Last night our glorious Ajax went mad
and brought down disgrace upon us.

Inside you’ll see the victims
butchered by him and soaked in blood.
It bodes ill for the future.

CHORUS. What you say about this brave man
can neither be borne, nor ignored.
It is common talk among the Greeks,
and rumour magnifies the tale.

Oh, I fear the future! He must die,
for in his frenzy he has killed
with his dark sword the herdsmen
and the beasts they herd.

TECMESSA. Alas, he brought the flock from there.
Some he killed indoors, on the ground, others
he tore apart, hacking at their sides.

He caught two white-hoofed rams, tore the head
off one and ripped out its tongue, and tied
the other to a pole and flogged it,
cursing fouly all the while.

CHORUS. I must hide my face and creep away
or take my seat on the rowers’ bench
and get away wherever the ship takes us!

The sons of Atreus threaten us;
I dread death by stoning alongside him,
a man struck by a terrible fate.

TECMESSA. But it is over! Like lightning
in a summer storm his madness flamed
and died. Now, sane, he suffers from knowing what he himself did.

This is the truth you need to know.
CHORUS. How did this disaster come upon him?
We share your grief – tell us what happened.

TECMESSA. You are part of this – I’ll tell you everything. At night, with the lamps burned out, Ajax took his sword and seemed about to set out on some senseless raid.

I tried to stop him and said ‘Ajax, what are you doing? Why go out when there has been no messenger, no trumpet call: the camp’s asleep.’

His reply was brief and hackneyed: ‘Woman, silence becomes a woman best!’

So I was quiet, and he went out alone. I don’t know what happened outside

but he dragged back tethered bulls, herdsmen’s dogs, and captured sheep. He slaughtered or tortured all of them as if attacking men, not sheep.

Then he rushed out, shouting at shadows, abusing the sons of Atreus and Odysseus, laughing at what he had done in his violent sortie.

Then he rushed in again and at last painfully came to his senses, stared at the shambles, struck his head, screamed, then sat among the bodies, tearing at his hair with his nails.

For a long time he sat silent, but then threatened me horribly unless I told him everything he’d done.

Friends, I was frightened, and told him everything as far as I knew it and he lamented with dreadful cries such as I have never heard from him.

Now, laid low by this disaster, he does not eat or drink, sits silent where he collapsed amongst the bodies and clearly plans to do something dreadful.
Friends, this is why I’ve come out:
go in and help him if you can.
Men in this state can be won round by friends.

CHORUS. Tecmessa, daughter of Teleutas,
it is terrible to hear how evil
has driven this man mad.

AJAX (offstage): ἰὼ μοί μοι.
TECMESSA. I think he will get worse – that cry,
did you not hear it? That was Ajax.

AJAX (offstage): ἰὼ μοί μοι.
CHORUS. Either he is still mad, or tortured
by the thought of his own madness.

AJAX (offstage): My son! My son!
TECMESSA. He’s calling you, Eurysaces.
What does he want? Where are you? Ah, woe!

AJAX: I’m calling Teucer. Where is Teucer?
Must he go on raiding, while I die?

CHORUS. The man sounds sane enough. Open the door!
When he sees me he may feel some shame.

TECMESSA. Then look, I’ll open the doors. Now see
what he has done and what state he is in.

THE DOOR IS OPENED.

AJAX APPEARS.

AJAX: Oh, friends, my crewmen, the only friends
still loyal; see what a wave swelled up
in a bloody storm and surges round me.

Do you see what mighty deeds I,
the valiant man, fearless in battle,
have done to harmless beasts?
How they’ll laugh! What humiliation!

TECMESSA. Ajax, my lord, don’t say such things.
AJAX: Why don’t you leave? Out of my sight!

TECMESSA. By the gods, I beg you, talk sense.

AJAX: Wretch that I am, I let those cursed men
escape me, and attacked horned cattle
and thriving flocks, and spilled their blood.

CHORUS. Do not lament over what is past.
What’s done is done, nothing can change it.
AJAX: You see everything, hear everything, devise every evil – Odysseus, you evil schemer, how you must now be laughing in delight.

CHORUS. The gods decide if a man laughs or cries.
AJAX: Even now, in my ruin, I’d face him, ἰω μοι μοι.

CHORUS. No proud words! Do you not see how bad things are for you?

AJAX: O Zeus, father of my fathers, if I could just destroy that schemer whom I hate, and the brother kings, and then, at last, die myself.

TECMESSA. If you pray for that, then pray for my death too. Why should I live when you are dead?

AJAX: Ah, darkness, now my only light, and gloom of Hell, now bright for me! Take me, take me to dwell in you. I am not fit to look to gods or men for help.

TECMESSA. Alas, that a strong man should speak like this, saying things he never would have.

AJAX. Hail, rushing seaways, beach caves and woodlands by the shore. Long, too long, you have kept me here by Troy. But now, enough!

Scamander, river hostile to the Greeks, you will see me no more, a man – let me boast! – like no other that Troy saw come from Greece. But now I lie here, my honour lost.

CHORUS. I can neither contradict your words nor let you speak, in your despair.

TRANSITION

AJAX. άιαι: who would think my name would match my fate? My father here in Ida won the prize for valour, and great fame.

I, his son, came here as strong as he and with great deeds behind me, but now I face death, dishonoured by the Greeks.
I know, if Achilles had chosen
the bravest man to win his arms
I’d be that man. But the sons of Atreus
gave them to a schemer, ignoring me.

And if I had not been distracted,
my mind diverted from its aim,
they’d be dead by now, and could never
load a vote like that again.

But Zeus’ grim-eyed daughter,
the invincible, struck me down,
drove me insane, and now my hands
are red with the blood of these beasts.

And they are safe and laughing at me –
not what I intended! When a god strikes
even a coward may escape
from a stronger man.

What must I do now? I am hated,
clearly, by gods, by the Greek army,
and by these plains of Troy.

Should I go home, leaving the ships
and Atreus’ sons? How shall I face
Telamon? He won a crown of fame
and would see me come empty-handed.

That is not to be borne. But should I
challenge all comers by the walls of Troy,
perform some great deed, and die there?
No, that would please the sons of Atreus.

That cannot be, I must show my father
that his son was not a coward.
It is shameful to want a long life
when a man can’t escape his woes.

What pleasure in going on day after day, each
nudging us closer to death, or pulling back?
No man of worth feeds on empty hopes.
Live or die with honour: you have heard me.

TECMESSA. Ajax, my lord, the compelling force
of fate is man’s greatest evil.

My father was free, the wealthiest man
in Phrygia; I am a slave.
The gods willed that, and your strength.

Now, sharing your bed, I’m loyal to you.
I beg you, by Zeus who rules our hearth
and by the bed we share, don’t let me
fall into your enemies’ hands.

The day you die and abandon me
the Greeks will seize me, and your son,
and I shall be treated as a slave.

And one of my masters will utter
taunting words: ‘Look at Ajax’s girl!
He was the strongest man in the army,
and she’s reduced to a slave’s tasks.’
That will bring shame on your family.

Be mindful of your father, abandoned
by you in his bitter old age,
and your aged mother, who prays
often to the gods for your return.

And pity your son: think how your death
will harm him and me. He will grow up
deprived of care, deprived of you,
with unfriendly guardians.

I have no-one to look to but you,
you who laid waste my country;
my parents’ fate has already
dispatched them to live in Hades.

What home, what wealth, have I but you?
My safety rests with you alone:
do not forget me.

CHORUS. Ajax, pity her as I do.
You should approve of what she says.
AJAX. I shall approve if she takes care
to do as I command her.

TECMESSA. Dear Ajax, I shall obey you.
AJAX. Then bring my son here for me to see.

TECMESSA. I was afraid, and sent him away.
AJAX. You mean, when I was struck down?
TECMESSA. I feared you might kill the child.

AJAX. Now let me see and speak to him.
TECMESSA. Of course. The servants have him close by.

AJAX. Why am I kept waiting?
TECMESSA. Son, your father calls you! Servants,
whoever has him, bring him here.

AJAX. Is that man coming, or is he deaf?
TECMESSA. Here he comes now, with the boy.
AJAX. Lift him up here. He won’t be afraid to see all this blood, if he’s my son.

He must quickly learn my rough ways and grow up to be like me.

Son, may you be luckier than your father, but like him otherwise, and no coward. I envy your ignorance of my woes; life is good before one knows joy or pain.

In time you will have to prove yourself your father’s worthy son: but meanwhile be nurtured by gentle breezes feeding your soul, and be your mother’s joy.

I know the Greeks will not harm you even without me: for Teucer will guard you bravely, even though at present he is far away.

Crewmen, for love of me I charge you, tell Teucer to take the boy home to Telamon and Eriboea, to care for them until they die.

And my arms are not to be offered for Greeks to compete for by any umpire, nor by my chief enemy.

But you, boy, take the shield from which you get your name, Eurysaces, hold it by its well-stitched thong; it’s made of seven hides, unpierceable. My other armour bury with me.

Make haste, Tecmessa, take the boy, bar the doors. Don’t weep outside. How women do lament! Quick, the doors! A good doctor doesn’t chant spells over a wound that needs surgery.

TECMESSA. I am desperate! I beg you for the child’s sake and by the gods, do not abandon us!

AJAX. You push me too far. Do you not know I owe the gods no service now!

TECMESSA. Do not blaspheme!
AJAX. Speak to those who listen!
TECMessa. Will you not hear me?
AJAX. You have said too much.

TECMessa. From fear, my lord.
AJAX. Shut the doors!

TECMessa. By the gods, relent!
AJAX. You are a fool to try to tame my temper now.

CHORUS. Famous Salamis, lashed by the sea, blessed by gods, famed the world over...

AJAX. Time brings all hidden things to birth and covers them, once shown. Nothing is beyond expectation; dire oaths, the strongest will, can be overcome.

I was hard as iron, but my edge has been blunted by this woman. I pity her if she’s left a widow among foes, our son an orphan.

I shall go now to the meadows by the shore to wash away these stains, and escape the anger of the goddess.

I shall find untrodden ground and bury this hateful sword where no one will find it, and Night and Hades will guard it down below.

For since I received this from Hector, my deadliest enemy, nothing good has come to me from the Greeks.

The proverb’s true: enemies’ gifts are no gifts and bring no gain. We’ll learn in future to yield to gods and to revere the sons of Atreus.

They are in command, and we must submit: how could it be otherwise? The strongest and most powerful must yield to recognised authority.

Snowy winter yields to summer’s fruits, night moves aside for day’s white horses, fierce winds die down and calm the sea, and mighty Sleep sets free his captives.

Then shall we not learn restraint?
For myself, I have learned lately
a hated enemy may turn friend,
and if I help a friend I must know
he may not be a friend for ever.
Friendship offers no safe harbour.

Things will work themselves out. Tecmessa,
go inside and pray to the gods
to grant in full what my heart longs for.

Comrades, honour my orders as she does,
and if Teucer comes, tell him
to care for me and be loyal to you.

I must go now where I’m bound to go.
Do as I say and perhaps you’ll learn
that though I suffer now,
I have been saved.

CHORUS. I thrill with love and leap with joy.
ἰ ἰ, Pan, Pan!

THE CHORIC SONG CONTINUES.

CHORUS. All things are withered by time. Nothing
is beyond expectation: Ajax
has had a change of heart and mended
his quarrel with the sons of Atreus.

MESSENGER. Friends, first I must announce to you
that Teucer is here, back from Mysia.
When he came to the camp
all the Greeks jeered at him.

They saw him coming from far off
and gathered round him in a circle.
They all taunted him from every side,
calling him brother of the madman
who plotted against the army,
wanting him dead, wanting to stone him.
They drew their swords, it came to that.

The fighting mood was rising
till the elders calmed it down.
Where is Ajax? I must tell him this.
News must be given to those in charge.

CHORUS. He left a little while ago,
in a new frame of mind, with new plans.

MESSENGER. ιοῦ ιοῦ. I was sent too late,
or I have come too slowly.
CHORUS. What’s wrong? What have you failed to do?
MESSENGER. Teucer said his brother should be kept inside until he got here.

CHORUS. But he has gone. He changed his mind and wants to make peace with the gods.
MESSENGER. These words are foolish, if Calchas is right in his prophecy.

CHORUS. What prophecy? What can you tell us?
MESSENGER. This much I know, for I was there.

Calchas left the commanders’ circle and the sons of Atreus, took Teucer’s hand, spoke kindly, urged him to keep Ajax inside all day, to save his life.

Athene’s anger, he said, would last only for this one day.

He said that when men get too great, the gods bring about their fall – those men who are only human but think themselves something more.

Ajax was foolish even when he left home, though his father spoke wisely: ‘Son,’ he said, ‘Wish for victory in battle, but always with the help of a god.’

His reply was boastful and stupid: ‘Anyone can win victory with the gods’ help, but I believe I can achieve glory without them!’

So he bragged. Again, when Athene directed him where to fight, he spoke as no man should to a god:

‘Lady, help the other Greeks! Where Ajax stands no-one will get through!’

So he provoked the goddess’s anger, thinking himself more than a man.

But if he is still alive today, with a god’s help we may save him.

That’s what the prophet said, and Teucer sent me to bring you this order. But if we are too late, Ajax will die if Calchas is a true prophet.
CHORUS. Wretched Tecmessa, born to suffer, come and hear what this man is saying.

TECMESSA. Why wake me when I had just found rest at last from unending sorrows?

CHORUS. Hear this man, he brings bad news about Ajax.

TECMESSA. What is it? Is everything lost?
MESSENGER. I don’t know, but if Ajax is not inside, I fear for him.

TECMESSA. He has left. You frighten me. What’s wrong?
MESSENGER. Teucer said he should be kept inside and not allowed to go out alone.

TECMESSA. Where is Teucer? Why did he say that?
MESSENGER. He has just come back. He believes if Ajax has left, his fate is sealed.

TECMESSA. Oh no! Who told him that?
MESSENGER. The prophet Calchas: he says today brings Ajax death or life.

TECMESSA. Friends, protect me from this fate. Some of you, find Teucer, bring him here. Some go to the western shore, some to the east, to look for Ajax.

I see he deceived me. He loved me once, but now he has cast me off.

What shall I do, child? We must not sit here, I’ll go as far as my strength will take me. Come, make haste, this is no time to rest.

CHORUS. I am ready, and that is not an empty promise. I’ll be quick.

THE CHORUS DISPERSES TO SEARCH FOR AJAX.

THE SCENE CHANGES.

ANOTHER PART OF THE SHORE.

AJAX IS SEEN KNEELING BEFORE HIS SWORD IN THE GROUND.

AJAX. The slaughterer is ready for work, well placed for the cut. Think about it –
a gift from Hector, whom I hated most,  
and hated even to see,

It stands in Troy’s enemy soil,  
newly sharpened with a whetstone  
and fixed with care to help me  
to a swift death.

So I’m well prepared. So, Zeus  
you must help me first, as you should.  
The favour I am asking of you  
is not a great one.

Send a messenger to Teucer  
with this bad news, so he can tend  
my body where I fall on the sword  
before an enemy finds me  
and throws me to the dogs or birds.

This I ask, Zeus; and I pray to Hermes,  
guide of the dead beneath the earth,  
to give me the sleep of death  
quickly once I have pierced my side.

And I call upon the eternal virgins  
who see all men’s suffering, the dread  
long-striding Furies, to witness how  
the sons of Atreus have destroyed me.

Come, Furies, quick to punish,  
take your fill of vengeance, consume  
the whole army!

But you, Sun, who drive your chariot  
through high heaven, when you see  
my homeland, pull on your golden rein,  
and tell my fate to my old father

and to my unhappy mother  
whose wails will fill the whole city.  
But lamenting is futile, I must  
begin the task and do it quickly.

O light! O sacred plain of Salamis,  
my home, my father’s hearth, and you,  
glorious Athens and your people;  
streams, rivers, plains of Troy:

this is Ajax’s last word to you;  
the rest I’ll say in Hades to the dead.
FROM NOW UNTIL THE END,
THE DEAD BODY OF AJAX LIES
AT THE FRONT OF THE STAGE.

THE CHORUS COME TO THE SCENE.

TECMESSA. (off-stage)

CHORUS. Who shouted from the trees near by?

TECMESSA. Alas for me!

CHORUS. I see the unhappy spear-bride
of Ajax, overcome by grief.

TECMESSA. Friends, I am lost, ruined, destroyed.

CHORUS. What is it?

TECMESSA. Here’s Ajax, newly dead,
his sword plunged deep into his body.

CHORUS. Who helped the unhappy man do this?

TECMESSA. He did it himself, it is plain.
He set the sword up and fell on it.

CHORUS. Alas for my blindness! You died
alone with no friends to save you.
I was deaf, unaware, heedless!
Where does he lie, stubborn Ajax
of the unlucky name?

TECMESSA. No-one must see him, I’ll cover him
with this cloak. No-one who loved him
could bear to see black blood gushing
from his nose and from the death-wound.

Alas, what shall I do? What friend
will carry you? Where is Teucer?
He should be here to help prepare
his brother’s body for burial.

Oh, unhappy Ajax, what a man,
what a fate! Alas, my child,
what slavery shall we fall into?
What new masters shall we have?

CHORUS. You named unspeakable deeds
of the two sons of Atreus,
but may the gods prevent them!
TECMESSA. The gods did not prevent this!
CHORUS. They send us more than we can bear.

TECMESSA. Grim Pallas, daughter of Zeus, sent this pain for the sake of her beloved Odysseus.

CHORUS. Surely that much-enduring man is exulting in his black heart, laughing at our frenzied grief; and when they hear, the sons of Atreus will laugh too.

TECMESSA. Let them laugh, and let them enjoy Ajax’s downfall! Even if they did not miss him while he lived, they’ll mourn him now in battle.

Evil men do not know the value of a good thing until they lose it.

His death is bitter to me, as it is sweet to them, but it gave him pleasure. He got what he desired, the death he wished for.

The gods killed him, not those men, no! Let Odysseus jeer at us who mourn. They have Ajax no more, but for me, his passing has left grief and tears.

FORLANA

TEUCER. ύ μοί μοι. (off-stage)

CHORUS. Quiet! I think I hear Teucer’s voice, loud with foreboding of this disaster.

TEU. Ajax, dear brother, are the rumours true?
CHORUS. He is dead, Teucer, be sure of that.

TEU. Oh, dreadful blow!
CHORUS. Dreadful indeed, Teucer.

TEU. Wretched me! And his child – where is he, where in the Trojan land?
CHORUS. Alone by the hut.

TEU. Won’t you bring him here at once, before he is snatched away by enemies like a lion-cub when the lion is killed? Help us, quickly. All men like to jeer at the helpless dead.
CHORUS. He asked before he died that you 
should take care of him, as you do now.

TEU. Oh, most painful of all the sights 
my eyes have ever looked upon!

Alas! Uncover him, let me see
the full horror. That face, marked
by bitter courage! What pains you have
sown for me by your death.

Where can I go, among what mortal men,
I who was not there to help you?

What a welcome I shall get from
Telamon, returning without you!
Even in good times he doesn’t smile much .

What will he keep back? What evil
will he not speak of me, his bastard,
for failing you, dear Ajax, through fear,
or scheming to succeed you?

That’s how he’ll speak, an angry old man,
quick to pick a quarrel over nothing.
In the end I’ll be cast out, disowned,
a slave, no longer a free man.

That’s at home: in Troy my enemies
are many, help scarce, and what there was
has disappeared with your death.

What shall I do? How can I pull
this cruel sword out? What a murderer
has ended your life. Do you see how Hector,
even in death, was fated to kill you?

CHORUS. No more talking now. You’d better think
how you will bury him and what
you are going to say. For I see
an enemy, come perhaps to jeer.

INTRADA.

THE ARRIVAL OF MENELAUS.

TEUCER. Who is that man from the army?
CHORUS. Menelaus, for whom we sailed here.
TEUCER. I see him. I recognise him now.

MENELAUS. You there, leave that body where it is!
TEUCER. Why do you waste so many words?
MENELAUS. I, and the commander, decided.
TEUCER. What reason do you give for this?
MENELAUS. We brought him here as our ally and friend: but he proved our enemy, more so than the Trojans.

He planned to kill the whole army and tried to attack us by night. Had a god not frustrated him, we should all be dead as he is now, And he would still be alive. As things, fell out, a god intervened and he killed only sheep and cattle.

So he must not be buried but flung on the sand for seabirds to feed on. Don’t lose your temper with me!

If we could not rule him while he lived at least we can now he is dead, in spite of you. He is in our hands, though while he lived he ignored me.

It is a sign of wickedness when a commoner refuses to obey authority.

The laws of a city do not work if no-one fears them; an army cannot be controlled without respect.

A man may be big and strong, but still a slight mishap can bring him down. A man who feels fear and shame is safe.

But arrogance and self-will can sink a city, even if it was sailing smoothly along before.

Let there be fear where it is needed. We cannot simply please ourselves, there’s a painful price to pay for that.

Life shifts and turns: he was arrogant, now it’s my turn to be proud. I warn you, do not bury him, or you will need burying yourself!

CHORUS. Menelaus, beware of pronouncing judgment and abusing the dead.
TEUCER. Friends, I'll never be amazed again
if a lowborn man goes wrong,
if the so-called nobles talk like this!

Tell me again: you say you brought
Ajax here as ally to the Greeks?
Didn’t he set sail of his own free will?

What makes you his commander? How
can you command the men he brought here?

You’re king of Sparta, not our ruler.
You could no more discipline him
than he could you.

Rule your own men, tell them off
with pompous speeches. I shall bury
Ajax, as is right, no matter what
you or the other generals say.

He did not go to war for your wife,
like those men who’ve trailed after you;
he was bound by oath, not by any
pledge to you. He despised nobodies.

So come back with more heralds, or with
the general: I won’t be shifted
by a man like you, for all your noise.

CHORUS. I don’t like such words at a time like this:
harsh words hurt, even if deserved.

MENELAUS. This man seems quite proud, for an archer.
TEUCER. My skill is something to be proud of.

MENELAUS. How you would boast if you had a shield!
TEUCER. Without a shield, I'd fight you in your armour.

MENELAUS. How your tongue feeds your anger!
TEUCER. I’m in the right – that makes me bold.

MENELAUS. What’s right in honouring my killer?
TEUCER. Killer? Strange! You died and live again?

MENELAUS. He would have killed me – a god saved me.
TEUCER. If the gods saved you, don’t slight them.

MENELAUS. Would I spurn the laws of heaven?
TEUCER. Yes: if you deny burial to the dead.

MENELAUS. Because he was an enemy!
TEUCER. Did Ajax ever fight against you?
MENELAUS. We loathed each other – you know that.
I have one thing to say to you:
this man must not be buried.
TEUCER. Here’s my one word: he shall be buried.
MENELAUS. I’m leaving. No-one must know
I argued where I could have used force.
TEUCER. Yes, leave! I don’t want it known
that I listened to a fool’s ranting.
CHORUS. This quarrel can only get worse!
Quickly, Teucer, dig a grave for him
so he can rest in the dank earth
and be remembered for ever.
TEUCER. Here are his son and wife, come
to prepare the tomb.
Boy, come here, clasp your father
as a supplicant. Sit, holding three
locks of hair, mine, your mother’s and yours,
symbols of supplication.
And if any soldier tries
to drag you away from the body,
may he die and not be buried,
as such an evil man deserves,
his family line cut off as I cut off this lock.
Hold the hair, boy, and take care of it.
Kneel and embrace your father’s body.
Let no-one drive you away, hold on tight.
Crewmen, don’t stand by like women
but help him, till I have attended
to this forbidden grave.
CHORUS. How long will the wandering go on?
When will they end, the years that bring us
endless wretched fighting here in Troy,
in sorrow and shame for Greeks?
Ajax was formerly my shield
against fear and arrows in the night.
But now he is lost to a harsh god,
what joy, what joy remains to me?
Oh, to be where the wooded headland
breasts the sea below high Sunion,
and to greet sacred Athens.
INTRADA.

THE ARRIVAL OF AGAMEMNON.

TEUCER. I came back quickly because I’ve seen Agamemnon coming this way. I know he’ll speak abusive words.

AGAMEMNON. I hear you have dared to criticise us, and have not been punished. You, it’s you I mean, you son of a slave.

How you would strut and boast if only your mother were noble! And now, nobody, you defend a nobody, deny our rule and claim that Ajax came here as his own chief.

Is it not scandalous to hear this from slaves? What was this man like? Where did he go that I did not go? Have the Greeks no-one else to call on?

It was a mistake to announce a contest for Achilles’ arms if Teucer abuses us, and you won’t accept a verdict reached by vote.

Instead, you hurl abuse at us or try to stab us in the back.

See reason. Understand who you are, find a freeborn friend to plead your cause. If you spoke, I wouldn’t understand the barbarous language you talk.

CHORUS. I wish you would both see reason, that’s all I have to say to you.

TEUCER. How quickly gratitude slips away, forgetting the dead, betraying them.

This man won’t remember you, Ajax, though you often risked your life for him. That was all for nothing, thrown away.

You with your long, foolish speeches, have you forgotten how you were trapped behind your own barricade, helpless, the battle going badly,

and this man came, alone, and saved you while the ships were already burning
and Hector leapt over the moat
to get to the hulls of the ships?

Who saved the day? The man you said
went nowhere that you had not gone.
Did he do something criminal then?

Or when he fought Hector man to man,
volunteering, not rigging the draw,
unless to get his token drawn first.

He did this, and I was at his side,
the slave, the barbarian’s child.

Wretch, how can you look at me and say that?
Don’t you know your grandfather Pelops
was a barbarian from Phrygia?

Your father Atreus served his brother
a dreadful feast of his own children.
Your Cretan mother’s father caught her
with a lover and fed her to the fishes.

How dare you insult my family!
I am the son of Telamon.

My mother was his prize for valour,
a princess, Laomedon’s daughter,
and given by Heracles himself.

A noble son of noble parents,
would I shame my kinsman to whom you
would shamelessly deny burial?

Know this: if you cast him out,
you will have to do the same to us,
all three of us; and I’d die proudly
fighting for him, not for your wife,
or rather for you and your brother.

Think of your own position, not mine.
You’ll wish you had been a coward
rather than challenging me.

INTRADA.

THE ARRIVAL OF ODYSSEUS.

CHORUS. Odysseus, you come just in time
if you come to untangle this quarrel
rather than make it worse.

ODYSSEUS. What’s wrong? I heard the sons of Atreus
shouting over this brave man’s corpse.
AGAMEMNON. Yes, Odysseus, but Teucer has been hurling insults at both of us.

ODYSSEUS. What insults? I can forgive insults if a man has been insulted first.

AGAMEMNON. I insulted him because of what he did.

ODYSSEUS. What did he do to offend you?

AGAMEMNON. He says he will bury this body, though that is against my will.

ODYSSEUS. May a friend speak truth to a friend, and support you as I always have?

AGAMEMNON. Speak! I’d be a fool to forbid it, you are my best friend among the Greeks.

ODYSSEUS. Listen, then. I beg you, don’t cast out this man, denying him burial. Hatred should not prevail at the cost of justice.

The moment I won Achilles’ arms he became my chief enemy, but still I would not fail to honour him,
or deny that he was the bravest of all the Greeks who came to Troy, except for Achilles.

It would be wrong to dishonour him, destroying not him, but divine laws. It is wrong to injure a great man when he is dead, even one you hate.

AGAMEMNON. Are you taking his side against me?

ODYSSEUS. Yes – I hated him when it was right to do so.

AGAMEMNON. The good man respects authority.

ODYSSEUS. Enough! You win, when you give in to friends.

AGAMEMNON. You will make us look like cowards.

ODYSSEUS. No, all the Greeks will think us just.

AGAMEMNON. You tell me to let them bury him?

ODYSSEUS. Yes. One day I’ll need burial myself.

AGAMEMNON. That’s always the way: think of yourself.

ODYSSEUS. Whom should I think of if not myself?

AGAMEMNON. Let it be known as your doing, not mine.

ODYSSEUS. If you do it, you will gain by it.
AGAMEMNON. Be sure of this: I would do even more than this for you. But Ajax, alive or dead, is my worst foe. However, you may do as you wish.

CHORUS. Odysseus, whoever says that you are not a wise man, must be a fool.

ODYSSEUS. Teucer, from now on I’m your friend, as much as I ever was your foe.

I wish to take part in the burial and help to do all that is needed to honour the noblest of men.

TEUCER. Noble Odysseus, that is well said. You have surprised me.

You were first among his enemies, yet of all the Greeks, you alone defended him and would not mock him when he was dead and you were still alive,

and when the insane general and his brother wanted to profane his body, throw it out without a funeral.

May they be cruelly destroyed by Zeus, by the unforgetting Fury and by Justice, they who cruelly wished to treat this man so unworthily.

But I cannot let you touch the grave. That might be displeasing to the dead man.

You can give other help, and if you wish to bring someone else from the army, we shall not object.

I’ll see to the rest. And be assured, you have dealt honourably with us.

ODYSSEUS. I’d hoped to take part, but I respect your wishes and I shall go now.

TEUCER. Enough! We have delayed too long. Some of you quickly dig a deep grave, others set up a tripod over the fire for holy water.

 Someone bring his armour from the hut.
Boy, help me as well as you can
with loving hands to lift your father,
in whose veins the black blood is still warm.

Come, let all his friends make haste,
and walk in procession as a last act
of service to this great man.

CHORUS. Men learn from what they see,
and no man knows his fate
until he sees it.