

SOPHOCLES'
"AJAX"

Produced between 450BCE and 430BCE

TRANSLATED BY
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Dramatis Personae

Athena

Odysseus

(The king of Ithaca)

Ajax

(King of Salamis)

Chorus of Sailors

Tecmessa

(Wife-captive of Ajax)

Teucer

(Ajax's half-brother)

Menelaus

(King of Sparta)

Agamemnon

(King of Mycenae)

Messenger

Various Attendants

(Soldiers -Silent)

Nurse

(To Eurysaces -Silent)

Eurysaces

(Young son of Ajax and Tecmessa -silent)

Herald

(Silent)

Still dark, just before Dawn.

At the siege of Troy.

In front of Ajax's hut. A little feeble light emanating through the hut's door lights up the stage.

Noises of "tortured cattle" emanate from within.

Enter Odysseus who is searching around the hut, looking for something on the ground around it.

A few seconds later, we hear the voice of Athena from somewhere behind him. Her voice makes

Odysseus stop in his tracks and look for her.

Athena:

Son of Laertes!

I always seem to catch you when you're in the process of cooking up some trap or other for your enemies. And now, here you are again, Odysseus! In front of Ajax's hut, at the very edge of the camp, searching the ground for his footprints, just like a hunter, wondering, no doubt if he's inside. You've been at it for hours now.

You sniff about with that keen nose of yours just like a Spartan hound and you get to your prey in no time at all.

She appears in the shadows behind Odysseus.

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Yes, Odysseus, Ajax is inside. Sweat is pouring out of his forehead and blood is dripping from his hands and from his slaughtering sword.

So, now there's no need for you to go on peering through that door.

Just tell me what you're after and I'll tell you. I know what's going on.

Odysseus:

Ah! The voice of our dear, beloved goddess, Athena!

I recognise that voice so well that I know it's you even if I can't see you!

Might as well be a Tyrrhenian trumpet shouting through its brass mouth!

Athena enters gently.

You've guessed well, Athena.

Yes, I am searching around on the ground checking the footprints of an enemy of mine. Ajax, the man with the big shield! It's him I'm after! Him and no one else!

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And I'm after him because he's a suspect to a shocking deed. One that was committed last night.

Insufferable stuff... if it is him. Nothing's for certain yet, of course! We're all still just wondering about it, so, I took on this investigation myself. Voluntarily.

We've just discovered that someone has slaughtered all the cattle we have plundered – as well as the cowherd!

Everyone says Ajax is the culprit.

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A scout saw him, rushing about in the valley, alone, with his sword dripping blood, as you said and then that scout came to me and told me about it. So, here I am, hot on the trail.

There's no doubt, some of these tracks are his, all right but then, there are these others that baffle me a bit. I can't tell where he is, really. Just as well you're here. Just in time. You were always my guide and you always will be.

Athena:

I already knew all this, Odysseus and that's why I'm here, I want to help you with your hunting expedition.

Odysseus:

So, my dear goddess, am I on the right track?

Athena:

Yes, the slaughter was committed by this man.

Odysseus:

So why did he do such a crazy thing?

Athena:

Anger made him crazy. The jury awarded the armour of dead Achilles to you and not to him.

Odysseus:

Yes, but what does that have to do with the herd of cows he slaughtered?

Athena:

He thought he was slaughtering you.

The blood that stained his hands, he thought was your blood.

Odysseus:

Did he think he was slaughtering all the Greeks?

Athena:

And he would be thinking correctly if I hadn't kept a close eye on matters.

Odysseus:

How did he even dare do such a thing?

What made him so sure he'd succeed in killing us all?

Athena:

He started off on his own, against you all, secretly, in the middle of the night.

Odysseus:

And did he get near us? Did he reach our tents?

Athena:

Indeed he did. Got right up to the gates of the two Commanders.

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Odysseus:

And? How did he manage to control his murderous hand, did he?

Athena:

No, that was me. I stopped him from his mad urge to kill you, by throwing some potion into his eyes.

Disorientated him completely. Then I dragged him to where the herd of cattle and all the other animals were. The herdsmen hadn't yet separated the sheep from the cows.

Ajax fell on them with great relish. Hacked the horned animals to pieces. Cleaved into them. Spines and flesh scattered all around him. One minute he thinks he's cutting into the Atreus brothers –here's Agamemnon, here's Menelaos- then it's some other chief, then another... he thought he was attacking and killing them all with his bare hands.

But then, as he was driving himself deep into his madness, I egged him on and on until I drove him right up to the edge of a terrible trap.

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Eventually, he got exhausted from all the slaughter and, after a little rest, he rounded up all the remaining live cattle, tied them and brought them here.

He thought he had tied up men instead of horned beasts!

So, he's in there now with them. He's got them all tied up and he's torturing them.

Let me show you now the madman and all his deeds, so that you can go and tell all the rest of the Argives what you saw.

Don't worry, no harm will come to you! I'll just shuffle about the rays of his eyes a bit so he won't be able to see you.

Shouting in the direction of the hut

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You in there!

Yes you! The man who's bending back the arms of his prisoners and tying them up behind their backs with ropes!

Yes, you! Come out here!

Yes, Ajax, I'm calling you! Come out here, outside, in front of your hut!

Odysseus:

Athena, what on earth are you doing? Don't call him out here!

Athena:

Be quiet, Odysseus! You're behaving like a coward now!

Odysseus:

For Heaven's sake! Let him stay inside!

Athena:

What are you afraid of? He is still a mere man, isn't he?

Odysseus:

Yes, a man AND an enemy! To me!

Athena:

And isn't laughing at one's enemy the most enjoyable laughter?

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Odysseus:

It'd be just as enjoyable for me if he stayed in there.

Athena:

What's the matter, Odysseus? Afraid to face a madman?

Odysseus:

A mad Ajax, yes! A sane Ajax no!

Athena:

But, don't worry because even though he'll be right in front of you, he won't be able to see you!

Odysseus:

Of course he will! He'll still have the same eyes, won't he?

Athena:

Odysseus, I'll make his eyesight very dull. He won't be able to see you at all!

Odysseus:

Oh, well, the will of the gods is always accomplished! All right, I'll stay.

Athena:

Good. Stand still and be silent.

Odysseus:

I'll stand but I wish I weren't standing here!

Athena: *Towards the hut*

Ajax! This is the second time I'm calling you. Is this how you treat your friends?

Ajax comes out of his hut. He is holding a whip.

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Ajax:

Ah! Athena! Daughter of Zeus! A true and loyal friend, indeed!

Indicating the cows inside

I thank you for this great catch, in there.

For that, I will make you some golden offerings.

Athena:

Thank you, Ajax but tell me first: Has your sword soaked up enough Argive blood yet?

Ajax:

Yes, there's no denying it. I can certainly boast about that!

Athena:

And the sons of Atreus? Agamemnon and Menelaos, did you use your strong arm against them, as well?

Ajax:

Those two will never again dishonour Ajax!

Athena:

So, both of them are now dead, is that right?

Ajax:

Let's see if they can deprive me of my armour now!

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Athena:

Right! What about Odysseus, Laertes' son? What's happened to him?

He hadn't escaped you, has he?

Ajax:

Odysseus? That cunning fox? Do you want to know where he is?

Athena:

Yes, that fox, Odysseus, your enemy.

Ajax:

Odysseus is sitting comfortably inside, my Lady.

The sweetest captive of them all. I don't want him to die quite yet.

Athena:

Not yet? Why, what do you want to do first? Do you want to strike a deal with him first?

Ajax:

What I want to do first is tie him up hard against a pole inside my hut...

Athena:

And then what, Ajax? Do something horrible to the poor man?

Ajax:

Only turn his back into a bloody pulp with my whip! Then I'll let him die.

Athena:

You shouldn't put the poor man through such torture.

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Ajax:

In all other matters, my Lady, I'm at your command; but not in this matter.

That man must pay the proper penalty and the proper penalty is torture.

Athena:

By all means, Ajax! Do as you please. If that's what gives you pleasure, Ajax, then don't hold back.

Stop at nothing. Do as you feel.

Noises of cattle from within the hut.

Ajax:

Right, well, I must get back to work!

Stand by me, Athena, stand by me always, help me with my fight.

Ajax goes back into the hut.

Athena:

See how powerful gods are, Odysseus?

Ajax! Was there ever a man more wise, more competent, more capable of doing the right thing at the right time than Ajax?

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Odysseus:

No, Athena. I can't think of anyone better than Ajax and though he's my rival, I do feel sorry for him. Miserable sod! He suffers from a dreadful sickness. Obsessed by it. And, of course, Fate might deliver this sickness to me one day as well.

Life is but an illusion, it seems, a fleeting shadow.

Athena:

So, Odysseus, since you know this, never show arrogance towards the gods.
Say nothing that will offend them.

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Never boast about your strength or your wealth being greater than another man's.
You must understand, Odysseus, that one single day can bring about both, the achievement as well as the destruction of a man's efforts.

The gods love good men but they hate the evil ones.

Exit Athena followed shortly afterwards by Odysseus.

Some more noise from the cattle.

Short pause while the light inside the hut is extinguished and that of the sun becomes brighter.

Enter the chorus of Ajax's sailors.

Chorus:

Ajax, son of Telamon!

Ajax, whose home is Salamis, the lofty, sea-splashed, island.

When you do well, I rejoice but I get anxious and worried, my Lord when I see Zeus' punishment aimed directly at you or when the gossiping tongues of all the Danaans spread quickly damaging rumours about you!

Chorus:

I get very worried, my Lord!

Worried, like a little dove whose eye sees fear.

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Chorus:

Like the disgraceful gossip that we heard about last night, Ajax!

They say you went into the valleys where the animals were held.

All those animals that were captured by the Greek spear.

Chorus:

You went in there and began slaughtering them all, cutting them down with your big shiny sword!

These animals hadn't been shared out among the soldiers yet!

Chorus:

That's what Odysseus is saying. He's spreading all this stuff. Whispering it across the ears of the whole army. And people believe him, my Lord. Totally!

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Chorus:

And not only do they believe his accusations but he who hears the tale enjoys it more than does its teller. Your suffering gives them courage.

Chorus:

That's how it is: Shoot a foul arrow at a noble man and you can't miss. Shoot slanders at someone like me and, well nobody will believe you! Envy only stalks the noble!

Little people like us are not very reliable guardians of a battlement without the presence of nobles!

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Chorus:

It takes both to secure the wall, the little man and the big noble, helping each other.

But these are not words that fools can understand, my Lord and it is such fools that shoot their foul arrows at you. How can we fight these fools without you?

Chorus:

They're like a flock of chattering birds, my Lord. When you've got your back turned to them they go chattering on about you, saying all sorts of insulting things but, stand up against them, like a wild eagle and they're stiff with fear and they shut up.

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Chorus:

What happened? Did you get Zeus' darling daughter, Artemis, mad, my Lord?

Was it that goddess who plays with bulls who drove you into slaughtering that cattle, my Lord? All that cattle that had still not been shared by all the Greeks?

Chorus:

Was it because you haven't paid her your respects, not given her, her glittering share of some loot or other? Did you hold back on giving her some huntsman's trophy, perhaps? Is that why she got so angry with you?

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Chorus:

Or was it because... was it Ares, the god of War?
Big guy with the bronze armour. Fights on our side all the time.
Did you get him angry? Was last night's doings some sly trick he played on you?

Chorus:

Ajax must have made him jealous somehow.

Still, all this is crazy stuff!

All this slaughtering of animals is not the sort of stuff that sensible people do.

Chorus:

No, I think he was struck by something from the Heavens... still, I hope Zeus and Apollo will cure him of it. I hope the gods keep those horrible rumours away from the Greeks!

Chorus:

But, then, my Lord, if our two mighty kings, Agamemnon and Menelaos, along with that horrible Odysseus, the son of lowlife Sisyphus, if they go about spreading lies about you, well then, don't just hang about your huts across the waves and let your good name be sallied! Don't do that!

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Chorus:

Come, get up now! You've been brooding in there long enough!

Chorus:

Come, you've had a long enough rest from the battle.

Chorus:

Come out now and stop this spreading blaze of mocking. It's reaching the skies now!

Chorus:

Come! Don't let the vile tongues of your enemies spread insolence wildly all about in the fields, with the help of the scorching winds of destruction!

I cannot put up with it any longer!

The door to the hut opens and Tecmessa appears.

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Tecmessa:

Sailors, good friends of Ajax, sons of Erechtheus, a race of mortals!

We who love the distant House of Telamon feel enormous grief.

Because right now, our Ajax, our mighty, our awesome, our untamed Lord, is stricken with a sickness whose fury has shaken his very soul!

Chorus:

Trojan daughter of Teleutas, tell us, what weighty deed, has last night cast upon yesterday?

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Chorus:

Brave Ajax has won you by his war-spear and brought you close to his heart, so you would know what truly happened. Tell us!

Tecmessa:

What words can I use to tell of things that defy words?

The man has suffered pains equal to death itself!

He's gone mad! Some evil frenzy has gripped his mind in the middle of the night! Our glorious Ajax is mad! Go, look into his hut, yourselves! There you will see the work of a madman. Sacrificial offerings slaughtered mindlessly by his own hands. Blood and gore is scattered everywhere.

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Chorus:

What dreadful news you give us, Tecmessa!

Chorus:

Unbearable news!

Chorus:

Our mighty warrior! Ajax!

Chorus:

Unbearable, yet undeniable!

Chorus:

The miserable, rumour-mongering Greeks have spread all this already!

A couple of the men peer reluctantly through the door of the hut.

Chorus:

Ah! What will happen to us now? If the public sees all this...

Chorus:

The disgrace alone will kill him!

Chorus:

His wild hands and his black sword have slaughtered all the herds, the herdsmen as well as their horses!

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Tecmessa: *Indicating the fields to the left of the hut*

He took a hold of them all up there. He roped them all up out there and brought them down here. That whole herd of animals. Some of them he took inside and slaughtered them there and then, on the ground and the rest he cut to bits hacking into their sides.

There were two rams with white feet. He sliced the head of one of them, clean off, then its hanging tongue and threw them on the floor. The other one, he stood it upright on its hind legs and tied up against a pole. Then he took a double-thick leather strap, the one he uses to tie up the horses with and whipped the poor animal ruthlessly, all the time yelling all sorts of vulgar words, words which he could have learnt only from some god, certainly not from a mortal!

Chorus:

It's time now, I think for us to hide our faces in shame and slide secretly away...

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Chorus:

Or sit at the rowers' benches and work the oars of our swift ocean-travelling ships and sail away for home.

Chorus:

The two royal Atreus brothers are hurling dreadful threats at us.

Chorus:

Stoning to death!

Chorus:

Why should I suffer that, alongside a man whose Fate is inevitable?

Tecmessa:

No, he's not like that any more. His frenzy is gone now. Just like a southerly wind that spins about with all that bright lightning and then dies down.

260

The fury is gone from him and his mind is well but now he's got a new sickness in his soul. Now he realises what he has done, how horrible his deed was and that it was he and he alone who did it. And that, my friends, is hurting him most bitterly.

Chorus:

Ah, good! Excellent news! If the madness has gone and he's now well, then surely that takes away from the horror of his deed.

Tecmessa:

But if you were given a choice, a choice of either hurting your friends or you feeling good or sharing in your friend's pain, which would you choose?

Chorus:

Tecmessa, the worse of the two is the double sorrow.

Tecmessa:

In that case, now that he's no longer sick we are in pain.

270

Chorus:

What? What do you mean? I don't understand what you're saying.

Tecmessa:

While that man was in the grips of his sickness he was happy but we felt sad seeing him like that. Now that he is no longer insane he is gripped by sorrow and pain as he found out what he had done and we, in turn, feel sad, seeing him like this; just as sad as we felt when he was sick. Is this not a double sorrow, replacing a single one?

Chorus:

Yes, I see. I am afraid that perhaps some god has sent this sickness to him.

Why else would he be well and yet still suffer?

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Tecmessa:

I think, the way things are right now, you ought to know the full story.

Chorus:

How did it all begin? What caused all this misfortune of his?

Please tell us, Tecmessa. We have a share in these pains.

Tecmessa:

Yes, I can see you do, so I'll explain everything.

Right in the middle of the night, when all the lights have been extinguished, he took up his two-edged sword and began to leave the hut; as if he was summonsed to go to some errand or other.

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I stopped him and asked him, "Where are you off to, Ajax? I didn't hear the trumpet for a general call and no herald came for you. You've not been asked to go anywhere or do anything, so why are you leaving like this? Everyone's asleep out there!"

What I got as an answer from him was the usual short insult.

"Listen woman! Women are only beautiful when they are silent!"

At that I shut up and he ran out of the hut all alone.

I've no idea what happened out there but when he came back he was dragging behind him bulls, all tied up, guard dogs and sheep, as if they were a prize of some sort for him.

Some of those animals, he cut off their heads, others he tied upside down up on poles and slit their throats and others he smashed their spines to bits. Then there were the other animals that he tied up and started torturing them as if they were men.

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After all that, he ran out the gate and started screaming out at some shadow, all sorts of insults directed one minute at the Atreus brothers and the next at Odysseus and, at the same time, laughing loudly at the thought of the disaster he had just caused in his madness.

Then he rushed back into the hut and slowly and with difficulty regained his senses. But then, as he looked around and became aware of what he had done -the whole room clogged with ruin and destruction- he struck his head with his hand and let out a horrible shout. Then he fell down among all the bloody carcasses and all the slaughtered sheep. Then he began to tear out his hair with his finger nails.

310

For a while he just sat there in total silence and then, when he finally spoke, he uttered all sorts of threats to me if I didn't tell him exactly what had happened in the hut and how he got to the state he was in.

I was frightened by his threats, my friends and so I told him as well as I could, the whole story. When he heard it all he began to cry. I've never ever seen him cry like that before! He used to always say that crying was a sign of weakness in a man. A sure sign that the man is a coward.

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And how he cried! Deep groans, moans, really, hardly audible, like those a bellowing bull would make. So now, deeply hurt by the disaster he caused, he lays there, without food or drink, among all the bloody carcasses he cut down with his sword.

From his words and his deep grief, it looks obvious to me that he's thinking of doing some great harm to himself.

But that's why I'm out here, my friends. To ask you to go inside and help him in any way you can. The words of friends can often cure a man in his condition.

Chorus:

Tecmessa, daughter of Teleutas, what Ajax has suffered is horrible!

Ajax: *From within the hut*

Oh! Oh! What a disgusting man I am!

Tecmessa:

Hear that? Looks like Ajax is getting worse.

Ajax: *From within the hut*

Oh, no! No! How shocking!

Chorus:

Either he's in pain or he's just realised what he's done earlier.

Ajax: *From within the hut*

Oh, my son! My darling boy!

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Tecmessa:

Oh, no! My darling son! Eurysaces, he's calling for you, my boy!

What is he thinking now? Where are you, my son? Oh no! This is horrible!

Ajax: *From within the hut*

I'm calling for Teucer! Teucer my brother! Where is he?

Will he go on fighting while I'm dying here?

Chorus:

He sounds all right to me!*Shouts at Ajax*

Come, open the door, Ajax!

Back to his friends

Perhaps he'll pluck up some courage and feel better, once he sees me.

Tecmessa: *Opens the door slowly.*

Here, take a look inside. See what he's done in there. Check out the state he's in.

When the door of the hut is opened wide we can see Ajax sitting among the slaughtered carcasses.

349

Ajax:

Oh my friends! My sailors, my only true and loyal friends!

Look what a black tempest has broken over my head!

I'm drowning by huge waves. They're gathering high all about me!

Chorus: *To Tecmessa:*

Oh, my Lady! What you've told us is absolutely right.

He looks like he's truly lost his sanity!

Ajax:

My sea mates! Experts of the sea! We've worked the oars together, you and I!

Come, my friends! You, my good sea mates are the only ones who can help me now! You and you alone!

Come, my friends! Come and kill me!

Kill me like I've killed these animals!

362

Chorus:

Stop talking like that, Ajax! Such unhappy words!

You're trying to cure a pain by causing another!

Your remedy will be worse than the disease you're now suffering from!

Ajax:

Look at me! Me, the brave hero! The one who never trembles with fear in battle! Never afraid of enemies! Look at what I've done! I have killed these helpless animals, poor beasts that have never hurt anyone!

Look at me!

Is there anyone more shameful than me? Is there anyone who's suffered a greater insult?

Tecmessa:

No, my Lord, Ajax! Don't talk like that! I beg you!

Ajax: *To Tecmessa*

Leave, woman! Leave! Go away!

Oh! Oh, I can't bear this shame!

371

Tecmessa:

In Heaven's name, Ajax! Listen! Be reasonable, my Lord!

Ajax:

Me and my horrible luck! I've let my enemies slip through my hands and jumped upon horned beasts and god-blessed sheep and spilled their black blood!

Chorus:

But what's the use of lamenting over what has been done?

It is done and there's no going back.

379

Ajax: *Screams*

Odysseus! Sly son of Laertes! Your evil mind misses nothing!

You! You are the instrument behind every evil deed! Scum of the army!

How heartily you must be laughing now!

Chorus:

It is the gods who determine whether we laugh or cry, my Lord.

Ajax:

If only he were here, in front of me, now! Even though I'm in such torment – Oh!

Chorus:

Still showing your arrogance with your big words! Can you not see what this arrogance has done to you?

Ajax:

Zeus! Zeus, father of my fathers! Destroy that most hateful man for me!
Him, Odysseus and the two sons of Atreus. The two Kings! Then I can die!

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Tecmessa:

If you must pray for your death then you may as well pray for mine also.
Why would I want to go on living if you're dead?

Ajax:

Darkness! You are my light! Hades' misery! You are my biggest hope!
Take me! Take me, Hades and let me live within your darkest halls!
Here, I am no longer fit to seek the help of gods or mortals.
Here, Zeus' daughter, that mighty goddess Athena, tortures me mercilessly.
Where can I find refuge? Where can I go and live?

If all my glorious past is gone, my friends, gone like these slaughtered animals, and all I'll be remembered for is having so mindlessly chosen to slaughter these innocent beasts, then let the whole army raise their swords and strike me dead!

410

Tecmessa:

What shocking words you utter, Ajax!
A brave man like you! You've never utter them in the past!

Ajax: *Walks out and around the hut. Suddenly he stops and faces towards the sea in the distance.*

Good bye to you, paths of the sea! Good bye to you, caves by the shores! Good bye, pastures by the coast lines! You have kept me here, in Troy for a very long time. Too long! But no more! No more for me! Let those with wit take note: I will not live, I will not breathe any longer! And you! You, good, neighbouring streams of Scamander! A river like no other.

420

You've been so very kind to the Greeks! Let me make this boast to you, Scamander: You won't be seeing another man like me! At least none from the whole army that came here, to Troy, from Greece! Yet now, now I lie here, a man defeated, a man without honour!

Chorus:

I can neither stop you nor let you go on like this, Ajax. The story you tell is so full of pain.

430

Ajax:

Ajax! A name, a lament, a groan! My name and my horrible Fate are in agreement. Ajax! Who would have thought one's name describes one's fate!

Ajax! To utter the word is to utter a groan of agony. Utter it again and again and still you are uttering a groan! Ajax! Agony!

Ajax! Ajax, whose father had once returned home from this very same land, carrying the greatest prize for bravery!

Yet I, Ajax, his son, who came here with a force no lesser than his father's and who has performed with his own hands deeds to match his father's! This very same Ajax is now lying here, dishonoured and destroyed by the Greeks!

441

One thing I know for certain, though: Had Achilles been alive today and held a contest on bravery, with his armour as the first prize, he'd be awarding that prize to me. Me, Ajax and to no one else! But, instead, the two brothers have disregarded my own mighty deeds and gave the armour to a sly, miserable man. If only my eyes and my mind had not been turned the other way, away from what I wanted to do, those two men would have never lived the day to make such a judgement, a judgement against such a man as me.

450

But that invincible daughter of Zeus, that goddess with the blazing eyes, Athena, threw me off course. Just as I had my hands stretched out to kill those two, she cast a whirl of madness over me and I ended up painting my hands red with the blood of those beasts, instead!

Now those criminals have escaped and I know they're laughing at me even though it wasn't my fault. When the gods are out on their war path, even criminals can escape the hands of heroes!

So tell me, my friends: What do I do now? There's no question about it, I am hated by the gods and I'm despised by the whole army of Greece. Troy hates me, the very fields here hate me!

460

Shall I leave? Go home? Leave behind my ships, leave them just like that, at the harbour? Leave the Atreus brothers and cross the Aegean Sea? But then, when I get home, how could I even dare to face

Telamon, my father?

What will he ever think of me? Appearing before him like this, my hands naked, empty? No Prize of Victory to show him? Telamon who has won that prize already, the crown of victory still upon his head?

No, that I could never endure!

So what then? Should I rush over to the walls of Troy and there challenge every one of her soldiers? I, alone against them all? One by one? At least that way I will die having achieved some fame. Should I do that?

No! That would be wrong, too! That would delight the Atreus brothers! Give them great joy and I'd never want to do that!

471

No, I must come up with something else. Something that will show my father that his son was no coward.

It is a shameful thing for a man to want to live a long life when he can't shake off his troubles.

Where is the pleasure in living a life that's filled with days that alternate between life and the brink of death?

The man whose soul is warmed by empty hopes is a fool! I think little of him. The noble live and die nobly.

You've heard all I've got to say on this matter!

481

Chorus:

There's no denying, Ajax, the words you've just spoken come straight from your own heart. These are not words spoken by anyone else. But do put them aside, Ajax and hear also the words of those who love you.

Tecmessa: *To Ajax*

My lord, the most difficult thing for people is to obey Fate's commands.

Look at me, my lord! My father was a free man, the wealthiest man in Troy, yet, here I am, a slave.

490

That was Fate's command, Fate's command and the strength of your arms; and so, since I ended up being your wife, I wish you well always.

But, in the name of Zeus, protector of the hearth and of the bed which we share: Don't think it a wise thing to have me abandoned to the hands of your enemies, who'll have nothing but insults for me.

You can count on this, Ajax: the moment you die, the moment you abandon me by your death bed, that very moment, your son and I will be violently seized by the Greeks and immediately turned into slaves.

500

Can you hear one of them talking? "Look at her," one of my new masters will say. "Look at Ajax's wife! The army's bravest. Look at her now! No more than a mere slave! Everyone envied her before his death! How she must suffer now!"

That's what he'll say. Insults to you and your family. And me? I'll just be another victim to my Fate. My own Fate!

Come now, my Lord! Think of your father! You're not going to abandon him in his bitter old age, are you? Think of your mother, too, Ajax! Poor woman! Endless years behind her! Every day she prays to the gods that you'll get back home safe and alive.

510

Do you not feel sorry for your son my Lord?

Think how painful your death will be for him and for me! Think how bitter his life would be if he lost your loving care and support, if he lost you and if he ended up in the hands of unfriendly keepers.

My eyes can look upon no one else but you, my Lord. Your spear has utterly and violently destroyed my country and Fate took my mother and my father away to live in the dark halls of Hades. There is no country to cast my eyes upon, no wealth, no pleasure for me other than you. You are my health, my wealth, my country, my security.

520

Remember me a little as well. A man should remember what kindness he had received in the past.

Remember it well because one act of kindness calls for another and if a man forgets an act of kindness he has received, well, that would not be an honourable thing to do.

Chorus:

I'd like you Ajax to feel for her, just as I do! Listen to her, Ajax!

Ajax:

I'll listen to her if she'll listen to me and do as she's told!

Tecmessa:

My dear Ajax, I shall do whatever you say.

Ajax:

Then bring me my son here! I want to see my son, now!

530

Tecmessa:

See your son? Why? I've sent him away. I was so afraid...

Ajax:

Afraid of my madness? Is that what you mean?

Tecmessa:

Yes, I was afraid you might see him and kill him.

Ajax:

That'd be right. Exactly what Fate had in mind for me.

Tecmessa:

And that's exactly what I wanted to prevent.

Ajax:

I agree with you. That was wise. You showed good foresight there.

Tecmessa:

What about now? How can I help now?

Ajax:

Bring him here. I want to speak with him, face-to-face.

Tecmessa:

Fine, he's been looked after by his nurse close by.

540

Ajax:

Well then? Don't keep me waiting!

Tecmessa goes to SL and calls out behind the curtain.

Tecmessa:

Come, my son! Your father wants to see you.

You, young lady, yes you, the one who's holding onto his hand, bring him here.

Ajax:

Has he heard you? Is he coming?

Tecmessa:

His attendant is bringing him here right now.

Enter nurse holding the hand of a very young Eurysaces.

Ajax:

Come, lift him up to me. Up here. He won't get frightened by the sight of spilt blood. Not if he's a true son of mine!

Tecmessa, you've got to start training him according to his father's tough disciplines. Make him as tough as me.

550

Takes Eurysaces into his arms.

Ah, my son! My son! I hope your Fate is better than that of your father's but I also hope that in every other respect you'll grow up to be just like him! If you do, you won't be called a coward as you grow up!

Still, I envy you as you are right now, my son! A child! That's when life is at its sweetest. Innocent in all respects. You've experienced neither joy nor pain yet.

But you will grow up, my boy and when you do, when you do grow up, you'll have to demonstrate to your enemies just what sort of a man you are, what sort of a man your father was. But, until that time, let the gentle breezes nurture your young spirit, let it feed you and fill your mother here with joy.

560

Of all the Greeks I know, none will dare attack you with insults, even though I won't be standing there, next to you because I shall leave behind someone who will watch over you fearlessly. Teucer, who even at this very moment, is out there hunting down enemies!

Turning to his men and sailors

My friends, my war mates, experts of the ocean, accept my gratitude and my request. Convey my wishes to Teucer, my brother. Tell him to deliver this boy safely to my home. Let Telamon my father and Eriboea, my mother, see him.

570

Let this boy look after them in their old age. Let him stay with them until the time comes for them to

enter the world below.

And as for my shield and the rest of my armour, let them not be the object of some contest or other and let no one be the judge as to who'll be its new owner, especially not, Odysseus, the man who's destroyed me.

He picks up the shield lying next to him.

No, my boy. You take it. You take this broad shield of mine. I've named you after it. Eurysaces, Broad Shield. That's your name, my son. Grab it, hold it by its strong leather strap. Look at it. Isn't it strong? Made out of seven hides. Unbreakable!

The rest of my armour... I want to have it buried with me, in my grave.

Come now, woman, quickly take this boy inside and shut the door. Lock it up behind you. I want no tears shed here, in front of the hut.

580

What endless crying you women do!

Come, now hurry! Go on, go and shut the doors!

He hands the boy to Tecmessa

Wise doctors don't go on chanting lamentations when what's needed is a sharp knife!

Chorus:

This eagerness of yours, Ajax! It frightens me! And this angry voice of yours. It worries me.

Tecmessa:

My Lord, what's in that head of yours? What are you up to?

Ajax:

Ask no questions, be no judge! Think calmly.

Tecmessa:

Ajax! I am losing all hope!

Ajax, I beg you!

For god's sake and for the sake of your son, do not abandon us!

Ajax:

Gods, woman? You make me so angry, when you talk like that!

I owe the gods nothing! Nothing, don't you understand that?

591

Tecmessa:

Hush! Don't talk like that about the gods!

Ajax:

I'd rather talk to those who care.

Tecmessa:

Will you not listen to me?

Ajax:

You've said too much already!

Tecmessa:

Because I'm afraid, my Lord!

Ajax:

Go! Go now and shut the door!

Tecmessa:

Please, Ajax, please don't!

Ajax:

What a fool you must be, Tecmessa, if you think you're going to change my character now!

Exit Tecmessa, Eurysaces and Ajax into the hut.

Chorus:

Glorious island Salamis!

In the lap of the sea!

Blessed by the gods!

600

Chorus:

For many years now I, a poor soldier, wandered aimlessly around the lush valleys of Troy, one month following the next, worn out by the passing of time with only one frightening prospect in mind.

That my wandering paths will lead me to Hades, the destroyer of all.

610

Chorus:

And for a companion I have Ajax, a man in the grips of an incurable insanity delivered to him by the gods.

Chorus:

O, Salamis! You've sent forth a mighty man, a powerful warrior but that was a long time ago. Now Ajax is a different man. There, alone, his mind feeds on misery and we, his friends grieve for him.

Chorus:

Gone to waste are all his brave deeds on the battlefield.

They have no currency in the hands of the most hated, ungrateful men in the Greek army, our two kings, Atreus' sons.

621

Chorus:

And what of his poor mother? White haired and bent with the many years, what will she do when she hears that her son is stricken by a sickness that destroys the mind?

630

Chorus:

I can hear her now! She cries out the lamenting tones of a nightingale. Deep, mournful, pitiful cries, the high-pitched notes of a dirge.

Chorus:

And I can hear the sound of her hands as they crash against her chest!

Chorus:

See how she tears her hair out!

Chorus:

Better the dark halls of Hades than the fetters of an incurable disease.

Chorus:

Ajax is no more!

Chorus:

No more the noblest of the defiant Greeks!

Chorus:

No more the strength of character he was brought up with!

Chorus:

No more the man, no more the mind, no more the heart!

Chorus:

Ajax dwells elsewhere.

641

Chorus:

O, unhappy Telamon! Unhappy father! How will you receive the news of your son's ruin? A suffering beyond endurance, a suffering that none of your father's generation, of Aeacus' generation, has ever had to endure.

Ajax, followed by Tecmessa come out of the hut. Ajax is carrying his sword.

Ajax:

Relentless infinite Time! It uncovers the hidden and hides the unhidden.

Nothing is beyond expectation: The strongest oath can be trampled, the toughest heart can be softened. And so, too has mine.

650

My own heart was tough before, yet this poor woman's words have softened it, like iron is softened by the hands of a smith.

It hurts now. The thought of leaving her a widow, and leaving my son an orphan, at the mercy of my enemies, pains me.

But now, I shall go to the fields by the shore and wash myself in the waters of the ocean. Cleanse myself of the pollution and avert the deadly anger of the goddess.

Then I shall look for a spot, some deserted spot where I can bury this sword here, in Troy!

Bury this most hated of all weapons.

Bury it beneath the ground, where no one can find it.

660

Let Hades below, take care of it in his dark underworld.

It was a gift given to me by my deadliest enemy, Hektor. A gift that from the moment I received it the Argives gave me nothing but grief.

It's true what they say: an enemy's gift is never a gift; it does no one any good.

Well then, let's obey the will of the gods and let us learn to respect the sons of Atreus.

They are the commanders and we must follow their orders.

Isn't that so?

Even the strongest, the toughest must yield to those who hold command.

670

Winter's most bitter blizzards must give way to the fruit-bearing Summer and the frightening circle of the night must move away as Day, carried upon her white horses, brings in the blazing light. The heaving seas are brought to sleep by the fury of spinning winds.

Mighty Sleep, too, will release those he has fettered and not hold them imprisoned for ever. That's why we must learn to be sensible.

And so, I shall be sensible. I have learnt just now that we must hate our enemies today in the knowledge that they will become our friends tomorrow and we must help our friends, knowing that they could become our enemies sometime in the future.

680

Friendship is not a very trustworthy harbour.
But never mind all this; it will all turn out well.

To Tecmessa.

Now, woman, you go inside and pray to the gods for me.

Ask them to accomplish all of my wishes, every thing that's in my heart.

Exit Tecmessa into the hut. Ajax addresses the chorus.

And you, my friends, honour my wishes also, just as she has and tell Teucer, my brother, when he comes back, to look after all my affairs and to be loyal to you.

690

And now, I must go to a place that is proper for me to go. Do as I ask you and you will soon hear that even though Fate is against me right now, I will soon be free of this misfortune.

Exit Ajax

Chorus:

Oh, how happy this makes me! Let me jump from joy!

Chorus:

Oh, Pan! Come Pan!

Come down from the snow covered craggy peaks of Cyllene, cross over the briny sea and come down here to us!

700

Chorus:

Come, Pan, master of the dance! Teacher to the gods! Come with us and teach us to dance to the beats of Gnossus and Mysia!

Chorus:

Oh, how I'd love to dance now!

And you, Apollo! God of Delos! Come, fly over the Icarian Sea and be our eternal good friend!

Chorus:

Ares the god of war has taken away the visions of dismay from my eyes!

709

Chorus:

Oh, Joy!

Oh, Zeus, you've brought the shining light of day back to the swift sea-travelling ships of the Greeks. Ajax has now left behind his misfortune and he will obey and accomplish the will of the gods with all due reverence and respect, with all due ceremony and by performing the proper sacrifices.

Chorus:

Time withers all things and, in the end, nothing is incredible: even Ajax forgetting his anger and quarrel against the Atreus brothers is not incredible.

Enter Messenger

719

Messenger:

Friends, firstly, I want to announce the fact that Teucer has just come back from the cliffs of Mysia and as soon as he arrived the whole of the Greek army set out in one body, against him. The moment they saw him in the distance they made a tight circle around him and one by one began taunting him with insults and threats, telling him that he is the brother of a madman and of a traitor who plotted against the Greek army and that they would not rest until he's dead, until his body has been pounded to death with stones.

730

Swords were drawn and swung about and the quarrel reached its extremes before the senior officers began to sooth the soldiers down and calm their anger.

But now tell me where is Ajax? I need to report this news to him.

The leaders must know every new bit of information.

Chorus:

He's not in.

Just left a few minutes ago. A new mood and a fresh view of matters are now tied to the yoke of his mind.

Messenger:

How awful!

Either Teucer has sent me here too late or I was too slow getting here!

740

Chorus:

Why, what's so important? Were you supposed to prevent something from happening?

Messenger:

Yes, Teucer told me not to let Ajax out of the house until he, himself, gets here.

Chorus:

Well, Ajax is gone!

Chorus:

Gone to make peace with the gods.

After all that anger in his soul, it was a good change of thinking.

Messenger:

Wrong, my friends! That is, if Calchas is right with his prophesy!

Chorus:

What? What do you mean? What have you heard?

Messenger:

I was there at the time and so, what I know is what I have witnessed with my own eyes.

750

I saw the prophet, Calchas, leave his place in the tight circle of the generals, including the Atreus brothers, and walk over to Teucer, take him by the hand and speak to him in a friendly manner.

Calchas told Teucer that if he wanted to see his brother alive again, he should make sure that Ajax stays inside his hut the whole day today and not get out of there at all.

After that, Athena's anger will stop pursuing him.

760

That's what Calchas said.

Then he also said that, when men overfeed their soul with pride, the gods will bring them down by sending upon them some heavy misfortune, because, men, though they are mere mortals, at times they stop thinking like mere mortals.

"Ajax was always foolish," Calchas also said. "Even before he left home to come here, we saw his foolishness. His own father gave him wise advice. He told him, 'my son, always pursue victory over your enemy but do so with the aid of the gods.'

But what does Ajax say to that? He said, 'Father, anyone, even a nobody, can be victorious in battle with the aid of the gods. Me? I'm certain I can triumph over my enemy alone and without the help of any gods.'"

770

"That was the sort of stupid boasting he did back then," Calchas said.

And then, he added that there was also that other time when the goddess Athena was urging him on and giving him directions in the battle, telling him where to strike with his bloody hand. Ajax turned to her that time and said, "Athena, you go and help the other Greeks because no enemy shall ever pass through the grounds that I stand and defend."

Calchas said that those were despicable words! That they showed arrogance at its worst! More pride than any mortal should possess! And it was because of this, because of those words he uttered to the divine Athena that she is now so implacably angry at him.

However, if Ajax is still alive today, perhaps, Calchas said, we can manage to save his life –with Athena's help.

780

And after Calchas told me all this, Teucer got up and told me to bring these commands here, to you and to make sure you observe them.

But if we delay on this, then either, Ajax is already dead or Calchas is not a good prophet.

Chorus: *Shouts at Tecmessa in the hut*

Tecmessa! Come out, you unfortunate woman! Unfortunate child born of unfortunate parents. Come! Come and listen to this man's words. They are like a razor that shaves too close for comfort, my Lady. *Tecmessa comes out of the hut, holding Eurysaces by the hand. A nurse accompanies them.*

Tecmessa:
What's wrong?
You've raised me from my bed. I was resting after all the horrors I've witnessed.

790

Chorus:
Listen to this man, Tecmessa. He has brought us some dreadful news about Ajax.

Tecmessa:
Oh, no! What is this news? Tell me, then, my good man. Are we totally lost?

Messenger:
News, madam? I don't know if you could call this "news" but if Ajax is not in there then I'm truly afraid.

Tecmessa:
No, Ajax is not inside. Your words make me shudder with fear, my good man.

Messenger:
My Lady, Teucer gave orders that his brother stay in his hut and not go anywhere outside it, alone.

Tecmessa:
Teucer? Where is he? Why did he give such orders?

Messenger:
He's just arrived from the battlefield. He is afraid that if Ajax ventured out of his hut, he would most certainly be killed!

800

Tecmessa:
Oh, no! Who told him that?

Messenger:
The prophet Calchas, Thestor's son. He said that today is a matter of life or death for Ajax.

Tecmessa:
Oh, my dear friends, save me from what Fate has in store for me!
Come, some of you run to find Teucer. Others run to the western shores and yet some others go to the eastern side. See if you can find out where that doomed man, Ajax rushed off to.

It's obvious, my friends: He has deceived me and threw me out of his trust.

Oh, my child, what shall I do now?

I mustn't stay here. I'll go and look for him as well. I will go and look for him for as long as my strength lasts.

We mustn't waste any time if we are to save a man who is determined to die.

Tecmessa hands the child to the nurse who takes it inside the hut.

Tecmessa rushes off stage.

812

Chorus:
I'm ready to go!

Chorus:
Enough words. Let swift action now speak.

The chorus is divided in two and runs off stage in opposite directions.

A short pause before the scene changes to a remote spot by the shore.

A number of shrubs on a mound of sand behind which Ajax is fixing his sword in the ground with the point upwards. He will later fall upon it.

Ajax:

There! The butcher is ready... sharp and ready!

It's certainly standing on the right land. Troy!

Ah, but I have no time for such concerns.

Hector gave me this. His gift to me. I hated the man. Hated the sight of him!

But this here is the right spot for this sword.

Troy. The soil of an enemy.

820

Freshly sharpened with a whetstone that can shave away iron.

Firmly planted there now so that it can send me to a quick death.

There. All done!

The rest is up to you, Zeus. Help me. It is proper for you do so since my grand father, Aeacus, was your son. Do this for me: Send a messenger to tell the awful news to my brother Teucer so that he'll be the first man to handle my blood-stained body after I fall upon this sword. Don't let some enemy find me. They will throw me to the dogs and the ravens. That's all I ask of you, Zeus.

832

And I also ask Hermes, the god who escorts men to the world below, to send me off to a soft sleep, to die quickly, without a struggle. Die, the moment I make the jump, the moment this sword pricks my side.

And I also call upon the eternal virgins, the fast-footed Furies who oversee the troubles of all the mortals. I call upon their help and I ask them to witness my death.

It is a death committed by the hands of the sons of Atreus.

Come, sacred maidens, grab them both and deliver them the evil befitting evil men.

840

Make them destroy themselves with their own hand, as I am destroying myself with mine. Let the cause of their death be their dear children.

Come divine Furies, exact the full punishment. Leave no Greek soldier alive!

Hurry!

And I also call upon the divine Sun who drives his chariot through the high heavens.

Sun-god, as you go over my native land, pull back your golden reins for a while, stop and announce my death and my Fate to my aged father and to my grieving mother who nursed me.

850

Unfortunate woman! What loud and wild wailing she will fill the city with, when she hears of my death!

But wailing is futile! Nothing at all is achieved by it.

Now I must hurry and begin my act!

Come Death! I call upon you now!

Come Death and look upon me now! Ah, but never mind, I'll talk to you, later, when I have come down below.

Come Light! Light of this bright day!

Come Sun-god, charioteer!

I call upon you again, for the very last time ever!

Come, sweet Light and you sacred soil of my island, Salamis!

860

Salamis, roof of my own home, the home of my ancestors!

And you, beautiful city Athens and the race of men that lives within your gates!

And you, springs and rivers here, in Troy! I send you my thanks! You have nourished me well.

This is the last speech that Ajax makes here. The rest I shall address to those below, in Hades' black halls!

Ajax falls upon his sword and dies.

A short pause before one half of the chorus (a) enters. They do not yet see Ajax.

Chorus (a):

Oh, I am so tired! We've walked everywhere! One path leads to another and that leads to yet another but not one leads us to where Ajax is!

A noise is heard from the opposite side of the stage. It is that of the other half of the chorus (b) as it is approaching.

870

Chorus (a):

Look! Look there! I've just heard a noise.

Enter the second half of the chorus.

Chorus (a):

Ah! It's our shipmates!

Chorus (b):

Any news, friends?

Chorus (a):

We went all around the west side...

Chorus (b):

Did you see anything?

Chorus (a):

Lots of trouble but no Ajax.

Chorus (b):

Not from the East side either.

Chorus (a):

If only someone could tell us...

880

Chorus (b):

Some fisherman, perhaps. Some tired old soul, staying up, all night, working at his nets...

Chorus (a):

Or some mountain nymph looking down from one of Mount Ida's four peaks...

Chorus (b):

The Olympian one...

Chorus (a):

Or one of the rivers flowing from the Bosphorus...

Chorus:

If they could see the madman and call out to us, tell us where he's wandering...

Chorus:

What a pity not to find the man's tracks after all this arduous search.

What a pity not to find him after all this work!

Tecmessa appears from behind the chorus.

She sees Ajax, rushes towards him and screams with terror.

891

Tecmessa:

Ah! No! No! Gods!

Chorus:

Who was that?

Chorus:

The scream came from over there, behind those shrubs.

Tecmessa: *Crying*

Oh, Ajax! Oh, my darling husband!

Chorus runs towards Tecmessa but Tecmessa also rushes towards them, trying to stop them from approaching the body. They meet a few feet away from the scene of death.

Chorus:

Ah! It is Tecmessa, the spearman's captive woman.

Chorus:

Beaten by an uncontrollable agony!

Tecmessa:

Oh, my friends! Oh, now I am lost! Now I am destroyed! I am finished!

Chorus:

What is it Tecmessa?

Tecmessa:

Ah! There! Look! Our Ajax has just been killed! His sword plunged deep into his heart!

900

Chorus:

Killed? Oh!

This is the end of our return! You have killed our homeward journey, my Lord!

Chorus:

And you have killed us, your shipmates!

Chorus:

Oh, you poor woman!

Tecmessa:

Yes, he's dead! We can do nothing but mourn now!

Chorus:

But who did it? Whose hand killed him?

Tecmessa:

His own, judging from the way he has planted the sword into the ground.

He obviously fell onto it!

Chorus:

Oh, Ajax! Oh, friend! Bathed in blood through our stupidity, our own blindness, our lack of care.

910

Chorus:

No friends around you, to protect you, my friend!

Chorus:

Tecmessa, where is our dead Ajax now? Where is that indomitable man?

Where lies the man whose very name means "Ill-Fated?"

Tecmessa:

No, no! No one else must see him like that.

She takes off her cape.

This shall be his shroud. I shall cover his body with it.

No friend of his could endure the sight of him!

Black blood gushing out through his nostrils!

Black gore that rose up from the deadly gash of his self-slaying.

She walks over to the corpse

920

Oh, Ajax! What shall I do now? Which of your friends shall carry you?

Where is your brother? Where is Teucer?

Oh, I wish he were here right now! A brother, dressing the body of his brother!

Unfortunate Ajax! What a man you were, what a man you are now!

Even your enemies could mourn your death!

Chorus:

You were determined, my unfortunate friend! Stubbornly determined to put an end to your endless troubles, to your dreadful Fate! Determined to do it with a tragic deed.

930

Chorus:

Night and day you groaned with a deadly passion, curses against your enemies, the sons of Atreus!

Chorus:

The day when the contest about Achilles' golden armour took place was a day that brought about this new lot of awesome troubles!

Tecmessa:

Oh, what an unbearable sight!

Chorus:

I know! I know it well! This pain pierces the very heart of a noble woman!

Tecmessa:

Oh! Ajax!

940

Chorus:

Cry, my Lady! Cry again and again, my Lady!

Today you've lost a man you loved, a man who had no equal.

Tecmessa:

This pain! This pain that I feel is something you can only ever imagine!

Chorus:

Yes, my Lady, I agree.

Tecmessa: *To Eurysaces*

Oh my little son!

What now?

What slavery's yoke do our new dreadful masters have in store for us now?

Chorus:

May the gods avert the unspeakable suffering that the ruthless sons of Atreus you've mentioned, have in store for you!

950

Tecmessa:

The gods? The gods?

It was the gods who hurled this disaster upon us!

Chorus:

Yes, they've made the weight of our burden even more unbearable.

Tecmessa:

It was Athena! Zeus' daughter! Fearsome Pallas!

It was she who brought about this terror. For Odysseus' sake!

Chorus:

Odysseus, yes! Odysseus, the sly, black-hearted soul!

He'll be laughing uncontrollably when he hears the news of our frenzied lament!

He and those two evil mates of his, the Atreus brothers!

Tecmessa:

Let them! Let them laugh all they want. Let them laugh at our misfortune.

They cared not about him when he was alive but they'll care about him now that he's dead and this war

rages still.

Fools never know the virtue of what they have in their hands until someone takes it away from them. His death gives sorrow to me and joy to them. So be it.

As for Ajax, himself, it was what he wanted, it was the death he longed for.

So what is there for them to laugh about? It was the gods who killed Ajax, not those men. The gods above, not the men below.

971

So let Odysseus shout out his empty insults. They no longer possess Ajax!

Ajax is now gone!

Gone and left me to my tears and sorrows.

Teucer: *Within*

Oh, what a disaster! What a disaster!

Chorus:

Hang on a minute! I think I've heard Teucer's voice and by the sound of it, it looks like he knows what's happened!

Enter Teucer accompanied by two soldiers.

Teucer:

Oh, my dear brother! Oh, Ajax! Oh, Ajax! Is it true what they say about you?

Chorus:

Your brother is dead, Teucer. Be certain of that.

980

Teucer:

Oh, how heavy is the Fate that rules me!

Chorus:

That is true, Teucer.

Teucer:

What bitter, bitter Fate!

Chorus:

We can but mourn, my friend!

Teucer:

Unbearable blow!

Chorus:

A most unbearable blow, Teucer!

Teucer:

Awful, awful blow! Where is his son? Where in this land of the Trojans can he be now?

Chorus:

He is alone, in the hut.

Teucer:

Quick then, go and bring him here! Hurry, before someone grabs him and takes him away! Poor child, he's like the cub of a lioness robbed of her mate!

Hurry! Help us, men!

Men love to mock the fallen!

Exit Tecmessa.

990

Chorus:

Teucer, you're doing exactly what Ajax had wanted you to do.

When he was alive, he asked that you should take care of his affairs.

Teucer walks towards Ajax's body.

The chorus stays back.

Teucer: *In shock*

Ah! Dreadful, dreadful sight!

Of all the dreadful sights I've beheld in my life, this is by far the worst!

And this path, my dear brother, this path that brought me here to you, of all the paths I ever took, this is by far the worst!

A rumour sped through the lines of the Greek army, my poor brother, sped fast, as if sent by the gods themselves, a horrible rumour that said you were dead.

When I heard it, back there in the field, far from here, I sighed quietly.

1000

Ah, but now, now that I am here and I can see you with my own eyes, Ajax!

Oh, the sight of you, Ajax! This sight has broken my heart!

To the chorus

Come, friends, one of you, uncover his body. Let me see the full dread!

One of the chorus pulls back the cape.

Ah! Ajax! What ghastly sight! How bitter the outcome of your courage!

How dreadful the pain you've sown in my soul by this death of yours!

What now, Ajax? What now for me, Ajax? Where can I go? What mortal could receive a man who did not stand by his brother in his hour of need?

1010

Will Telamon, your father and mine, smile when I return to him without you?

Will he receive me kindly?

No! Of course not!

Telamon doesn't smile even when Fortune treats him well, let alone now.

What insults will he not hurl at me! I can hear his shouts now: "The bastard son of a slave captured by the spear!" And "the brother who has betrayed Ajax through sheer cowardice, or through trickery so that he might inherit his kingdom and his house!" That's what he'll accuse me of.

Oh my darling brother, Ajax!

These will be the insults that he will throw at me, Ajax. He's now a man weighed down by old age, cantankerous and quick with his anger.

1020

And after those insults he will banish me from our land, renounce me as a free man and have me declared a slave.

And so, that's the sort of homecoming I can expect now, Ajax.

As for Troy, here, too, my enemies are great in number and my friends few. Fewer even now that you are dead!

Ah!

Examines Ajax's body

What shall I do with you now, my brother? How can I get the courage to pull you away from that gleaming murderous point of the sword?

Poor man! What murderer has taken your last breath?

Examines the sword

Hektor! You see, Ajax? Even in his death, Hektor has murdered you!

Compare the Fates of these two mortals, Ajax:

1030

There was Hektor! Tied to his chariot by Achilles with the very belt that you had given him! Tied and dragged around until his body was nothing more than a mound of mangled gore. And there you are, Ajax! Fallen and died upon the very sword that Hektor has given you as a gift!

Well then, is it not true to say that it was some Spirit of vengeance that forged this sword for you and that it was Hades himself—a most gruesome craftsman— who made that belt for Hektor?

Such things, I say, such things and all things, at all times, are brought together for us mortals by the gods themselves.

Whoever doesn't hold this view let him believe what he likes. I'll believe what I like.

1040

Chorus: *Sees Menelaus in the distance*

Enough talk for now Teucer.

Think now of how you'll bury the man... and what you'll say to the enemy I see coming towards us. Evil man has obviously come to mock us in our misfortune.

Teucer:

Who? Who do you see? What soldier is that?

Chorus:

Menelaus, the man for whom we launched this expedition.

Teucer:

Ha! Yes, I see him now that he's near enough!

Mockingly

He's not hard to recognise, is he?

Enter Menelaus in full armour accompanied by two soldiers

Menelaus: *To Teucer*

You there! Leave that body alone! Do not move it! Leave it as it is!

Teucer:

Such big words, Menelaus! What do they mean?

1050

Menelaus:

My words are my command and the command of the chief of the army.

Teucer:

In that case, you'll tell us the reason behind your command.

Menelaus:

The reason? The reason is treason!

We have brought this man with us, here in Troy, thinking that he was our ally, a friend of the Greeks.

Now we see that he is an enemy. Worse enemy than the Trojans themselves.

That man has conspired to murder us, to murder the complete army! He tried to put us to the spear during the night! Had not one of the gods intervened and thwarted his evil plan his fate would have been ours.

1060

He would be alive and we would be lying there, in his place, victims of a loathsome death. Thankfully, the god has diverted his violent act and delivered it upon dumb sheep and cattle.

And that's why no mortal has the power to give this body a proper burial.

It will be thrown onto the yellow sands of the shore as fodder for the birds of prey.

So control this hot anger of yours!

We could not control him when he was alive so, whether you like it or not, we'll control him now that he's dead.

1070

He had no time for my commands when he was alive. Typical of an uncouth man who disregards the orders of his superiors. No city can succeed without the respect of the laws; nor can any army be ruled wisely if it lacks fear and respect.

Every man must know that even those men with a massive body can be brought down by even the smallest evil.

1080

And every man must know well that he is safe only when he can feel fear and shame and that if he is arrogant and disrespectful towards his city's laws, then that city, even though it was sailing along well before, that city will eventually sink to the bottom.

Let us hold some due respect and let us never think that if we achieved all of our heart's desires there won't come a time when we'll have to pay back a painful recompense.

The one drags in the other.

First it was he who behaved with fierce arrogance but now it is my turn to behave with pride. So, I command you: Do not bury this man if you don't want to see yourself fall into that very same grave.

1091

Chorus:

Your speech was wise Menelaus but now you mustn't insult the dead!

Teucer:

Friends, when men, who are supposed to be of high birth, make speeches like this, it does not surprise me to see men of low birth make mistakes.

Menelaus, tell me again: you say that you brought Ajax here as an ally to the Greeks. Is that right? Did you really bring Ajax here?

1100

Did he not sail here of his own accord, as an independent and as his own master?

How is it that you have suddenly made yourself his commander? And what right do you have to command those people he brought here with him?

You, Menelaus, are the king of Sparta, not our the king, so you have no more right to chastise him as he has to chastise you. Use your fine, arrogant speeches to chastise your own subjects. You may rule them as you wish but as for me, I will give this man the due and proper burial he deserves.

1110

I am not afraid of your pompous words, nor of the words of the rest of the commanders.

Ajax did not come here to fight for your woman, like all the other poor, worn out men. Ajax came here because he was bound by an oath he swore.

His coming here had nothing to do with you because, to him, you were a nobody, a nothing and Ajax placed no value on nobodies.

If you don't like this, then go, send off your heralds and bring the General here. As far as I am concerned I will do what I must, despite all your noisy protestations.

So long as you're the sort of man you are, I will not be afraid to turn away from you.

Chorus:

In such times of trouble I don't like to hear such speeches!
Harsh words bite, even if they are right.

1120

Menelaus:

Ha! This... archer seems to be a little too proud for my liking!

Teucer:

Because, unlike your skills, mine are not loathsome.

Menelaus:

You'd be prouder still if you had a shield!

Teucer:

Shield? Ha!

I don't need a shield to deal with you, Menelaus! Even if you are with your full armour!

Menelaus:

Your tongue feeds your temper with a fierce anger!

Teucer:

When justice is with you then anger is justified!

Menelaus:

Is it just, then, that my murderer be honoured?

Teucer:

Your murderer? What a mighty thing it is to be both alive **and** murdered, ey?

Menelaus:

It's true. A god has saved my life but Ajax had me for dead.

Teucer:

Then do not dishonour the gods! Do not disobey their laws – if, as you say, they've saved your life!

1130

Menelaus:

Dishonour them? Disobey their laws? How am I doing that?

Teucer:

You dishonour them by not allowing the dead their burial.

Menelaus:

The burial of my own enemies, yes. Is that dishonourable?

Teucer:

Ajax? Was Ajax ever your enemy?

Menelaus:

You know very well we hated each other!

Teucer:

I know very well –as does everyone else – that you've cheated in the voting.

Menelaus:

The blame for that rests with the judges, not with me.

Teucer:

Oh, how cleverly you can twist things, Menelaus!

Evil turns into virtue in your sly hands!

Menelaus:

This is the sort of talk that can cause someone a great deal of pain, Teucer!

Teucer:

I don't think it's going to be as painful for me as it is going to be for you!

1140

Menelaus:

Then let me say just this one thing: this man will not be buried!

Teucer:

And let me say just this one word in reply: this man will be buried!

Menelaus:

In my life I've seen a man who shouted with a reckless tongue at his sailors, pushing them to go on sailing, right through a terrible storm. But then, when the storm came, when the wild winds began to charge, this man was heard no more. Not a sound from him! He crawled under his cloak and just lie there.

The sailors rushed about, trampled all over him, as their needs demanded and he still didn't utter a sound!

Just like you, Teucer! You and your fierce shouting!

Well, some little cloud will come and blow a mighty storm upon you and upon your tongue and put an end to all your noise!

1150

Teucer:

And I've seen a man, too, Menelaus. A very stupid man who harassed people in their time of trouble until a man, whose heart was just like mine, saw him and spoke to him. He told him, "man, do not hurt the dead because if you do, you'll get hurt."

That was the advice he gave to that stupid man; and that stupid man was you, Menelaus.

Is that too difficult a riddle for you?

Menelaus:

I'm leaving. I'd be humiliated if I was seen wasting words with a man whom I should be beating up!

1161

Teucer:

Off you go then! I'd be humiliated myself, if I was seen listening to the babbling of an idiot!

Exit Menelaus and his soldiers

Chorus:

This great dispute will end in a great fight!

Quick, Teucer, look around for a hollow dugout where you can bury this man. Make a grave for him beneath the moist soil, so that folks may remember him always.

Enter Tecmessa with Eurysaces and the nurse.

Teucer:

Ah, here's Ajax's wife and child. Just in time to adorn this unfortunate man's grave.

Come here, son! Come stand by to your father and hold him, pray to him.

1170

Kneel down beside him and pray, my boy. Here! Take some strands of hair from your head and from your mother's head and from mine. These are the ceremonial tokens of prayer.

Both, Tecmessa and Eurysaces pull some strands of hair from their head.

And stay here, Eurysaces! Stay here and if anyone from the army tries to drag you away from your father's body, may that man and the whole of his generation, die and disappear from the face of the earth, without burial, without a grave. Let him be torn off from his roots just as I tear off this hair from my head!

1180

Hold on to him, boy and guard him well! Don't let anyone move you from there. And if someone comes, throw yourself upon your father and cling to him. Don't let go of him.

And you men! Don't just stand there like a bunch of women! Help them! Look after them until I come back. I'll go and take care of a grave for him, in spite of what anyone else says!

Exit Teucer and his two companions.

Chorus:

How many more?

When will come the final year? The last year of our wandering? When will it come?

Chorus:

Year after year, pain after pain!

An endless number of years, an endless war, an endless pain!

A dire shame for the Greeks in these wide plains of Troy.

1190

Chorus:

The man who first taught the Greeks how to wage a war...

Chorus:

...with murderous weapons...

Chorus:

...should have been murdered himself.

Chorus:

Either lifted to the heavens or cast down into Hades' dark caverns!

Chorus:

Pains! Pains who give birth to more pains!

Utter destruction! That's what that man has brought to humans.

1200

Chorus:

It was that man who has robbed me of the joy of festive garlands and of brimming deep cups, of the

sparkling sounds of pipes that would come in my hours of sadness! It was he who has robbed me of the pleasures of night's bed.

Chorus:

He robbed me of the pleasures of Love, that man! Of Love!

Chorus:

And now, here we are, lying alone, uncared for, neglected!

1210

Chorus:

Our hair soaked all day in heavy dew! Troy's eternal reminder of misery!

Chorus:

Mighty Ajax, stood like a shield before us, guarding us against the fears and arrows of the night but now Fate's hateful god has taken him.

1219

Chorus:

What's left for us then? What joy remains?

Oh how I wish I were at Sunium, near the sea-beaten woody shore!

There, on its flat valley! I'd stand there and wave a salute to sacred Athens.

Enter Teucer and his soldiers in a rush.

Teucer:

I've rushed back here because I saw our General, Agamemnon, walking this way and from the looks of him, he's about to let fly some nasty words from his mouth.

The three stand around the body, protecting it.

Enter Agamemnon with two of his soldiers

Agamemnon: *To Teucer*

You! Reports have come to me about you!

You've been spreading disgusting insults against us everywhere and with total impunity, it seems.

Yes, you! Teucer! You, the son of a captive slave, it's you I'm talking to!

1230

Heaven knows what sort of fine speeches you'd be making if you were born of a noble woman! The earth would be too lowly for you to tread upon, your words would be so high and mighty! What boasts would fly from your tongue, ey?

You are a nobody, a nothing and you are standing up for another nobody, another nothing!

You've made declarations that we have no authority to rule over the Greeks or over you, that we are not the leaders of the fleet; and that Ajax, you say, had sailed of his accord, as his own master!

Monstrous, intolerable lies! Lies uttered by a mere slave!

Ajax? You speak of him so proudly! What sort of a man was he, that Ajax of yours?

Has he done anything that I have not? Had he stood upon a battlefield that I had not? Had he gone anywhere that I had not? Is there no other man in the whole Greek army except him?

1240

Looks like it was the wrong thing for us to do, to have that contest over Achilles' armour, if all that was going to happen was to have you, Teucer, reject the judges' decisions and then to insult us at every turn or to slaughter us in some cowardly ambush.

How could we ever establish any proper laws if we allowed such unruly behaviour as to turn down those who justly won a prize and promote those who had lost?

1250

No! This will have to stop right now!

Strong men with massive shoulders are not the most dependable. No, triumph comes to those men who have brains and wisdom. One can lead a broad-shouldered ox down a straight path with just a tiny whip.

And that's the remedy, I suggest, will soon be used on you, Teucer, if you are to get some sense. That man is dead and gone. He's now no more than a ghost and yet you go freely about the place, spreading insults against us.

Get some sense, Teucer! Learn who you are! You are a slave!

1260

Bring a free man to speak on your behalf! I cannot understand a thing you're saying. I do not speak the language of the barbarians.

Chorus:

Sense! I wish you both had some it! I wish both of you had some wisdom!

That's the best advice I can give you!

Teucer:

So much for gratitude to the dead! How quickly it disappears! How quickly men forget what they owe the dead. How quickly mortals betray their dead!

To Ajax

Oh, Ajax, my brother! Here is Agamemnon whose life you have protected by putting yours at risk, yet here he is now showing us just how little regard he has for you!

1270

All your work is gone and forgotten for ever!

To Agamemnon

You speak such nonsense, Agamemnon! So many words, so little sense!

Have you forgotten that time when you barricaded yourself behind your walls, trembling with fear because of the way the battle had turned? Have you forgotten that it was this man, yes, Ajax, who came and rescued you? And have you also forgotten the time when the sterns of our ships were turned into blazing torches and wild Hector was leaping high over the ditches and onto the hulls of those ships?

1280

Have you forgotten who it was who put an end to that terror? Have you forgotten that it was that man, there, that man who, you said, went nowhere where you didn't go? Was that act not worthy of your praise, Agamemnon? And have you forgotten, Agamemnon the day he fought man-to-man against Hector?

No one ordered him to that then. It was decided by lot. A lot that was fair and square. The token he dropped into the crested helmet wasn't made of some loose lump of crumbly clay or some other thing that would roll back out of it, but a solid one, a token guaranteed to be the first to spin out of the helmet when the judge shook it.

Yes, that was Ajax! That man there! It was he who did this and I was there, next to him, a witness; a slave, the child of a barbarian mother.

1290

Look at me, you horrible man! Look at me when you're lying to me!

Did you know that your father's father, Pelops, was Phrygian born? A Trojan? A barbarian? And did you know that your own father –yes, your father Atreus!- set up a most despicable dinner for his brother, Thyestes, your uncle? Did you know what it was that he had served Thyestes that night? It was the flesh of Thyestes' very own sons!

Your own mother, Agamemnon, was from Crete. Your father found her in the arms of a lover and so he threw her into the ocean to be eaten by the voiceless fishes!

And you have the audacity to criticise my birth? My lineage? You, yourself are not Greek!

1300

My father is old Telamon who, while fighting on the battlefield, won the army's prize for valour. My mother was his award. Given to him to be his concubine.

She was a princess by birth. Her father was Laomedon and Heracles, Alcmene's son, presented her to her husband as a special prize.

So, I am a prince, the son of noble parents. Would I shame my own kin, then? Would I shame that man there, that man who is my brother, by abandoning him in this dismal hour? Would I let you throw his body away, unburied?

Have you no shame in suggesting such a thing?

Be certain of this, Agamemnon: If you try and throw that man away to the beasts of prey, you'll need to be doing the same with the three of us here.

1310

I would be proud to fight and to die doing so, for that man's sake and to do it in front of everyone here!

Sooner than die for that woman of yours, or rather, your brother's woman, Helen!

So, don't worry about me, rather worry about yourself because if you harm me in any way, you'd wish you played the coward with me and did nothing.

Enter Odysseus.

Chorus:

Ah, Lord Odysseus!

Just in time to untie this dreadful knot –unless of course you wanted to make an even worse tangle of it!

Odysseus:

What is going on here, gentlemen? I heard all the shouting the sons of Atreus were making over this brave man's corpse, from quite a distance.

1320

Agamemnon:

But of course, Odysseus! Have we not heard enough insults from this man already?

Odysseus:

Insults? What sort of insults? Personally I can understand a man hurling insults to those who have done the same to him.

Agamemnon:

My insults to him were a response to his insulting deeds towards me.

Odysseus:

What insulting deeds did he commit to you?

Agamemnon:

He said he'll refuse my orders to leave this corpse unburied and that he'll bury it himself.

Odysseus:

Well then, can I act like a friend towards you, Agamemnon and help you now by speaking the truth, just as I always have done for you?

1330

Agamemnon:

Speak, Odysseus. I'd be a fool not to listen to your advice. You are the best friend I have in the Greek army.

Odysseus:

Well, then, listen. I beg you in the name of the heavens, Agamemnon, not to be so merciless as to refuse that man his burial. Don't let anger grow so much in your heart that it overpowers your sense of justice.

He was my enemy, too. The worst in the whole army, particularly since I won Achilles' armour but even though he thought of me as his enemy I would not betray his honour by denying that he was, indeed, a very brave man.

1340

The bravest of all the Greeks that came here. All except Achilles.

So, to insult Ajax is to commit an injustice because by doing so, it won't be him that you'd be insulting but the gods and their laws.

The law is clear on this: to insult a noble man, even if he's dead and even if you hate him, is to commit an injustice.

Agamemnon:

Odysseus! You are defending this man against me!

Odysseus:

Yes, Agamemnon. I hated him when it was proper and just to hate him!

Agamemnon:

So, now that he's dead, isn't it proper for you to insult him?

Odysseus:

Son of Atreus, don't take pleasure in gains achieved by ignoble deeds.

1350

Agamemnon:

It's hard to find a king who'd virtuous in such circumstances.

Odysseus:

But, nevertheless, he should honour the words of a friend whose advice is good.

Agamemnon:

Noble man should obey their superiors.

Odysseus:

Fine but one wins when one gives way to friends.

Agamemnon:

But do remember to what sort of a man you're granting your kindness, Odysseus!

Odysseus:

True, Ajax was my enemy but he was, nonetheless, noble!

Agamemnon:

So, what will you do with him? Do you have that much respect for the corpse of your enemy?

Odysseus:

His virtue is far greater than his enmity.

Agamemnon:

Yes, such men have no stable character.

Odysseus:

The fact is, Agamemnon, that men can be friends one minute and enemies the next.

1360

Agamemnon:

And do you think it's proper to make friends with such unstable characters?

Odysseus:

I've no desire to praise a pitiless heart.

Agamemnon:

So, Odysseus, today you'll make us all look like cowards.

Odysseus:

On the contrary! I hope to make us all look like men who are noble, in the sight of the gods.

Agamemnon:

So, then, is it your wish to have me allow the burial of this corpse?

Odysseus:

Yes, Agamemnon, because I, too, will end up in his position one day.

Agamemnon:

Ah! All men are the same. They all care for their own pain.

Odysseus:

If I would not care not for my own pain then for whose pain should I care?

Agamemnon:

Then let it be known that burying this man is your doing, not mine.

Odysseus:

Whatever you do, the burial of this man will be regarded as an act of your generosity.

1370

Agamemnon:

Odysseus, you should know well that I am prepared to do for you favours that are even much greater than this one. But as far as Ajax is concerned, he will be an enemy to me whether he's dead or alive.

But you do as you please, Odysseus.

Exit Agamemnon and his soldiers

Chorus:

Odysseus, no one will deny that what you've done is a wise thing.

Odysseus:

Teucer, I want you to know that from now on I shall be as big a friend to you as I was your enemy before. I wish to join you and to help you bury that man, with all honours due to one of the most noble men.

1381

Teucer:

Noble Odysseus. Let me say that I approve of everything you said.

You have made lies of my expectations of you.

You, Odysseus, were Ajax's greatest enemy, yet it was you, alone, of all the Greeks, who stood by him and, as a man living, refused to insult this man who is dead.

This you did, even though, that bloated general and his brother wanted to hurl insults at him and to leave him unburied.

1390

Let, then, the Father, the Lord of Olympus, and the Furies who oversee every act of the mortals, and the goddess, Justice, destroy those two utterly and cruelly.

They are both cruel! They wished to dispose of the body of my noble brother in the most disrespectful manner.

However, son, of Laertes, I hesitate to let you touch this body with your hands, lest that might offend the dead. But, of course, you can help with all other matters regarding the burial and you may, if you wish, call on any other Greek soldier to help us. That will not offend us in the least.

I will look to deal with all the rest.

Odysseus, I want you to be certain that we consider your actions today to be the actions of an honourable man.

1400

Odysseus:

Well, I would have liked to touch the body but since that is not your wish, I will respect you and leave. Your wishes in this matter are proper.

Exit Odysseus

Teucer: *To the chorus*

Enough, now! We have wasted a great deal of time.

Let some of you dig a deep grave and let others set up the tall tripod over the fire, with the proper ceremonial holy water.

Some of you go into the hut and bring out the armour he wore in battle.

Turning to Eurysaces

1410

Come, boy, use what strength you've got to help me lift your father's body.

Careful because his wounds are still warm and they're still spouting forth black blood.

Come, all you men! If you are here in friendship, come, hurry and begin the work.

Do it as well as you can because you will never work for a man more noble than Ajax.

Ajax, while alive, was the noblest of them all!

Chorus:

Men may learn many things from what they see.

But no man can see what the Fates have in store for his future.

Exit all

**END OF SOPHOCLES'
"AJAX"**