

Dennis Daly

SOPHOCLES' AJAX

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Introduction

Sophocles lived during the golden age of ancient Greece. He was born around 496 BC in Colonus, just outside of Athens, and died 90 years later. He probably came from a wealthy merchant family and lived what many would think of as a near perfect life. So the dry facts seem to say.

At sixteen years of age Sophocles led the paeon, celebrating a decisive Greek victory over the Persians at Salamis. This was more than just an everyday honor. You needed the physique, athleticism, a stage presence and the ability to sing. Sophocles held numerous civic positions of high honor including treasurer, general (he served with the legendary Pericles), priest, and commissioner. His friends included the great historian Herodotus.

Of all of Sophocles' 123 plays only seven survive. They are Oedipus Rex, Antigone, Oedipus at Colonus, Electra, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, and Ajax. Sophocles wrote his plays specifically as entries for the Dionysia festivals held annually in Athens. Playwrights usually entered four plays at a time into these competitions. The so-called Theban plays of Sophocles, Oedipus Rex, Antigone, and Oedipus at Colonus, were never entered together, but were each entered with another set of plays. Early on Sophocles bested his older rival Aeschylus and never looked back winning many more competitions than either Aeschylus or his younger rival, Euripides.

The power of these tragedies and their subject matter belie the official biography of Sophocles. The dramatist simply understood shame, degradation, alienation, despair and madness a little too well. His view of the gods as overbearing and at times dicey characters does not appear consistent with Sophocles, the priest and pillar of the community. Since it is too late to amend the few extant facts that make up Sophocles' biography, to know him better one must read his tragedies and there is no better starting point than Ajax.



After Achilles, Ajax is the greatest of the Greek warriors that have come to Troy. However Odysseus has triumphed over him in a contest for the armor of Achilles. Hatred for Odysseus, and the generals, who rigged the contest, Agamemnon, and Menelaus, drives Ajax mad. He plots to murder them for their duplicity. The goddess Athena then intervenes.

In Ajax, madness leads to shame and shame leads to self-knowledge and nobility, a nobility that not only puts the pettiness of the gods in a strange light, but is transformational. Human pride and arrogance, as personified in Ajax, are routed. The plebian fears of Ajax's followers serve to emphasize the newly-found maturity of their leader, albeit a bit late. Ajax's wisdom in turn echoes off the loyalty of Tecmessa, his wife, the generosity of Odysseus, his sworn enemy, and the devotion of Teucer, his admirable brother. In the end Ajax wins his victory in death. His body is allowed a ritual burial, guaranteeing his proper entry into the afterlife. Thus harmony returns to the human condition.

Soundings East published three excerpts of Ajax in Vol. 5 No. 2.

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SOPHOCLES' AJAX

ATHENA

Son of Laertes, you have always amazed
Me by your ability to gain some slight
Edge over even the most awesome
Of adversaries. And now I find you
Where the mighty Ajax's tent is pitched
To protect the army's flank from sudden
Assault. Like an eager Spartan hound you seem
To have picked up the scent of fresh tracks.
Indeed your nose has not failed you; at this
Very moment the prey you seek is within,
His face and murderous hands drenched in blood
And sweat. So stop peering around doors
And tell me the reason for this conduct.
I may be able to help.

ODYSSEUS

Athena! How happy I am to hear your voice,
The voice which of all the gods is dearest
To me. As to the sound of Tyrrhenian
Trumpet, my soul thrills to its summons.
Yes, you have guessed rightly, I am on the trail
Of Ajax, possessor of the seven-fold
Shield. I've been following him for hours.
Last night he carried out an incredible
Attack against us. Or at least we think
It was he. The facts at this point are still
Not very clear. I have offered to track down
The perpetrator of the deed and discover
His motive. This much we know: our Trojan spoils,
All of our cattle and sheep, were found
Butchered this morning, along with the men
Whom we had posted to guard them. Everyone

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Believes it was Ajax. Also, someone claims
To have seen him running wildly across
The campground with his sword unsheathed and bloody.
After questioning the man, I found
This trail which led me here; but I'm confused.
Obviously, some of these footprints
Are not his. You come just when I need
You, Athena. Many times in the past
You have guided me. Will you help me now?

ATHENA

Yes, Odysseus, why do you suppose
That I came all this way, if not to assist
You in your pursuit.

ODYSSEUS

Then tell me, goddess, is my time well spent here?

ATHENA

The man you seek is within; it was his doing.

ODYSSEUS

What could have provoked him to such slaughter?

ATHENA

His jealous anger at the loss
Of Achilles armour, which was given to you.

ODYSSEUS

I understand; but why attack the beasts.

ATHENA

He believed that the blood he was letting
Was the blood of men, not of beasts.

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ODYSSEUS

We were the objects of this assault? His own comrades?

ATHENA

You were. And you would be dead by now
If it were not for my intervention.

ODYSSEUS

How could he attempt this? What was his plan?

ATHENA

To fall upon you under the cover of night.

ODYSSEUS

How near did he get?

ATHENA

The entrance way of the Atreidae's tent.

ODYSSEUS

Then who checked his hand, preventing murder?

ATHENA

It was I who stole from him his triumph
Blinding him to the truth with insane delusions
Which caused him to turn his anger on the penned-in
Herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, the undivided
Booty of the army. He struck them first on the right,
Then on the left, hacking away in a bloody
Circle, dead and wounded carcasses piling up
Everywhere, and all the while he believed
That he had Agamemnon in his grip
And would cut his head off, or that he
Was thrusting his sword into Menelaus' heart,
Or that he was battling some other

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Renowned warrior. And I, while he was
In this maniacal state, urged him on.
Finally when he tired from the killing
He bound up the animals left alive—
Still believing them human—and drove
Them back to his tent. He is torturing
Them now. A gruesome sight! But you will
Soon see with your own eyes, and whatever
You see you must report to the Argives.

(ODYSSEUS moves back from the tent - Looking rather skittish, hesitant.)

Get a grip on yourself, no need to fear.
I'll make you invisible to him, he won't harm you.

(She calls to AJAX within)

Ajax, stop binding the wrists of your captives.
Come out. Do you hear me? Come out of the tent.

ODYSSEUS

Please, goddess, don't call him forth now. Wait!

ATHENA

Is this cowardice? I told you there is
Nothing at all to be afraid of.

ODYSSEUS

Yes, but I'd rather you let him be, for now.

ATHENA

What's wrong? He's only flesh and blood – like you.

ODYSSEUS

He's also the man I've always hated,
And hate even now.

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ATHENA

Well, here's your chance. Isn't it one of a man's
Greatest satisfactions to be able
To mock, to humiliate his enemies?

ODYSSEUS

I'd just as soon he stay where he is.

ATHENA

Be honest with me, Odysseus. Is it
His madness that you are afraid to face?

ODYSSEUS

I would never fear him if he were his own self.

ATHENA

Don't worry; no matter how near to you
He comes, I'll make sure he can't see you.

ODYSSEUS

But his eyes, he still has eyes.

ATHENA

They'll see, but only what I want them to see.

ODYSSEUS

Gods, I guess, can do anything they want.

ATHENA

Just stand where you are and be quiet.

ODYSSEUS

Alright, alright; but I'd rather be elsewhere.

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ATHENA

Ajax, I know you hear me. Do you have
So little regard for your protectoress.

(Ajax emerges from the tent with a blood-stained scourge in his hand.)

AJAX

Hail Athena, daughter of Zeus. You are
Most welcome to my tent. Again you have
Stood by me, and I am not ungrateful.
You will have as many gold trinkets
As you want: an offering for this,
The greatest of all my victories.

ATHENA

I am pleased. And did you stain
Your sword well with the blood of Argives?

AJAX

I'll not deny it.

ATHENA

Was it against the Atridae whom you took up arms?

AJAX

They will never insult Ajax again.

ATHENA

Are you telling me that they are dead?

AJAX

Yes, they are dead. Not likely to cheat me
Of my armor now!

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ATHENA

Did Laertes' son meet a similar fate?
Or has he escaped?

AJAX

Aha!, so you want to know where that villain
Is. That wily fox.

ATHENA

Yes – Odysseus, your arch-enemy.

AJAX

He's here, among my other prisoners.
I'll attend to him shortly. His death
Will be a painful one.

ATHENA

What do you intend on doing with him?

AJAX

I'll tie him upright to the pillar
Inside my tent, slowly scourge the skin from
His back; then, after a while, kill him.

ATHENA

There's no advantage to be gained, Ajax,
By torturing the man. You are victorious
Over him – that's plain to see – don't be so harsh.

AJAX

Daughter of Zeus, in all other things
My obedience will remain exact.
But for this purpose you cannot sway me.

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ATHENA

If that's what pleases you, forget what I've said,
Do exactly as you will, and more.

AJAX

I must return to my work. But I hope
You will remain as before: a staunch ally.

(He returns to his tent.)

ATHENA

Do you see, Odysseus, how powerful
We gods are? Where could you find a man more
Prudent in his judgement or valiant
When called into action?

ODYSSEUS

I know of none greater. He is
My enemy and I hate him, yet I
Pity him also for his helplessness
In the face of misfortune and the shame,
The awful shame he will feel. For this touches
My condition as well. Are we—all living
Beings – mere phantoms, a moment's shadow?

ATHENA

Remember this lesson, never speak
A haughty word against the gods, or swell
With foolish pride, whether due to conquest
In battle or the power of wealth.
Each mortal's fate is uncertain: one day glory;
The next infamy. The gods smile on the man
Of wisdom who knows his place. They hate the proud.

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(ATHENA vanishes, ODYSSEUS leaves, the CHORUS of Salamion Sailors enter.)

CHORUS

Son of Telamon, lord
Of the island Salamis
Where the swelling sea-waves are held
In check. With some apprehension
We greet you. Not always as such:
When all is right with you, we are
Filled with gladness, rejoicing
At fortune's benevolent nod.
But when the fury of Zeus
Or the Argives' petulant tongues
Assail you, we tremble in fear,
Our dove-eyes lost in terror.
Even now, out of last night's
Fading blackness, come rumors
Of dread and loathsome detail.
They say that you, lurking about
The grasslands where the horses feed
And run free, fell on the captive herds
And flocks, striking at them with your
Flashing sword, slaughtering them all.
This tale comes from Odysseus
Who presently is spreading
Scandal throughout the campground
By whispers and insinuations.
Any story he tells finds
Gullible listeners, and with each
Listener the exultation
And the gaiety grow. They, not
Surprisingly, revel in this
Distress of yours. For the higher
One aims, the surer his shaft

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Will hit home. Yet if these same barbs
Were aimed at a lesser man, they
Would fall on deaf ears, not believed.
The strong are always the objects
Of envy. But without them
The weaker have little chance
Of protecting their possessions.
Only an alliance will do:
The weak supporting the strong,
And the strong, in turn, defending
The weak. These things the ignorant
Will not be taught. Instead, like fools,
They clamour against you. O master
We are powerless to defend you
Without your help. But show yourself
To them and they will cower
In silence like a flock of birds
Frozen to the hawk's dive.

Strophe

The tale they tell has mothered a terrible shame
On us all. Was it the high god's daughter,
Artimas, the bull rider, who coerced
Our master into this mad killing of cattle?
Was her anger fueled by a victory
Offering withheld: war-spoil or hunter's gift.
Or was it the bronze-clad war god,
Jealous of our master's success in battle,
Who revenged himself by sowing the havoc,
The strange occurrences of last night.

Antistrophe

Certainly the Son of Telemon would never
Of his own will take part in this heinous
Slaughtering of beasts. Can a man be blame-

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Worthy if the gods tamper with his wits. We think
Not. May Apollo and Zeus protect us
From these baneful rumors. But if the brother-
Kings have crafted a false story
(along with that bastard Son of Sisyphos),
You must not hide any longer in your tent.
Join us now and defend your good name.

Epode

Arise, why do you hesitate?
There is fighting to be done; your cause
Stalls without you. With each moment
Lost, the flames of hatred and ruin
Rise higher. Malice walks freely
On the open plain: your enemies continue
To slander you. And our hearts are filled
With grief, much grief.

(TECMESSA enters from the tent.)

TECMESSA

Shipmates of Ajax, descendants
Of the soil-sprung Erechthid line,
There is no joy for those who long
For the distant house of Telemon.
Our grim and absolute leader,
Ajax, is bewildered and storm-
Tossed by frightening tides.

CHORUS

What further misery has the night
Brought that was not evident
Yesterday. How did he come to this?
Answer us, daughter of Phrygian
Teleutas. Since you are his spear-won

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Bride, and since he loves you and keeps
Nothing from you, let us know
What you know.

TECMESSA

Words fail me. How can I speak
The unspeakable. That which has
Happened is terrible, worse than death.
Ajax is mad. During the night
He was seized by evil obsessions;
The bloody results—his unholy
Sacrifices—lie within.

CHORUS

Strophe

That confirms it. There is no disputing
The powerful rumors which we have heard;
We seek escape where there is no escape.
We must wait for the inevitable,
The dread terminus that is our lot.
If, as it seems, he did slaughter
The herds and their guards, his death is
At hand. Ajax will die in dishonor.

TECMESSA

So, it was from the commons that he
Came, leading his bound, captive herd
To our tent. And here, mercilessly,
He cut them to pieces with his
Hewing sword. One white-footed
Ram he seized, cutting out
Its tongue and severing its head,
Throwing both to the ground.
Another of the same, tied
Upright to a post, he whipped

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Fearfully with a double
Horse-harness, each blow whistling
As it fell. And all the while he
Shook with joy, uttering inhuman
Cries, ridiculing his victim.

CHORUS

Antistrophe

There is nothing left to do but cover
Our heads and quietly creep away over
The plains. Or meet on board ship at the oar-
Benches and plot a course for the open
Sea and safety. The Atridae's
Threats must not be taken lightly:
They'll stone him for certain, and us
If we stay to share our master's fate.

TECMESSA

Yet there is hope; like the aftermath
Of a lightening storm, a tumultuous
Southern gale, his rage abates. He
Becomes himself. But now there is
Other grief to torment him. He sees
Too clearly his handiwork, and bears
Alone a guilt-ridden anguish.

CHORUS

Though, if his madness has ended
Everything may yet be alright:
Trouble often becomes of less
Importance once it is past.

TECMESSA

Which would you choose then: to give
Pain to your friends and yourself

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Experience nothing but joy,
Or share with them their misery.

CHORUS

Two griefs are a heavier
Burden than one, my lady.

TECMESSA

So, our sickness has ended
But our bodies do not recover.

CHORUS

What are you saying, Tecmessa,
We cannot understand you.

TECMESSA

While Ajax was out of his mind
He at least felt happiness,
No matter how evil his actions;
We, on the other hand, were horrified.
But now that he is well, he falls
Under the weight of bitter sorrow
And we are no less troubled
Than before. Is this not two
Griefs rather than just the one.

CHORUS

Yes, you are right, my lady.
Surely the anger of Zeus
Must be upon him. What else
Could explain his tormented state
Since his return to sanity?

TECMESSA

And so things stand now.

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CHORUS

But how did his madness start?
Tell us, we are as deeply
Upset as you. Will you tell us?

TECMESSA

Have patience and I'll tell you as much
As I know.
Ajax in the dead of night
Left our bed, took up his two-edged sword
Intent upon some mischievous foray
Into the lampless camp. Hearing him
I asked, "Where are you going Ajax,
There's been no call to arms or message
Summoning you. The army still sleeps."
"Woman," he answered sharply, "keep to yourself,
It's none of your business." I said nothing more.
Then he left, alone.
What happened next
I'm not certain. But at last he came back
With his captives: oxen, sheep, and shepherd dogs
Roped together like defeated warriors.
After driving them inside, he, O God
Pity him, turned our tent into a house
Of slaughter: slitting their throats, beheading
Them—nothing seemed to quench his blood-rage.
Some of them held by bonds he abused
With words and blows as if they were human.
After a time he darted out the door
Conversing wildly with a phantom
Listener; and, thrashing the morning air
With a horrid laugh, he declared his vengeance
Now on the Atridae, now on Odysseus.
At length he stumbled in again with trembling
Body and eyes blank; he sat in the midst

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Of his carnage groaning, and with angry fists
Pummeled his own face. He reached over to touch the torn
Carcasses of his dying victims, then lurched
Back, clutching at his hair. There he sat,
Blood-soaked and silent, for a long time.
When at last he returned to his senses
He questioned me, demanding to know all
That had taken place. I hesitated,
But finally, out of fear for my life,
Told him everything I knew. Then he startled
Me with a cry so shrill and anguish-filled
That I could not believe it from my husband.
He had always taught us that shrill cries
Were for cowards and slaves. In distress
His own lament was like a bull's deep moan.
Yet even now he sits uttering loud cries,
As motionless as any of his slaughtered
Beasts. He surely means to harm himself.
Please, if you are truly his friends, come in,
Remind him of his nobility, speak
Of his virtues. In short, repay him
The friendship he has so often lent to you.

CHORUS

These are fearful tidings,
Tecmessa, our leader reduced by
His sorrows to a raging madness.

AJAX (from within)

Ai, Aiiii...

TECMESSA

Hear him, hear him, there is
Worse to come. He cries so pitifully!

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AJAX

Aiiii...

CHORUS

What are we to think?
Is he still distempered and determined
In his bloody feud, or a suffering
Penitent shrieking for an end to pain.

AJAX

My son! Bring me my son!

TECMESSA

He calls for Eurysaces. But why?
O my son where are you? What should I do?

AJAX

Teucer! Teucer won't you come, return
From your petty raids and give comfort
To your brother, your perishing brother.

CHORUS

He seems quieter now. Open the door.
Perhaps old friends can quell his fever.

TECMESSA

See for yourself. (She opens the door.)

AJAX

Loyal friends
See what has become
Of a man who stood
Firm against a tide of blood.
I've drowned.
What are you gawking at?

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CHORUS

Tecmessa, most unfortunate woman
Your report was too true. His wits are gone.

AJAX

Brave hearts, shipmates
Who rode with me
The sea-canyons, our oar-blades
Flashing upon the froth.
There is none left but you
In this red-stained world.
Kill me! Kill me now.

CHORUS

No, my lord, be reasonable. Another
Crime cannot cure you. You must bear your pain.
Speak no more of this evil. You must live.

AJAX

I, mighty Ajax,
Scourge of the Trojans,
Conqueror of cattle,
A clown provoking
Laughter. Better dead.

CHORUS

Please my lord, don't talk like this. It's unseemly.

AJAX

Fools!, wretches!, out of my sight.

CHORUS

Calm yourself in God's name, we want only to help.

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AJAX

I had them in my hands, my enemies here,
Caught in my clutches, but let them escape,
Instead spilling the dark blood of these
Innocent beasts. How could it happen?

CHORUS

Forget the past Ajax, what's done is done.
Nothing you can do will change that.

AJAX

Odysseus,
Most counterfeit of all
Argives. Will you point me
Out to your friends
And have a good laugh?
Scum! Vile enemy!

CHORUS

Only the gods send laughter or tears,
We are not responsible for these gifts.

AJAX

If I could just get my hands on him,
Even in my wretched state I'd ...

CHORUS

My lord, you must quit this boasting; you are
In no condition to harm anyone.

AJAX

Zeus, father of my fathers,
How can I kill
That fiendish Odysseus
And his two partners

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The brother-kings.
Let me kill them;
Then let me die.

TECMESSA

If you pray for your own death, you pray
For mine also, I am nothing without
Your protection; think of me, my lord.

Strophe
AJAX

O night, take me
To your dwelling of darkness
Receive as friend one scoffed at
By the gods, unfit even for the world
Of men. Alas! One who feels
Your shadows even now
Fingering his mortal heart.
Take me as I am, stripped
Of nobility, like these
Contaminated beasts.
Take me, O friend; the army, with swords up-
Lifted, is bent on my destruction.

TECMESSA

Must a woman accept this? Her husband
Brought to such a fate, such despair.

Antistrophe
AJAX

Paths of churning
Seas, beach caves, and salt-pastures,
Too long have you held me
To this land of Troy; I'll not be kept
Living any longer. The

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River Scamander, whose
Chill waters have cooled the hot
Blood of the Argives, shall
Never see this man again,
This Ajax who—listen well—
Had no peer in all the host from Hellas'
Land; but now forever dishonored.

CHORUS

We would restrain you, yet we pull away.
Is there nothing to be done? Is there no help?

AJAX

Ai, Aiii...
My name once, twice, and again thrice,
A harmony which mocks at misfortune.
And yet how fortunate: my name, its
Mortal cry, all in a sound so singular,
So final, a heart pierced. Aiii, how could
This happen? My father arrived here, fought
And returned bearing an honored name.
But I, his son, stronger, braver, fighting
On the same cursed soil, have lost my name,
My honor, have been reduced to a cry,
A wretched cry – but were Achilles
Living and were he to select among
The Argives a true champion to receive
His weapons, the just price for valiant deeds,
No rival would have stolen them from me.
But they have been stolen. The Atridae
Have conspired against me, ignoring
My every triumph, giving the prize
To a knave. And be assured, they never
Would have lived—those scoundrel brothers—to fix
Another contest if I had not been blinded

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At the last moment by that demon-eyed
Daughter of Zeus who, just as I was to
Strike the death-blow, sent a madness upon
Me. My hands now dipped in the gore and blood
Of these poor beasts—even to the elbows.
And they have escaped to laugh at my undoing.
A man can avenge nothing if the gods
Aid his enemies.
Now what should I do?
I am hated by the gods, the Trojans,
And even the Argives. Shall I sail for home
Across the Aegean Sea, deserting
The Atridae? What explanation would
I give to Telemon, my father? Would
His welcome be contempt for a son
Who after all these years returns with nothing,
Having lost even his father's battle-won fame?
No, I will not do it. Shall I then
Assault the walls of Troy demanding
Combat, and at least die bravely, fighting
Them all. No, that would only add honor
To the Atridae. That I won't do!
I must devise some act which will convince
My father his son is no coward.
For only a coward would accept a long
Endless life filled with misery, one day
Nearing death, the next snatched from its grasp—
Every hope becoming an illusion, a pretense
Concealing the ultimate end. One must
Live nobly. Or die nobly. There is nothing more.

CHORUS

None can deny your eloquence, Ajax,
Nor question your honesty; you have
Bared your soul to us. Therefore, let bitter

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Thoughts cease, let misplaced passions die.
Ajax, please, listen to your friends.

TECMESSA

My husband, my dear husband,
Of all the evils which infect us
In this strange life, surely the hand of fate
Is cruelest. I was free born, a daughter
Of Phrygian wealth. My father a power
To be reckoned with among that people.
But he, a mere man, could not save me.
Now I am your consort, your bedmate. Was it
Your act, or heaven's will? Who can say? I
Am here and you are my husband. In the name
Of that bed which we still share and Zeus,
Protector of the hearth-fire, I beg you
Not to abandon me to the taunts and jeers
Of your enemies, nor leave me defenseless,
Prey to their lust-filled hearts. On the day you die
They will seize us – myself and your son –
Abuse us, and drag us off into captivity
To our new duties as bond-slaves. Then someone,
One of your old rivals, will say mockingly
“Look here, Ajax's wench. When he was
The mightiest of warriors her life
Was easy enough; how times have changed!”
Can't you hear them now? These words will sound
Harsh enough to me and add to my burdens,
But, even worse, they will be an affront
To your blood, a shame on your family.
O Ajax, think of your father, left
To face old age alone. And your mother,
Heartbroken after years of praying to the gods
For your safe return. Think of our son,
Bereft of a father's guiding example,

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Left to the care of unkind, loveless guardians.
Will you consign him to that sorrow? Or me?
You are the only one left to me.
Your spear has ravaged my homeland. My father
And mother by another stroke of fate
Were death-afflicted and dwell now in Hades.
With you gone, where is my home, my happiness,
Where is my wealth? Can't you see,
Without you there is no hope for me. O husband
Remember our nights together. Will you forsake
Me now, after all I've given to you.
A man who accepts kindness but refuses
To return it can never call himself noble.

CHORUS

Ajax, will you not agree with her as we
Do, or at least feel compassion for her plight.

AJAX

She'll have my compassion when she obeys me.

TECMESSA

Whatever you want, Ajax, I'll do.

AJAX

Bring me my son, I wish to see him.

TECMESSA

I – I sent him away while you were ...

AJAX

While I was ... ill. Is that what you mean?

TECMESSA

Yes, I thought you might ... harm him.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

AJAX

Oh, that would have been a fitting touch,
A deed worthy of my recent fortune.

TECMESSA

Well, I averted that, didn't I?

AJAX

You did, and I am most grateful for your prudence.

TECMESSA

My husband, as things now stand, can I
Do anything for you?

AJAX

Bring him to me.
I want to talk with him face to face.

TECMESSA

He is close by, in the care of attendants.

AJAX

Send for him at once.

TECMESSA

Eurysaces, your father wants you. Bring
Him here, whichever one of you holds his hand.

AJAX

Is he coming? Hasn't he heard you call?

TECMESSA

Here he is. One of the servants escorts him.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

AJAX

Lift him up, lift him up so that I may
Hold him. He won't be frightened by this
Newly spilt blood if indeed he is
My son. He must be broken in to a
Soldier's rugged ways, growing like-natured
With his father.
My son, may you be
More fortunate than your father, but
In every other way like him, then will
You live well. Even now I envy
Your ignorance of these matters.
Life is best when one is oblivious
To evil. But someday, when you come
To know the meaning of evil, its pains
And even its pleasures, you'll show your true
Mettle, and soon enough men will speak of you
As Ajax's son.

Meanwhile feed off the feather-
Winds, living as a child should, a comfort
To your mother. And do not fear the Argives;
Even though I am gone, they will not
Bother you. I'll leave Teucer, whom more than
Anyone else I trust, to guard over you,
To care for you. That is, when he returns
From his raids.
And you, my seafaring warriors,
My friends, will you do this favor for me.
Tell Teucer to take the child to my home
And show him to Telemon and my mother,
Eriboea, that, until they enter the dark places
Of the nether god, he may bring some
Happiness to their old age. Will you
Also tell Teucer that my weapons

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Must not be given away as prizes
By any arbiters of games, nor by the man
Who destroyed me. Here, my son, take this,
My greatest protection, my seven-fold shield—
You were named after it. Hold it firmly
And fearlessly by its leather thong;
May it serve you well as it has served me.
The rest of my weapons are to be
Buried in the safety of my grave.

(To TECMESSA)

Come quickly; take the child, seal the entrance.
For God's sake, no crying or hand-wringing
Before the tent: women, it seems to me,
Are especially prone to hysteria.
Now hurry! Prayers and whining are of no
Use when sickness craves the corrective knife.

CHORUS

Why the haste Ajax,
That and the sharpness of your speech frightens us.

TECMESSA

My lord, what are you planning to do.

AJAX

Stop questioning me. I won't answer.

TECMESSA

My heart bursts! By your son, by the gods
Don't abandon ...

AJAX

Enough. Do you believe that I owe
Anything, anything at all to the gods?

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

TECMESSA

What's this. Blasphemy?

AJAX

Speak to those who hear.

TECMESSA

Listen to me, my lord.

AJAX

I've listened to you for too long already.

TECMESSA

But I'm afraid ...

AJAX (to the Attendants)

Shut the doors. Shut them!

TECMESSA

Please, Ajax ...

AJAX

Foolish woman! Let me be.

(Ajax is sealed within the tent)

CHORUS

Strophe 1

Salamis, blessed sanctuary,

High above the lashing surf.

You reign in peacefulness, a jewel

Cherished above all others.

But we linger here, exiles

Camped on the fields of Ida,

A timeless vigil. We look

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Forward only to that dreadful
Day when we enter the darkened
World of eternal fading.

Antistrophe 1

And now we are stricken by a new
Grief: Ajax, your loyal son
And our brave leader, has lost his wits.
Heaven has sent a frenzy
Upon him which has reduced
This warrior without peer
To a man of solitude
Who sits, companion to dire thoughts
And suspicious of everyone
Whether friend or enemy.

Strophe 2

His mother, poor woman, grey-haired
And burdened with old age, will
Surely collapse in despair
When she hears of her son's ruin.
Unlike a nightingale's plaintive notes,
Her sobs will sound in shriller strains
As she beats her shriveled breasts
And rends her wiry tresses.

Antistrophe 2

Better Hades should hide with darkness
The diseased soul of a man
Estranged from his true nature,
Languishing in an alien
Meter of misconceived illusion.
Wretched father, how will they tell
You of your son's affliction;
He, alone, of all your race, damned.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

(Ajax enters, carrying a sword. He is in control, calmer.)

AJAX

In time's illimitable universe
Nothing is kept forever hidden. All things
Are drawn from utter darkness, described
With light, then concealed again. Everything
Is possible – the most fervent oath may
Be broken, the most inflexible will bent.
Even I, who a short time ago was
So tempered with the best steel, so determined,
Have lost my edge because of this woman
And her soft words. I hesitate to leave
A widow and an orphan son to the mercy
Of my enemies.

But now I will go
To the bathing-places and the meadows
By the beach and wash until I have
Cleansed these stains which soil me that I may appease
The anger of the goddess. Then I will find
Some secluded spot and hide this sword,
Most accursed of all weapons, where no one
Will see it, buried in the earth. May death
And darkness keep it there forever. Since
I took this gift from Hector, the greatest
Of my enemies, I have received no good
From the Argives. How true the old proverb:
An enemy's gift is not a gift, it brings
With it only grief.

If anything,
I have learned to obey the commands
Of our gods and to respect the authority
Of the Atridae. They are our leaders,

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

And we, mere subordinates, should submit.
What other way is there? Neither the dread
Nor the mighty powers are exempt
From this rule. Thus Winter with her snowy feet
Defers to the warmth of Summer's roots, and Night,
Tired from his lonely trek, withdraws
Before the white steeds of Day. After the fierce
Storm-winds have ceased, a calm envelops
The groaning sea. Even sleep, who makes
Us all her captives, imprisons only
To set free!

Should we, then, not learn this wisdom.
I, of all men, know that one must hate
One's enemies, remembering all the while
That some day they may be his closest friends,
And aid one's friends as though they soon may
Be numbered among his most treacherous
Enemies. For to most men friendship is
No haven at all. But enough!
Tecmessa,
Go in and pray to the gods to grant
Me my heart's desire. And you, my friends,
Do likewise, honor me with your prayers
That I may find peace; and when Teucer comes
Tell him I have left everything in his hands,
And that he should look after you. I am going where I must go.
You will hear of me soon: a happiness
Untouched by misery, unburdened of suffering.

(AJAX departs, TECMESSA goes into the tent.)

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS

Strophe

We thrill with pleasure
Soaring like a great bird
To the impossible heights.
O Pan, Pan, come to us
From over the sea,
From the snow-crested hills
Of Cyllene, appear
As a god
Of dance would. Teach us
The measures of Nysa,
Gnosus—let all dance,
Let all fill their hearts
With laughter and dance
To daylight's passing.
And, Appollo, dear Lord
Of Delos, cross over
From the pale, Icarian shore
To be with us always.

Antistrophe

The destroying god
Has lifted from our eyes
The haze of dire anguish.
O Zeus, once more our swift,
Sea-cutting ships will
Bathe in the blithe goodness
Of the sun's soothing
Warmth. Ajax is well
Again; he forgets
His troubles, and would make
Peace with the gods, per-
Forming his duties
In solemn worship

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

And loyal devotions.
The mighty and shrill
Are bleared by the long trudge
Of endless years. Witness here:
Ajax repents his feuds.

(A messenger from the camp enters)

Messenger

Friends, I have news. Teucer is back, just returned
From the Mycean heights. He was on his way
To the generals' quarters surrounded by
A great multitude of Argives who had seen
Him coming from afar and recognized him.
They reviled him with curses and taunts,
Calling him "kinsman of the maniac,"
And "conspirator against the host."
"Stone him to death," one cried, "tear him apart."
Another yelled. It reached such a pitch
That swords were drawn from their sheaths and held
Menacingly in men's hands. Yet, just when
Things seemed beyond control, the elders
Intervened, and so violence was stayed.
But where is Ajax, I must tell him this.
It is he who this news most concerns.

CHORUS

He is not here. He left a little while ago
With a new purpose and in high spirit.

MESSENGER

God help him then! I was either sent too late
Or I took too long to get here.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS

Why the urgency, what haven't you told us?

MESSENGER

Teucer said that Ajax must stay confined
To his tent until he himself arrives.

CHORUS

Well, he is gone – and for good reason too.
He must appease the wrath of the gods.

MESSENGER

Your words are folly
If Calchas' prophecy can be trusted.

CHORUS

What prophecy is that? What have you heard of this?

MESSENGER

Too much; I was present when Calchas, who was
With our leaders at the council, left them
And walked over to where Teucer was standing.
He offered his hand to him as a friend would,
Then drew him to one side. They were far enough
Away that neither Agamemnon
Nor Menelaus could hear. In an earnest
Voice he begged Teucer to restrain his brother
From leaving his tent this whole day long
And to stay with him, or, if he didn't
He would never see Ajax alive again,
Since on this day alone would the anger
Of divine Athena doom him. For whenever,
Said the seer, man forgets his nature
And pretends to something more than mortal
He is dashed to earth by heaven-sent

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Calamities. Ajax, on the day
He left home, showed himself lacking in this
Essential modesty. His father, giving
Good advise to his parting son, said to him,
“Go now and seek your victories, but always
With God on your side.” Ajax’s answer was
Both haughty and foolish. “Anyone can win
Battles with God helping him,” he said,
“But I intend to win mine on my own.”
An impudent boast! And another time
Athena came to him urging that he raise
His deadly hand against his foes. His retort,
Almost too blasphemous to tell, was
“Goddess, give your help to other Argives
Who need it. Where I stand, no one will break
Through our line. It was appalling words
Such as these—inflated beyond all limit –
Which provoked the anger of Athena.
Still there is hope. If he lives through today
We may yet save him, with heaven’s help.
When Calchas had finished speaking these things
To him, Teucer rose immediately
From his seat and commanded me to come
Here bearing these instructions for you.
But if, as you say, Ajax is gone, then he
Is surely dead, or Calchas is no prophet.

CHORUS

Tecmessa, poor woman, you seem to have
Been born for misery. Come, a messenger
Has arrived. He brings a fearful tale.

(aside)

This business touches us much too closely.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

TECMESSA

Is there no end to my suffering? Why do
You wake me again?

CHORUS

Listen to this man, he has news pertaining
To Ajax. Grim news.

TECMESSA

What is it? What's the matter? Are we
In any danger?

MESSENGER

As far as I know, my lady, you are
In none. However, Ajax, if he has left
His tent, might be in serious danger.

TECMESSA

He--he has left. Tell me what you mean.

MESSENGER

Teucer sends strict orders to keep Ajax
Confined to his tent, and to prevent him—by force
If necessary—from venturing out alone.

TECMESSA

But where is Teucer?
What purpose can these orders have?

MESSENGER

He has just returned, and has reason
To believe that if Ajax goes forth
From this place but once, it could be fatal.

TECMESSA

God help us! How did he find this out?

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

MESSENGER

From Thestor's son, the prophet, this day
He learned it—this very day.

TECMESSA

O my friends, protect me
From this threatening doom.
Someone, please, find Teucer
And beg him to hasten here.
The rest of you help me, search
For my husband, either toward
The eastern or the western bays.
I see now—only too clearly—I have
Been betrayed by my lord, cast
Aside. O child, what shall I do?
We must not stay here—no!
I'll look for him, as much
As my strength allows. Hurry, we
Must find him before death does.

CHORUS

In more than word, we'll show
Our speed, my lady.

(The CHORUS, TECMESSA, and MESSENGER hurry away in all directions. The scene changes. Ajax appears alone in a desolate place by the seashore.)

AJAX

The slayer stands ready; he shall do
His work well. And why not? Now that I think
Of it. Hector, worthiest of my enemies,
Gave me that sword, and I have carefully
Planted it, with its blade sharpened and poised
In the hostile earth of Troy. Death should
Come swiftly, kindly.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Next, as it is
The appropriate thing to do, I call
On you Zeus. It is no great favor
That I petition for. Send a messenger
For me to Teucer that he may be
The first to hear the news of my catastrophe,
And come to lift me off this blood-damp sword
Before some enemy finds me slain, and throws
Me as prey to the dogs and carrion birds.
O Zeus, grant me this. I likewise call upon
Hermes, guide to the nether land, to lay
Me asleep easily, after one quick bound
Upon this keen and piercing blade. And you,
Immortal maidens, dread furies who watch
Forever the miseries of mankind, witness
My death and know that the guilt of this deed
Rests with the sons of Atreus. As I will
Die wretchedly, self-slain, let them perish
By kindred hands. Go, catch them with your long strides,
Revenge me on their host, hold back nothing.
And sun-god, you whose radiant chariot
Climbs the steep sky-heights, when you see my birth-
Land, pull up your golden reins and tell this tale
Of sorrow and doom to my aged father
And my mother, my poor mother. With tears
She will fill the streets of our city,
Her selfless heart breaking. But it does no good
To think these unhappy thoughts. I must
Do this speedily.
O Death, Death come now,
Collect your due. Yes, even you I will
Speak to in that other world of near
Darkness. But, bright daylight, you I will never
See again, or you, sun-god, aloft

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

In your chariot, I look upon you
For the last time. O light, O Salamis,
Holy soil, site of my father's hearth,
And famous Athens too, whose race is kindred
To mine, farewell. And you, also, the conservers
Of my life, the fields, the streams, the springs
Of Troy, farewell. My speech is ended;
Whatever else Ajax may have to say,
He will say it to the dead in Hades.

(Ajax falls on his sword and dies.)

(After a short interval, the CHORUS enters, half from one side of the stage,
half from the other.)

CHORUS 1

Tired feet. Troubling thoughts. We've looked
Everywhere, yet still not found
That place which knows the secret
Of our search.
But listen! I hear
Something. Over there!

CHORUS 2

Friends! It's us, your shipmates.

CHORUS 1

Any luck?

CHORUS 2

We covered the entire coast westward from the ship.

CHORUS 1

And did you find ...

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS 2

No.

CHORUS 1

Neither did we; there is no sign of him
Where the morning sun gilds the shoreline.

CHORUS (as one)

Strophe

What salt-bitten fisherman, weary from toil,
Plying his tasks in a sleepless daze,
Or what nymph of mountain, or stream that flows
Down to the Bosphorus, has seen this man
Wandering with troubled soul and fierce
Demeanor. How hard it is that we
Who have searched far and wide over this land
Of emptiness, must relent without finding
As much as a trace of our afflicted lord.

(TECMESSA has found the body of AJAX, and is heard lamenting.)

TECMESSA

Oh no! No!

CHORUS

Whose cry is that coming from the wood?

TECMESSA (sobbing)

My husband, there was no need –why?

CHORUS

It is Tecmessa,
Our master's spear-won bride, lost in anguish.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

TECMESSA

I am alone. Without hope. Desolate.

CHORUS

What is it? What's happened?

TECMESSA

Here is Ajax, newly slain; a sword
Sheathed by this mighty heart.

CHORUS

Gods! Is this the end of all our hopes,
Will we never return to our homeland
Again. Now nothing but death awaits
Us—your comrades—O hapless warrior,
O corpse not yet cold.

(To Tecmessa)

And for you, poor woman, we sorrow.

TECMESSA

He is beyond our cries, he is dead;
We can only mourn for him.

CHORUS

With whose help did he accomplish this appalling act?

TECMESSA

No other but his own hand shared in the blame.
The sword on which he fell, fixed firmly
In the ground, stands—his mute accuser.

CHORUS

By his own hand, alone. How gullible
We were to let him out of our sight.
What fools! And he, shedding his own blood

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Far from friends—we were blind. Show us
Where he lies—proud Ajax, that fatally named man.

TECMESSA

No, you shall not see him. With this enfolding
Cloak I'll cover him fully; for no man
Who loved him could endure this ghastly sight—
His dark life-blood runs out through his nostrils
And even yet spouts from his self-dealt wound.
O what shall I do? What friend shall gently
Lift you up? Where is Teucer? It is he
Who should be here to tend his brother's
Corpse. Ah, Ajax, my husband, to have fallen so.
Even your enemies will mourn for you.

CHORUS

Antistrophe

There was nothing to be done, you were fated
To follow this course—your unbending
Soul was destined for blinding misery.
Your dread passion of hate disquieting
The nights and embittering the days
With constant rantings against the Sons
Of Atreus: these were signs of your sorrows
To come. Yes, that was a pregnant day
When those golden arms were made a prize
Of worth in that contest of prowess.

TECMESSA

Aii, Aiii ...

CHORUS

A heart holding such grief—her loss is profound.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

TECMESSA

Ah, my husband!

CHORUS

It's no wonder that you cry, my lady,
Deprived of one who so loved you.

TECMESSA

So you say—but I feel it.

CHORUS

Of course.

TECMESSA

My child, what will become of us, what cruel
Overseers will catapult us into chattel.

CHORUS

The sons of Atreus would indeed
Deal with you as you suspect. They are
Both arrogant and ruthless. Expect
No pity. May God deflect this danger.

TECMESSA

Was it not God who sent it on its flight.

CHORUS

Too true! Heaven delights in our pain.

TECMESSA

And who engendered this pain
If not Pallas Athena, child
Of Zeus, ally to Odysseus.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS

Doubtless this much-enduring
Odysseus exults in his,
The darkest of hearts, mocking
At this outrage and our grief.
And the brother-kings, when they hear
This story told, will gloat
At fallen glory and our distress.

TECMESSA

Let them gloat! Damn them!
While he lived they cared nothing
For him, but one day they'll regret
His loss—in the heat of battle
When greatness is needed to turn
The tide, then will they yearn for him.
Fools cannot know the wealth that was
Theirs until they have lost it.
His death is all bitterness
For me, all jubilation for them.
But I care little. Ajax
Himself is content. Whatever
He wished for, he made his own,
Including death; he died this way—
His own place, his own time. Why then
Do they gloat? Where is their triumph?
His death was decreed by the gods,
Not them. So let Odysseus
Mock and revel to his heart's content.
Ajax is gone, and I, his wife,
Left to misery, will mourn him.

(TEUCER is heard approaching)

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS

Be still. Is that Teucer's voice
We hear, rising in sorrow
Above this solumn sight.
Surely it must be.

(TEUCER enters)

TEUCER

Ajax! My brother!
My dear brother! Can it be
That you are already dead. Is
It true, is the dread rumor true?

CHORUS

He has perished, Teucer.

TEUCER

And am I to bear this bravely,
This burden so unexpected.
O Gods!

CHORUS

We must accept ...

TEUCER

Bitterness and tears, O life ...

CHORUS

Your complaints are not without cause.

TEUCER

Why so swift, so fierce a blow ...

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS

It was that; there's no denying it.

TEUCER

Then misfortune is our lot.

But – where is my brother's child.

Tell me where I can find him.

CHORUS

Alone, by the tents.

TEUCER

Bring him here at once, before it is too late

And he is snatched like a lion's whelp

Separated from its mother. Don't waste time.

Quickly! For little men, impotent

Before nobility's might, wait for death

To take their triumphs from his corpse.

(TECMESSA and one of the sailors depart)

CHORUS

Yes, Teucer. It was Ajax's last wish

Before he died that you care for his child

And shield him from harm, just as you are doing.

TEUCER

O corpse of Ajax, worst sight my eyes

Have ever seen. Never has a path

So embittered a heart as that which led

Me here, seeking my troubled brother.

While following your tracks, terrible rumors

With fearful and spear-sharp news were sped to me

As if by a god, from the Argive camp.

I heard them and hurried over your trail

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Haunted by gloom-filled and tremulous thoughts.
And now I see all my fears have bloomed.
I am ruined! My heart is broken!
Someone uncover him. Let me see all
Of what I dread.

(The covering is lifted from the corpse of AJAX)

Grim, ghastly form. Stubborn manhood. Your death
Has sown a bitter fruit which is mine to eat.
Where can I go? Who will welcome me
When they know it was I who failed you
In your distress. How will Telemon,
Your father and mine, greet me when I return
Without you? With graciousness and smiles?
Even in good times he rarely smiles.
He'll keep nothing back—hurling curses,
Spitting insults. And the taunts! Loathsome coward,
He'll call me ... bastard son of a captured slave...
Betrayer. There'll be no end to it. Or worse,
He'll accuse me of treachery, letting
Ajax die that I might inherit wealth
And lordship. And this said with meanness,
The ill-temper of old age. Quarrels will
Soon follow—his anger will rise up,
Bereft of reason or cause. Then shall I
Be exiled, branded by his reproaches
As no longer a free man but a parasite
And criminal. Such are my prospects at home.
While at Troy, I can expect only venom
And hostility with few, if any, allies.
These are the fruits of your death, the fruits
Which I must bear—O brother, let me
Lift you off this accursed weapon
Which boasts even now of your stolen breath.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Did you guess that Hector, although gone
Before you, would be the parent of this deed?
How strange the fortune of these two men!
With the same girdle that Ajax had given him,
Hector was dragged to death under the wheels
Of Achilles' chariot. And this hateful sword
On which Ajax fell and died was a gift
From Hector. Only a Fury could have forged
This blade! Only the grim artisan
Of Hades contrived that girdle! These things
Like all others which torment men's lives
Are conceived by the gods. Let those who don't
Believe this look to their own lives. For myself,
I'll keep this opinion.

CHORUS

Hold. Too much talk. We must think of preparing
A grave, and what to say to the man—
Your enemy— who is fast approaching us.
Does he come to taunt us in our sorrow,
Or vent his anger on this still warm corpse,
Vile scoundrel that he is.

TEUCER

Who do you see? Which one of our leaders?

CHORUS

Menelaus, that damnable man
For whose sake we made this voyage.

TEUCER

Now that he's nearer, I recognize him.

(MENE LAUS enters with attendants)

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

MENELAUS

You, I'm warning you, don't touch that body
Or attempt to bury it, leave it where it is.

TEUCER

By whose authority do you babble
Your orders at us.

MENELAUS

It is both my will and our commander's decree.

TEUCER

Then let's hear your reasons.

MENELAUS

Listen well. We brought this man from home
Believing that he would be a friend
And champion of the Argive host.
However, he lately proved worse than any
Foe of Phrygian blood: conspiring
Against us, plotting our downfall, even
Aiming to kill us one night while we slept.
If it were not for some friendly god
Thwarting his murderous plan, we would
Be dead—as he is now, slain by a traitor;
And he would have still been alive to tell
His ignoble tale. Instead, his attack
Foiled, he fell on the herds of cattle and sheep.
So do not doubt me when I say, we shall
Not be cheated of our revenge; no man
Alive shall bury his body. We'll cast
It out on the sun-swept sand—a carcass
For the seabirds to feed from ...

(Teucer draws his sword, but is restrained by his comrades; MENELAUS
flinches)

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

If we could not curb him while he lived
At least—despite your threats—we'll rule
Over him in death. Never did he obey
A word we said; but soon, under
Our control, he'll have no choice. In nature's course
Men who do not submit to their betters show
An evil and corrupted slant which should not
Be tolerated. Can a city prosper
Whose citizens are not bound by fear? Or
An army survive whose soldiers are not
Disciplined by force? The iron-ribbed man,
The brash paragon, is no exception
To this rule; a luckily aimed blow may
Drop him. Safety lies best with the politic
Man. Where outrage and insults are given sway,
Surely that state, though graced by favoring
Winds, will find destruction sinking into
The sea's abyss. Accept the necessity
Of fear! Do not deceive yourselves: every
Pleasure has its recompense. There is
A circular motion to things. This man
Was hot-tempered and insolent once; now it's
My turn for boasting. So I warn you
Again: do not test my anger and try
To bury him, or his grave will be your own.

CHORUS

These are fine dictums, Menelaus,
But why go further and outrage the dead.

TEUCER

Never, my friends, will I be surprised
By the callous actions of the low-born
When a man who calls himself noble,
A man of some renown can utter
Such words of incredible slander

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

(To MENELAUS)

Do my ears deceive me? You say you brought
Him here? You found this friend and champion
Of the Argives? Don't you remember
That he voyaged here on his own. He came
As master; not as drudge. By what right
Do you call yourself his chieftain or even
Our king. You are Sparta's king
And nothing more. No one gave
You the power to dictate to him
Any more than he could to you. Neither did
You sail here as sovereign commander
Of our fleet; you were a subordinate
Of others and had no authority
Over Ajax. Go, govern those who give
You warrant to govern, discipline them
With your stern speech. In the meantime I intend
To bury my brother, and neither your words,
Nor anyone else's, will deter me.
Whatever you think, Ajax did not
Join this expedition—like your own
Credulous thralls—to win back an erring wife.
No! It was his sworn oath which bound
Him to war, he cared nothing for your
Conjugal plight. Why should he? So next
Time you come, bring more kinsmen with you
And perhaps your commander. For it is
Difficult to listen to a trivial
Man prattling in a trivial way.

CHORUS

These words are painful to hear. However just
They may be, we should not tempt further ruin.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

MENELAUS

The bowman, I think, likes to hear himself talk.

TEUCER

Perhaps so. Still, my craft recommends
Itself to others. It is not swinish.

MENELAUS

Were you prepared for battle how insolent
Would your speech be?

TEUCER

Without shield, without armor, naked
I'd match you in all your panoply.

MENELAUS

What! How courageous a tongue this man has.

TEUCER

The rightness of one's cause can exalt the soul.

MENELAUS

And is it right to honor a murderer?

TEUCER

A murderer? Oh! You mean your murderer.

MENELAUS

As I told you, a god rescued me.
The intention, although deflected
From its purpose, provides sufficient guilt.

TEUCER

If saved by a god, why dishonor heaven?

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

MENELAUS

Have I not always followed heaven's commandments?

TEUCER

Not when the dead are forbidden burial.

MENELAUS

Forbidden you say! Yes, but only
My foemen are forbidden-
How could justice be served otherwise.

TEUCER

Was Ajax your foeman, your enemy? Did
He meet you in battle on the fields of Troy?

MENELAUS

We hated each other, as you well know.

TEUCER

I know you robbed him of votes by your influence.

MENELAUS

He was defeated by the judges, not I.

TEUCER

Villain!, you camouflage the truth well.

MENELAUS

Someone will pay for those words.

TEUCER

No higher payment then we will secure.

MENELAUS

I'll say it once more: the man will not be buried.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

TEUCER

Then listen once more: he shall.

MENELAUS

I have heard a man of fiery
Tongue and vaunting manner cajole his crew
To voyage out into a turbulent sea.
When the weather worsened and the danger
Of shipwreck grew formidable, you couldn't
Find him anywhere. He was hiding
Under his cloak, sniveling, his sailors
Stepping over him or kicking him at will-
So take heed or your brash words might yet
Be quelled by a sudden tempest whose breath,
Born of a single cloud, overpowers all.

TEUCER

And I have seen a fool who gloried
In his fellow man's misfortune, while another
Man, somewhat like myself and of the same
Temperament, admonished him not to wrong
The dead or he would suffer the fatal
Consequences of it. Thus he warned
That imprudent man whom I see before me;
That man is you. Do I speak in riddles?

MENELAUS

I'll go now. It is ludicrous that I
Scold and lecture when I could compel.

TEUCER

Go then. For it's worse that I
Should listen to a fool's witless bluster.

(MENELAUS leaves)

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS

A mighty contention is shaping up here.
Teucer, hurry, let us find a suitable
Grave site where we may with dignity
Bury his corpse, where hereafter men
Can come to remember, to praise his name.

(TECMESSA enters with EURYSACES)

TEUCER

Look, the wife and child of Ajax.
They arrive just in time to help us
Perform properly the burial rites.
Come boy, stand here by your father's side,
Lay your hands upon him as a suppliant
Would. Kneel. Take these locks of hair...mine...
Hers...Yours...our simple offerings.
Stay close to him and pray. But if any
Man from the Argive host tries to force
You away from this corpse, may he find
His just reward: his body left at life's end
Without a grave, cut off with the rest
Of his kin at the root, just as this lock
Of hair which I sever. Take it boy,
Carry it with you always. But for now
Remain here with him, let no one
Dislodge you. That's it, embrace him,
Pray for us all. You others, act as men,
Not weaklings, guard them well till I return.
I go to prepare a grave for my brother;
We will bury him shortly. Let the dogs
Snarl all they want, they'll not forestall us.

(TEUCER leaves)

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

CHORUS

Strophe 1

When shall this litany pass, these refrains
Of repetitive years, when shall the tide
Cease, the storm-waves abide, our hardships give pause
To a peaceful day, a freedom from spear-
Anger? We are tired of Trojan plains and exile.
Fair Hellas, shall we ever see you again?

Antistrophe 1

Would he had vanished, faded into the
Substance of sky or the realm of snow,
This man who leagued the dominions of Hellas,
Who taught us war with all its misery
And wretchedness, who made his troubles our hardships;
Indeed, here was a maker of men's ruin.

Strophe 2

And what rewards did we merit
For our part in following
Him to this dreadful country? Were
Wine cups filled and refilled
For our pleasure's sake, and our paths
Bestrewn with flowered wreaths?
Were our fears quieted by sweet
Melodies of soothing flute
And the dreamworld comfort of sleep?
No, there was nothing of worth
Granted to us. Even love, O
Blissful love, we were denied.
Each morning at the touch of tears
We awake in this strange land,
Uncared for, forgotten.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Antistrophe 2

Where once Ajax stood firm, our poised
Champion, our stalwart shield
Against the terrors of nighttime
And the day's battle-shafts,
Now he lies drained of all his warmth
By the demons of Hades.
Have we no shelter? Is joy dead?
O, if only for the span
Of a moment's time, between
The rush and recess of tides,
We could return to our homeland,
To the wooded hills beneath
The summit of Sunium, then
Look out upon the sea-road
Sparkle to sacred Athens.

(TEUCER enters, out of breath)

TEUCER

Agamemnon comes! I saw him and hurried
Back. His demeanor is fierce but his tongue-
I believe- will prove even fiercer.

(AGAMEMNON enters)

AGAMEMNON

Are you the man who threatens defiance
Of me? They say your mouth foams with the words
Of a fool, words, by the way, for which I
Will shortly exact a punishment.
Don't ignore me! Yes, it's you I'm talking
To, the son of a captive whore. I can
Imagine your proud boasts and affected manners
Had you been born to nobility! But, instead,

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Being only a nothing, you value
Nothing: a dead body. You claim,
So the story goes, that my brother and I
Had no authority over Ajax,
That he was his own commander, both on sea
And land. What insolence! What presumption
From a slave boy! Who was this Ajax after
All, Had he done anything that I haven't?
Obviously he was mortal. Have the Argives
No other champion to take his place?
It seems we shall ever regret that
Accursed contest for Achilles'
Armour, since Teucer-though he knows better-
Takes it upon himself to denounce us
As thieves and rogues. He spurns the decision
Of lawful arbitrators and, unable
To accept defeat, denigrates us with vile
Profanity and, possibly, plots
Our assassinations. Never will
The rule of law govern our people
If such outbursts are endured
And the defeated allowed by clamor
And threats to usurp the winner's prize.
Such abuses we will no longer tolerate.
Besides, it is not the broad-shouldered bully
On whom we must depend, it is the shrewd,
The prudent man who everywhere prevails.
However huge the ox, it takes only
A tiny whip to keep him from veering
Off the road. This remedy may soon
Be applied to you, unless you learn restraint
And check your impertinent behavior.
Think about it: the man is dead, why cause
So great a quarrel over a mere corpse?
Remember who you are! And, if you still

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Have a grievance, send an advocate
To plead your case. Otherwise I cannot
Bear listening to you, being so little
Schooled in your barbarian tongue.

CHORUS

Be reasonable—both of you. Learn modesty.
Restrain yourselves. Cease hurling this invective.

TEUCER

How quickly the dead are effaced from memory!
How brazen the ingratitude of men!
See, Ajax, the esteem this man holds
You in, this man who you for so long
Fought and labored for. There was a time when
You would have given your life to save his.
And how does he remember you? By casting
You aside like so much rubbish!
Villainous windbag! Can't you even recall
That day, penned within your own lines, flames
Licking the sterns of your ships, and Hector
Vaulting high over the protective trench,
That was the day Ajax turned rout into
Victory, saving your life. Is this a man
Who deserves your scorn? Do you also
Forget the day he fought Hector in single
Combat, not because he was compelled to, but
Because he was chosen by ballot—for
His lot was no lax lump of clay, but a solid
Shard which would leap easily and firstly
From the crested helmet.
These were his deeds,
And I—the slave, the son of a barbarian
Woman—was at his side. Vulgar cur,
How dare you belittle my lineage! Look

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

To your own family tree. Was your
Father's father not Pelops? — the Phrygian!
Then there was Atreus, your infamous father.
We all know the tale of how he prepared
A feast from the flesh of his brother's children
And served it to that unwitting brother.
And, of course, your mother- a Cretan no less!
She was fed to the fishes, a just
Punishment for her infidelities. So
Who are you to call me a barbarian?
Telemon is my father. His battle-feats
Were unequaled in his day. My mother was
A princess, the daughter of Laomedon.
She, the worthiest prize of all the war-spoil,
Was given by Alcmena's son to my
Father as a reward for his bold exploits.
Do you expect a man such as I, born
Of two noble races, to disgrace himself
Before his earth-cold kinsman whose body
You would unashamedly desecrate?
It is better that I take a stand
In his defense, than to sacrifice myself
For the sake of your wife—I mean your brother's
Wife. Therefore take heed, consider not
My welfare but your own. Make any move
Upon me and you'll soon regret it.

(ODYSSEUS enters)

CHORUS

Lord Odysseus! – just in time. You come,
We hope, to mediate not to inflame.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

ODYSSEUS

What happens here? From far away I heard
The voices of the Atridae bickering
Over this brave man's body.

AGAMEMNON

No, Lord Odysseus, we were merely
Returning the insults spat at us
By this shameless man.

ODYSSEUS

Well, I can certainly understand
The immoderate words of a man
Engaged in a battle of insults.

AGAMEMNON

His insults, however, were more than matched
By his despicable actions.

ODYSSEUS

And what were they?

AGAMEMNON

He attempts to bury that corpse, despite
My orders forbidding it.

ODYSSEUS

May I speak freely—as one friend to another,
Without you distrusting my loyalty?

AGAMEMNON

Say what you will. I am not so thick-witted
As to distrust you. Of all the Argive
Warriors, you are my truest friend.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

ODYSSEUS

Alright, then listen. Show some compassion
For this hapless man. Don't let your blind
Hatred incite you to such an outrage.
Justice must not be trampled upon like this:
He should be buried.

Keep in mind that this man
Was my mortal enemy. Since the day
That I won Achilles' weapons, he hated
Me. In spite of this I would never
Dishonor him in death or deny that, save
Achilles, he had no peer in all the host.
Moreover, it is not only he you
Would wrong by this deed, but also heaven's
Law. When a man of such nobility dies—
Even a hated foe—he deserves your respect.

AGAMEMNON

You, Odysseus, you side with him.

ODYSSEUS

I do. Although I hated him once,
I cannot now. He was greater than I.

AGAMEMNON

Why build him up so? Take revenge while
You may on your fallen enemy.

ODYSSEUS

What triumphs, son of Atreus, can
You find in disrespect.

AGAMEMNON

It is hard for a king to be respectful.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

ODYSSEUS

Is it also hard for a king to take
The good advise of a friend.

AGAMEMNON

A soldier should obey his commander.

ODYSSEUS

Enough! Accept my advise and declare
Yourself the victor.

AGAMEMNON

But this man hated you ...

ODYSSEUS

He was an enemy—but a noble one.

AGAMEMNON

A hated enemy—yet you still plead for him?

ODYSSEUS

His greatness should be of more weight than
Any enmity he felt for me.

AGAMEMNON

Impulsive man! Your tempers are in flux.

ODYSSEUS

What? That's nothing unusual. A man's friends
Will often turn on him, becoming his foes.

AGAMEMNON

And would you tolerate that kind of friend?

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

ODYSSEUS

More than I would pigheadedness.

AGAMEMNON

You'll make us into cowards yet.

ODYSSEUS

That's not true. We'll appear as just and good
Sovereigns in the eyes of others.

AGAMEMNON

Then you suggest I allow the burial.

ODYSSEUS

Yes, one day I'll require the same.

AGAMEMNON

Aha! It's for yourself that you plead.

ODYSSEUS

Why not? Whom should we look out for if
Not for ourselves?

AGAMEMNON

Very well, have it done by your orders,
It is nothing more to do with us.

ODYSSEUS

Whatever you say.

AGAMEMNON

Don't misunderstand me, my friend,
I would readily do much more than this
For your sake. As for him, however: whether
On earth or in Hades, he will always
Have my hate. Deal with it as you wish.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

(AGAMEMNON goes out)

CHORUS

You are a shrewd man, Odysseus.
Anyone who does not recognize this
After listening to you here is a fool.

ODYSSEUS

From this moment on, Teucer, let us share
Friendship, just as we once shared enmity.
Include me in the burial ritual
Adding my prayers and praises to yours.
Let us begrudge no ceremony
In honoring this mighty warrior.

TEUCER

Friend Odysseus, with all my heart I thank
You for your kind words. Any misgivings
I might have had have been laid to rest.
You were, of all the Argives, the enemy
Who galled him most, and yet you alone
Have stood by him and defended his speechless
Corpse against the insults of the living.
For this service, again, I thank you.
Had it been left to those ignominious
Brothers, his body would have been tossed
To the elements, uncared for, unburied.
May the Ruler of the Heavens, and the all-
Remembering Fury, and Justice,
Their adjutant, devise a wicked doom
For those wretches who sneer at our fallen lord.
But ... as to your generous offer,
I hesitate to accept since, by letting
You participate, I might antagonize
The dead. Nevertheless, you're welcome to observe

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

And, if you wish, bring a companion
From the camp to act as your proxy
In the burial ritual. He will receive
The utmost courtesy. In the meantime
I must make the arrangements. We shall
Not soon forget the kindness you have shown us.

ODYSSEUS

I did want to join you, but if you think
It not proper, I respect your judgment.
I'll leave you now.

(ODYSSEUS goes out)

TEUCER

Make ready the grave. We will delay
No longer. Some of you fetch the spades
To dig the trench, some build a fire
And set the great caldron upon it
In preparation for holy ablutions,
You others collect the weapons
And armor from his tent and bring them here.
You too, boy, you can help. Together
Let us lift your father. Be gentle, his warm
Dark blood still pulses from his wound.
Quickly, if you call yourselves his friends,
To your tasks, for never will your labor
Be so well spent as today – we bury
Ajax, the noblest of all men.

CHORUS

The matter of life a man may see
And from it learn a wisdom.
But who has sight enough
To envision the future
Or perceive his own fate?