

# AJAX

*Translated by* JOHN MOORE

# AJAX: INTRODUCTION

## *The Play: Date and Composition*

We do not know when *Ajax* was first produced. Presumably Sophocles presented it along with three other plays for the annual competition in Athens; but we have no idea which plays they were, out of the 120 or so tragedies and satyr-dramas by Sophocles that we know about. In the absence of any reliable historical evidence, modern scholars' opinions about the date of the play are based mostly on formal and stylistic criteria. The technique of the dialogue scenes in particular, in which we do not find three characters all engaged in conversation together as we do in Sophocles' late plays, and also the relative paucity of actors' solo songs, seem more characteristic of early than late fifth-century tragedies. Overall, the majority of scholars believe the play was probably written early in Sophocles' career, perhaps in the 440s BCE; but it could be even earlier, or considerably later. The issue remains open.

## *The Myth*

Ajax was one of the most famous heroes of the Trojan War. Son of the mighty hero Telamon (who had himself fought successfully at Troy in a previous campaign), Ajax plays a prominent role in the *Iliad* and is regarded by everyone there as the greatest Greek warrior after Achilles. Among several memorable scenes involving Ajax is one in which he engages in single man-to-man combat with the Trojan

champion Hector, ending in a stalemate and exchange of gifts (book 7: an episode directly recalled in our play). Ajax is also found from time to time fighting in collaboration with his half brother Teucer, an archer. In several other poems of the epic Trojan Cycle, of which only brief fragments and summaries survive, it was narrated that, after Achilles had been killed by the Trojans, Ajax carried his body off the battlefield and it was then proposed that the armor should be awarded to “the best of the Greeks.” Somehow Odysseus, not Ajax, ended up receiving it. In rage and humiliation Ajax committed suicide with his sword; and in the *Odyssey* (book 11) we find his ghost, still enraged, refusing to speak to Odysseus when he visits the underworld.

Depictions of particular moments from this story are common in the visual art of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, especially on Athenian vases. As with all Greek myths, the details varied considerably from one version to another, and in the early fifth century, before Sophocles came to write his play, additional accounts were composed, including some lyric poems by Pindar (extant) and a tragic trilogy by Aeschylus of which the titles, but little else, are preserved: *The Judgment of the Arms*, *The Thracian Women*, and *The Women of Salamis*. The process whereby the armor of Achilles came to be awarded—surprisingly—to Odysseus was explained in various ways, often involving some foul play. Sophocles leaves this issue tantalizingly open. Then in some versions of the story, including this one, Ajax becomes so angry, even to the point of temporary insanity, that he attempts to kill Odysseus and Agamemnon in revenge. In our play Athena directly intervenes to cloud Ajax’s mind so that his violence is directed against animals instead of the Greek leaders: this may have been Sophocles’ own invention. (Of course Athena was always known to be a devoted protector and helper of Odysseus.)

Sophocles has also added a characteristic new twist to his plot by including an unexpected prophecy about Athena's desire to punish Ajax, which we are told may be averted if he survives this one day. After Ajax's suicide, Agamemnon and the other Greek leaders are sometimes, as in our play, described as denying a proper burial to his body, but the idea of having Odysseus intervene to bring about his archrival's due burial, out of enlightened fellow-feeling, seems to be another innovation by Sophocles.

This play is not only about Ajax, of course. The rest of his family is intimately involved. Neither Ajax's father (the mighty, intimidating Telamon) nor his mother (Eriboea) actually appears in the play, though they are frequently mentioned. More crucial to the action and pathos of the tragedy are Tecmessa, Ajax's war-captive concubine, and their baby son, Eurysaces. Sophocles depicts the affectionate relationship between Tecmessa and Ajax and their concerns about their son's future in terms vividly reminiscent of the relationship of Hector, Andromache, and Astyanax in the *Iliad* (and again, in Euripides' *Trojan Women*), though Ajax's harshness of character contrasts sharply with the more considerate Hector. Another prominent character in the play is Ajax's half brother, Teucer (son of Telamon's own slave-captive, herself of Trojan ancestry); he seems to have been a major character also in Aeschylus' trilogy (see above). In our play Teucer's loyal defense of his half brother provides much of the dramatic energy of the later scenes, and the bond of respect and gratitude forged between Teucer and Odysseus at the end helps bring about some degree of comfort and resolution.

According to tradition, Ajax and his family were based on Salamis, which in Homer's time had been an independent island but by the sixth century was an integral part of Attica and hence (by Sophocles' time) of the Athenian democratic city-state. One of the ancestral Athenian tribes

was named after Ajax (Aiantis), and he and his son were worshipped in several hero cults. Of all the major Homeric heroes Ajax was thus by far the most closely associated with Athens, and the issue of his burial and the honor to be shown to his corpse, and to his son, was therefore of particular importance to Sophocles' audience. This play is also unusual in having as its chorus a group of young men: these Salaminian sailors, played by young Athenian citizens, seem likewise to stand in a particularly close relationship to the spectators themselves.

### *Problems of Staging and the Suicide*

In its first production, *Ajax* seems to have involved some unusual experiments in staging, not all of which are possible for modern scholars to sort out. In the opening scenes, the action takes place in front of Ajax's hut or tent in the Greek camp at Troy. But in the middle of the play, not only does the chorus rush out in different directions to search for Ajax, leaving the orchestra empty—which very rarely happens in Greek tragedy—but when Ajax reappears with his sword and prepares to commit suicide, the scene seems to be the beach at some distance from the Greek camp. The details of the staging of the suicide are also unclear to us (see Textual Notes on lines 815-65). Ajax apparently places his sword hilt-down in the earth within the audience's line of vision, and then falls on it—a highly unusual example of a violent death in tragedy actually represented on stage. Scholars have debated how this was managed, and how Ajax's body could have remained visible for the rest of the play, as it clearly did, even while the actor somehow departed in order to return shortly in the role of Teucer. The visual spectacle of Ajax placing his sword in the earth, or doubled-up and impaled on it, was a favorite topic for Athenian vase painters: how Sophocles

represented this unforgettable moment in the Theater of Dionysus remains a fascinating puzzle.

### *Transmission and Reception*

While the story of Ajax continued to be well known throughout antiquity and was often depicted in literature and art, it is impossible to know exactly how widely Sophocles' play was performed and read after its first production. Other successful plays on this topic were composed, both Greek and Roman, including tragedies (now lost) by the Roman Republican playwrights Livius Andronicus (*Ajax the Whipbearer*), Ennius, and Pacuvius. Some of these doubtless drew directly upon Sophocles, and Ovid includes the episode in his *Metamorphoses*. Thus Ajax endured into late antiquity and the Middle Ages as a (good) example of stalwart courage and heroic commitment to the maintenance of honor, and as a (bad) example of excessive passion for vengeance—and also of the vulnerability of great men to divine displeasure or human lies and envy. *Ajax* does not seem to have been among the most widely read of Sophocles' plays in antiquity (few papyrus fragments have been found, and the play is not often quoted), though it is cited quite often by ancient grammarians and lexicographers. It was one of the seven Sophoclean tragedies selected for school use during the Roman period, and a few copies thus survived until the Byzantine revival of classical learning in the tenth century and beyond. Along with *Oedipus the King* and *Electra*, *Ajax* was included among the "triad" of Sophoclean plays most often copied between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, and so it exists in more than a hundred manuscript copies.

In the Early Modern period, the story was frequently adapted in dramas, operas, ballets, and paintings. Few of them stayed close to Sophocles' original. Productions of the

Sophoclean play itself have been relatively frequent ever since the sixteenth century, mostly in schools and colleges, doubtless because of the predominantly male cast of characters and the focus on masculine virtue. The twentieth century has witnessed a few more ambitious professional productions, including one by the National Theatre of Greece, directed by Takis Mouzenidis (1961) with music by Mikis Theodorakis, and one by the London Small Theatre, directed by Peter Meineck (1991; available on video). An inventive production directed by Peter Sellars (1986, etc.) of Robert Auletta's adaptation of the play, which adheres closely to Sophocles' original, was performed widely in the United States and Europe. (It was filmed by Dutch TV and is available on video.) Several freer adaptations have emphasized Ajax's uncompromising ethical principles in contrast to the political corruption and tyrannical impulses of Agamemnon and Odysseus: for example, Ugo Foscolo's *Ajace* (1811; with reference to Napoleon); H. J. Rehfisch's *Die goldenen Waffen* (1913); and Heiner Müller's *Germania 3: Ghosts at the Dead Man* (1995).

Sophocles' *Ajax* has always been appreciated by readers and audiences for its classic depiction of the proud, even obsessive, commitment of a "great man" to his own honor and aristocratic principles, as he collides with the principles of loyalty and obedience demanded by smaller-minded political authorities. The dramatic impact of Sophocles' exploration of the ferocious and intransigent passion of this old-style Homeric hero, and of the patient devotion and vulnerability of his family, have not faded.

# AJAX

## *Characters*

ATHENA

ODYSSEUS

AJAX

CHORUS of Salaminian sailors  
TECMESSA, war captive and concubine of Ajax  
EURYSACES (silent character), the baby son of Ajax and Tecmessa  
MESSENGER

TEUCER, half brother of Ajax  
MENE LAUS

AGAMEMNON

*Scene: The tent of Ajax in the Greek encampment at Troy.*

*(Enter Athena, on high, ° and Odysseus from the side, moving eagerly across the orchestra as though tracing footprints.)*

ATHENA

Odysseus, I have always seen and marked you  
stalking to pounce upon your enemies;  
and now by the tent of Ajax, where he keeps  
last station upon the shore, I find you busy  
5 tracing and scanning these fresh tracks of his,  
new-printed on the sand, to see if he's inside.  
You've tracked him down like a keen-nosed Spartan hound.  
In fact, he has just come in. His head is dripping

10 with sweat and his murderous hands drip too ... But now  
you need not go on peering in—no, tell me,  
what was the reason for your eager search?  
For I have knowledge and can set you right.

## ODYSSEUS

Voice of Athena, dearest utterance  
15 of all the gods' to me—I cannot see you,  
and yet how clearly I can catch your words  
that speak as from a trumpet's throat of bronze!  
You guess my purpose; I have been circling  
steadily on the trail of a man I hate,  
20 shield-bearing Ajax.  
He has done a thing—sometime this last night—  
an act of staggering horror ... aimed at us,  
if indeed he's done it; for nothing about these things  
is surely known—we are floundering in conjecture,  
and I have volunteered to search it out.  
25 This much is sure: we found not long ago  
our flocks and herds of captured beasts all devastated  
and struck with havoc by some butchering hand.  
Their guards were slaughtered with them. Everyone  
puts the blame of it on Ajax. A scout saw him  
30 alone, bounding over the plain and carrying  
a sword still wet with blood—this man informed me  
and set me on the track. I leapt to the scent  
at once; and partly I can trace it still,  
though partly, too, I'm baffled. How can these prints be his?  
You come just as I need you. Now and always:  
35 as heretofore, your hand shall steer me straight.

## ATHENA

I know, Odysseus;  
some time ago I felt your need and came  
on the path to guard and help you in your chase.

ODYSSEUS

Tell me, dear Mistress: am I working to some purpose?

ATHENA

Yes, this is the man that did the things you speak of.

ODYSSEUS

40 What motive, though, prompted that senseless hand?

ATHENA

He was aggrieved, because of Achilles' armor.

ODYSSEUS

But why this wild assault upon the flocks?

ATHENA

He thought it was *you, your* blood, that was staining his hands.

ODYSSEUS

It was a stroke, then, aimed at the Greek army?

ATHENA

45 A successful one, if I had not been watchful.

ODYSSEUS

What desperate daring nerved him to this attempt?

ATHENA

In the night he was moving upon you, stealthily and alone.

ODYSSEUS

And did he come close? Was he reaching near his goal?

ATHENA

To the very doors of the two supreme commanders.

ODYSSEUS

50 And how did he check that hand that yearned for murder?

ATHENA

*I checked him; I threw before his eyes  
obsessive notions, thoughts of insane joy,  
to fall on the mingled droves of captured livestock,  
the undistributed loot which the herdsmen had in charge.  
He fell upon them,*

55 *hewed out a weltering shambles of horned beasts,  
chopping them down in a circle all around him.*

*Sometimes he thought he held the sons of Atreus  
in his grip to kill them, and then again  
his fancy would seize some other of the chiefs.*

*The man was wandering in diseased delusions;  
and I urged him, drove him into the fatal net.*

60 *At last, when he was weary of the slaughter,  
he hobbled the cattle that were still alive,  
and the sheep, and brought them to his tent, thinking  
it was men he had captured and not poor horned beasts.*

*And now he has them bound inside the lodge  
65 and is tormenting them. But I shall show you*

*his madness in plain view. Take note of it;  
then you can proclaim it to all the Greeks.*

*Get a grip on your nerves and wait. You're in no danger  
70 to see the man. I'll turn his glance away.*

*He'll never see you or know your face.*

*(To Ajax.)*

Hey!

You there, who are binding fast your captives' arms

with fetters, come outside! Ajax! Come out!

ODYSSEUS

Athena, what can you be thinking of?  
Don't call him out!

ATHENA

75 Quiet, now! Don't be a coward!

ODYSSEUS

No, no, for heaven's sake!  
It'd be much better if he stayed inside.

ATHENA

What are you afraid of? He was only a man before.

ODYSSEUS

Yes, but he was my enemy and still is.

ATHENA

But to laugh at your enemies—  
what sweeter laughter can there be than that?

ODYSSEUS

80 It's enough for me if he stays just where he is.

ATHENA

You're afraid, then, to see a madman face to face?

ODYSSEUS

Certainly if he were sane, I should never shrink from him.

ATHENA

No need to do so now. He will stand near you,  
and yet not see you.

ODYSSEUS

How is that possible, if he sees with the same eyes still?

ATHENA

85 I can darken even the most acute vision.

ODYSSEUS

I know that a god's contriving may do anything.

ATHENA

Be still, then, and remain right where you are.

ODYSSEUS

If I must, I must. But I wish I were anywhere but here!

ATHENA

Hello there, Ajax, I call you once again!  
90 Why so little care for your old ally?

*(Enter Ajax from inside, carrying a whip.)*

AJAX

Hail, Athena! Daughter of Zeus,  
hail and welcome! How well you have stood by me!  
I shall garland you with trophies all of gold  
from the spoils of this hunting, in thanksgiving.

ATHENA

Excellent. But tell me, did you dye

95 your blade well in the Greeks' blood?

AJAX

Indeed, I can boast as much. I don't deny it.

ATHENA

Did you even turn your weapon against Atreus' sons?

AJAX

I don't think they will slight Ajax again.

ATHENA

Those men are dead, if I understand you correctly.

AJAX

100 Dead they are. Let them rob my armor now!

ATHENA

Tell me, please, what happened to Laertes' son?  
He didn't escape you?

AJAX

Oho, that villainous fox! You want to know where *he* is?

ATHENA

Yes. Your adversary, you know. Odysseus.

AJAX

105 He's sitting there inside, my sweetest prisoner.  
I don't intend for him to die just yet.

ATHENA

What are you going to do first?

AJAX

First bind him to the pole that props my tent ...

ATHENA

Poor miserable man! What treatment will you give him?

AJAX

110 Crimson his back with this whip first, then kill him.

ATHENA

Poor wretch! In pity don't mistreat him so!

AJAX

Have your way, goddess, in all else, and welcome;  
but that man's punishment shall not be changed.

ATHENA

Well, then, if your good pleasure wills it so,  
115 put your hand to work, spare nothing of what you plan.

AJAX

I must be at my work. Goddess, I bid you:  
stand always my ally as you have today.

*(Exit Ajax inside.)*

ATHENA

Do you see, Odysseus, how great the gods' power is?  
Who was more full of foresight than this man,  
120 or abler, do you think, to act as needed?

## ODYSSEUS

None that I know of. And I pity  
his wretchedness, though he is my enemy,  
for the terrible yoke of blindness that is on him.  
I think of him, yet also of myself;  
125 for I see the true state of all us that live—  
phantoms we are, no more, and weightless shadow.

## ATHENA

Look well at this, and speak no towering word  
yourself against the gods, nor walk too grandly  
because your hand is weightier than another's,  
130 or your great wealth deeper founded. One short day  
inclines the balance of all human things  
to sink or rise again. Know that the gods  
love men of steady sense and hate the wicked.

*(Exit Athena; exit Odysseus to one side. Enter the  
Chorus  
of Salaminian sailors, from the other side.)*

## CHORUS [*chanting*]

*Son of Telamon, lord of the firm foundation*  
135 *of Salamis, where the sea circles and swirls,*  
*Ajax, my lord,*  
*when you are fortunate, I too feel gladness;*  
*but when the fury of Zeus or the virulent*  
*slur of the Greeks' slander*  
*strikes you, I shrink in fear, and my eye*  
140 *like a bird's, like a dove's, shows terror.*  
*Now out of this fading night*  
*come huge oppressive rumors of dismay,*  
*wretched and shameful;*  
*for you, they say, in the dark went striding out*  
*over the horse-delighting grassland,*

145 *swinging your bright sword, slaughtering and wasting  
all that remained of our plunder,  
flocks and herds belonging to the Greeks.  
Such tales as these, whisperings and fabrications,  
Odysseus is supplying to every ear.*

150 *And many believe him. For as he speaks of you,  
his words win credit, and each new hearer  
even more than the teller relishes his chance  
to gloat over your distress.*

*Strike at a great man, and you will not miss;*

155 *but if one should bend such slander at me,  
none would believe him. Envy stalks  
after magnates of wealth and power;  
yet small men without the great  
are a frail support for a fortress. They*

160 *should best depend upon the great,  
and the great ones too be upheld by the lesser.  
But the foolish cannot be taught these things.  
Such are the men who are raising this clamor;*

165 *and against it we have no defense, my lord,  
but you. When once they are out of your sight,  
they screech like a gaggle of angry birds;  
but fear of the mighty eagle,<sup>o</sup>  
all of a sudden, I think,*

170 *if you should only appear,  
would make them cower and be silent.*

[*singing*]

## STROPHE A

*Can it have been wild, bull-consorting Artemis  
that stirred you, evil Rumor,*

175 *mother of my disgrace, to move against the flocks?  
Was she angered perhaps over victory dues  
unpaid,  
cheated of some rich spoils of war,*

*or the recompense for a hunted stag?  
Or was it Enyalios, the bronze-cased lord of war  
that begrudged your co-operant spear,  
180 and spitefully paid you out in the night's error?*

#### ANTISTROPHE A

*For never, son of Telamon, of your own heart's  
prompting,  
would you so far have strayed,  
185 as to fall upon the flocks. A god-sent sickness  
must have come on you. May Apollo and Zeus ward off  
the evil tales of the Greeks!  
Yet if the high kings or Odysseus,  
he of the accursed family of Sisyphus,  
190 are artfully weaving some lying tale,  
then no longer hide your face like this, my lord,  
in your tent beside the sea, as they destroy your good name!*

#### EPODE

*Rise, up from the place  
where you have sat too long, refusing to fight your cause,  
195 while ruin flares up toward heaven.  
Your enemies' gross outrage  
sweeps fearlessly, breezing through all the glades  
in a blast of ringing laughter and hard spite.  
200 But I am fixed in my distress.*

*(Enter Tecmessa from the tent.)*

TECMESSA [*chanting*]

*Mariners who serve with Ajax,  
our prince of the old and kingly line  
sprung from Athenian earth, we  
who care for him and his father's far-off home  
have cause indeed for grief;*

205 *for he, our great grim man of power, lies low,  
sickened with a storm of troubles.*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*But what, following on yesterday's  
load of wretchedness, has this night brought?*  
210 *Tell us, daughter of Phrygian Teleutas;  
for the valiant Ajax loves  
and honors you, his spear-won bride—  
perhaps you can speak with knowledge.*

TECMESSA

*But how shall I speak a thing that appalls  
my speech? You shall hear all too clearly*  
215 *of a suffering awful as death.  
Madness has seized our noble Ajax;  
he has come to ignominy in the night.  
What a sight is to be seen within the tent!  
Victims, slain by his hand, deep-dyed*  
220 *in blood, this man's sacred offerings.*

CHORUS [*singing while Tecmessa chants in response*]

STROPHE B

*You have vouched it true, then, that report  
about our hot-tempered chief,  
that tale we cannot bear, yet may not escape:*  
225 *huge it grows, and the words of powerful Greeks  
give it further reinforcement. Oh, I fear  
for that which is moving upon us. He will be done to death,  
our glorious prince, because*  
230 *with frenzied hands and a dark sword he killed  
herds and their mounted guardians.*

## TECMESSA

*Alas, then, it can only have been from there  
that he brought those bound beasts home!*

235 *And some he slew on the tent's floor  
cleanly with a neck-cut; others he hacked to pieces  
with slashes at their ribs. But two special  
white-footed rams he caught up; the head of one  
he cut off, and the tip of its tongue, and threw them away;*  
240 *the other he bound upright against a pillar,  
seized a stout length of harness, using it  
as a singing whip, two-thonged, to lash him with.  
And, amid the blows, poured forth such awful curses  
as no man, but some demon, must have taught him.*

## CHORUS

### ANTISTROPHE B

245 *Now is the time for a man to muffle his head  
and over the land to make his escape in stealth,  
or else, sitting the thwarts to row,  
250 to trust his life to a ship's swift course on the deep—  
such are the threats that the sons of Atreus, two in power,  
stir toward us. I am in dread to share  
255 with him the blows and hurt of the killing stones;  
for awful is the doom that holds him.*

## TECMESSA

*No longer so. After the lightning  
flash and leap of the storm-wind,  
he is calm. But now, being clear in mind,  
he is freshly miserable. It is a painful thing  
260 to look at your own trouble and know  
that you yourself and no one else has made it.*

CHORUS LEADER [*now speaking*]

But still, if it is past, I should think he is lucky;°  
once the trouble has gone, there is less talk about it.

TECMESSA [*speaking*]

265 If someone posed the question, which would you choose:  
to grieve your friends while feeling joy yourself,  
or to be wretched with them, shares alike?

CHORUS LEADER

The last, lady, is twice as bad a thing.

TECMESSA

Since he is ill no longer, only we feel ruined.°

CHORUS LEADER

270 What do you mean? I cannot understand you.

TECMESSA

Ajax, so long as the mad fit was on him,  
himself felt joy at all his wretchedness,  
though we, his sane companions, grieved indeed.  
But now that he's recovered and breathes clear,  
275 his own anguish totally masters him,  
while we are no less wretched than before.  
Is not this a redoubling of our grief?

CHORUS LEADER

You are quite right. Lady, I wonder  
if a fearful blow of god's anger may have hit him.  
280 It is strange that he feels no happier sane than sick.

TECMESSA

Strange, perhaps. But the facts are as they are.

### CHORUS LEADER

How at the start did this catastrophe  
swoop down? Tell us: we share the pain of it.

### TECMESSA

Indeed, you are partners and shall hear it all.  
285 In the depth of night, after the evening flares  
had all gone out, Ajax, with sword in hand,  
began to move toward the door, intent  
upon some pointless errand. I objected,  
and said, "Ajax, what are you doing? Why  
290 do you stir? No messenger has summoned you:  
you have heard no trumpet. Why, the whole army now's  
asleep!"

He answered briefly in a well-worn phrase,  
"Woman, a woman's decency is silence."  
I heard, and said no more; he headed out alone.  
295 I don't know what horrors occurred outside,  
but when he came back in, he brought with him  
a mass of hobbled bulls and shepherd dogs  
and woolly captives. He struck the heads off some;  
others' throats he slit with an upward cut;  
and some, held fast in bonds, he kept abusing  
with words and blows, as though they were human beings—  
300 and all the while he was abusing poor dumb beasts.  
At length he darted out the door and spoke  
wild, rending words, directed toward some phantom,  
exulting with a harsh laugh how he'd paid them,  
Odysseus and the sons of Atreus. Then  
305 he sprang back in again, and somehow, slowly,  
by painful stages came to his right mind.  
And when he saw his dwelling full of ruin,  
he beat his head and bellowed. There he sat,

wreckage himself among the wreck of corpses,  
the sheep slaughtered; and in an anguished grip  
310 of fist and fingernail he clutched his hair.  
He sat so, without speaking, for some time;  
then finally spoke those fearful, threatening words—  
what he would do to me if I failed to say  
all that had happened: he asked me where he stood.  
315 Friends, I was terrified by all he'd done,  
and told him, simply, everything I knew.  
Then he cried out—long wails of shattering pain,  
like none I ever heard from him before;  
he always used to say such cries were cowardly,  
320 marks of an abject spirit. His own way  
was not to wail aloud in his distress,  
but keep his moans low, like a roaring bull.  
Now, though, quite overcome by his misfortune,  
refusing food and drink, he sits there motionless,  
325 relapsed among the beasts his sword brought down.  
There are clear signs, too,  
that he's aiming to do some dreadful thing; his words  
and his lamentations both somehow suggest it.  
Friends—this was the thing I came to ask of you—  
won't you come in and help us, if you can?  
330 Men like him will listen to their friends.

#### CHORUS LEADER

Tecmessa, Teleutas' daughter, what a frenzy,  
by your account, his griefs have moved him to!

*(From inside the tent.)*

#### AJAX

*Ah, ah!*

#### TECMESSA

Worse may be coming. Didn't you hear his voice,  
335 Ajax's, distorted in that ghastly cry?

*(From inside.)*

AJAX

*Ah, ah!*

CHORUS LEADER

Either he still is mad, or else can't bear  
to face the results of his former madness.

*(From inside.)*

AJAX

*Boy! Where is my son?*

TECMESSA

340 Oh no! Eurysaces, it's you he's calling.  
What can he want? Where are you? What shall I do?

*(From inside.)*

AJAX

Teucer! Where are you? Where is my brother Teucer?  
Is he out there raiding, forever? And I here ruined!

CHORUS LEADER

No, he seems to be sane. Open the door.  
Perhaps seeing someone, though it's only us,  
345 may help him to compose himself.

*(Tecmessa opens the door, revealing Ajax sitting in  
the middle of slaughtered bulls and sheep.)*

## TECMESSA

There, now you see.

You can judge for yourself the state of his affairs,  
and how the man is too.

AJAX [*singing, perhaps from inside the tent or from the doorway, while the Chorus Leader and Tecmessa speak in response*]

## STROPHE A

*Ah!*

*Dear fellow sailors, my only friends,  
350 still faithful in the old proved way,  
look at this swirling tide of grief  
and the storm of blood behind it,  
coursing around and round me.*

## CHORUS LEADER

Horrible!

Tecmessa, what you told us was too true—  
355 insanity stands here revealed indeed!

## AJAX

## ANTISTROPHE A

*Ah!*

*Stout hearts and skillful navigators,  
strong hands to move the oar,  
I see no friend but you,  
360 no, none, to watch out for me.  
So now, please, help by killing me!*

## CHORUS LEADER

Hush! Check those awful words!

Don't seek a worse cure for a bad disease,  
and make your pain still heavier than it is.

AJAX

### STROPHE B

*Here I am, the bold, the valiant,  
365 unflinching in the shock of war—  
a terrible threat to unsuspecting beasts.  
Oh! What a mockery I have come to! What indignity!*

TECMESSA

Ajax, my lord and master,  
I beg you not to say such things.

AJAX

*370 Go away! Take yourself out of my sight!  
Ah, ah!*

CHORUS LEADER

In god's name, be more gentle and more temperate.

AJAX

*How could I be so unfortunate?  
To let those accursed ones out of my hand,  
and fall instead on goats and cattle,  
375 curving horns and splendid flocks,  
shedding their dark blood!*

CHORUS LEADER

The thing is done. Why grieve about it now?  
You cannot make it undone.

AJAX

ANTISTROPHE B

*Ah, yes, son of Laertes  
spying everywhere, always  
380 the tool of every mischief,  
filthiest scoundrel of all the army:  
what a huge laugh you're laughing now, what gloating!*

CHORUS LEADER

It is the god's giving if we laugh or weep.

AJAX

*Ah, if I could just once catch sight of him!  
Crushed as I am, I'd ...  
385 Ah, ah!*

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, no blustering words.  
Your situation's desperate; can't you see?

AJAX

*Zeus, father of my forefathers,  
how might I strike them down,  
390 that devious, hateful rogue and the two joint kings,  
and finally find death myself?*

TECMESSA

When you utter that prayer, why, pray for my death too;  
why should I go on living after you are dead?

AJAX

## STROPHE C

*O*  
*darkness that is my light,*  
*murk of the underworld, my only brightness,*  
395 *oh, take me to yourself to reside with you,*  
*receive and keep me. I cannot look*  
*to any of the race of gods for help,*  
*being no longer worthy,*  
400 *nor yet to humankind.*  
*But the mighty goddess, daughter of Zeus, cruelly works my*  
*ruin.*  
*Where shall a man flee?*  
*Where shall I turn for refuge?*  
405 *All that I was has perished<sup>o</sup>*  
*with these poor creatures here,*  
*and I abused by a fool's dream*  
*of stalk and capture. Friends, friends,*  
*the massed army will take my life*  
*with bloody swords in hand.*

## TECMESSA

410 What wretchedness, to hear a brave man speak  
such words as formerly he'd never deign to use!

## AJAX

## ANTISTROPHE C

*O*  
*sounding straits of the sea,*  
*caves by the sea's edge, meadows on the shore,*  
415 *long and long have you kept me here at Troy;*  
*but now I shall not revive again, never again—*  
*a man of sense may know it.*  
420 *Scamander, neighboring river, gentle to Greeks,*  
*you shall no longer see this man,*

*such a man (let me now speak my boast)  
as Troy never saw the like of, not in all  
425 the army that came from the land of Greece.  
But now in dishonor  
I lie abject.*

## CHORUS LEADER

I cannot restrain you, and yet I can't allow you  
to keep talking, surrounded by such miseries.

## AJAX [now *speaking*]

430 Agony. Who would have thought my name and fortune  
could square so well together! My name is Ajax;  
agony is its meaning. ° And my fortunes  
are cause indeed for an agony of wailing,  
cause and enough twice over. How my father,  
fighting here under Ida long ago,  
435 won with his sword the loveliest prize of all  
for valor, and sweet praise at his return;  
but I, his son,  
coming in my turn with a force no less  
to this same land of Troy, no less than he a champion,  
nor less deserving, yet am left an outcast,  
440 shamed by the Greeks, to perish as I do!  
And yet I seem to know this simple truth:  
if the bestowing of the famous armor  
had rested with Achilles while he lived,  
to give them as a war prize to the bravest,  
no rival then would have filched them from my hands.  
445 But now the sons of Atreus have contrived  
that a man of most dishonest mind should have them,  
pushing my brave deeds aside. And I say this,  
that if my eyes and mind had not leapt whirling  
wide from my aim, those two would never again  
cheat anyone with their awards and ballots!

450 But, instead, the fierce-eyed, overpowering  
daughter of Zeus, just then as I was readying  
my hand and plot against them, set me sprawling,  
distraught and frenzied, and I dipped my hands  
in the blood of beasts like these. And now they are laughing  
and triumph in their clear escape, which I  
455 never intended for them. But when a god  
strikes harm, a worse man often foils his better.

And now, Ajax—what is to be done now?  
I am hated by the gods, that's plain; the Greek camp hates me:  
Troy and the ground I stand upon detest me.  
460 Shall I go, then, from this place where the ships ride,  
desert the Atridae, and cross the Aegean to my home?  
But when I get there,  
what face can I show to my father Telamon?  
How will he ever stand the sight of me  
if I stand there empty-handed, armed with no glory,  
465 when he himself won the crown of men's top praise?  
That won't bear thinking of. Well, then,  
shall I make a rush against the walls of Troy,  
fight with them all in single combat, do  
some notable exploit, and find my death in it?  
But that might give some comfort to the sons of Atreus.  
470 No. I must find some better way entirely—  
an enterprise which will prove to my old father  
that the son of his loins is not by nature a weakling.  
It's a contemptible thing for a man to want long life  
when his whole existence brings no relief from trouble.  
475 What joy is there in a long file of days,  
edging you forward toward the goal of death,<sup>o</sup>  
then back again a little? I wouldn't give much for a man  
who warms himself with the comfort of vain hopes.  
Let a man nobly live or nobly die  
480 if he *is* a nobleman: I have said what I had to say.

## CHORUS LEADER

Ajax, no one could ever call those words  
spurious or alien to you. They are your own heart's speech.  
Pause, though, a moment; put aside these thoughts,  
and give your friends a chance to win you over.

## TECMESSA

485 Ajax, my lord, life knows no harder thing  
than to be at the mercy of compelling fortune.  
I, for example, was born of a free father;  
if any man in Phrygia was lordly and prosperous, he was.  
Now I'm a slave. Such, it seems, was the gods' will,  
490 and the will of your strong hand. But since I've come  
to share your bed with you, my thoughts are loyal  
to you and yours. And I beg you  
in the holy name of Zeus who guards your hearth fire,  
and by your bed, in which you were united with me,  
don't give me up to hear the harsh speech  
495 of your enemies and to be owned by one of them.  
For this is certain: the day you die  
and by your death desert me, that same day  
will see me outraged too, forcibly dragged  
by the Greeks, together with your boy, to lead a slave's life.  
500 And then some one of my masters, lashing out  
with a cruel word, will make his hateful comment:  
"There she is, Ajax's woman;  
he was the greatest man in the whole army.  
How enviable her life was then, and now how slavish!"  
Some speech in that style. And my ill fate  
will be driving me before it, but these words  
505 will be a reproach to you and all your family.  
Ajax, revere your father; do not leave him  
in the misery of his old age—and your mother,  
shareholder in many years, revere her too!  
She prays the gods for your safe return, how often!

510 And last, dear lord, show pity to your child,  
if robbed of his infant nurture and deprived of you,  
he's to live his life out under the rule of guardians  
not kind nor kindred—what a wretchedness  
you by your death will deal to him and me!  
For I no longer have anywhere to look for help,  
515 if not to you. My country was destroyed  
utterly by your spear, and another fate  
brought down my mother and my father too,  
to dwell in death with Hades. Then what fatherland  
shall I ever have but you? Or what prosperity?  
You are my only safety. O my lord,  
520 remember even me. A man ought to remember  
if he has perhaps experienced some pleasure.  
Kindness it is that brings forth kindness always;  
but when a man ignores good done to him  
and lets the recollection of it slip away,  
how shall I any longer call him noble?

#### CHORUS LEADER

525 Ajax, I wish you could have pity in your heart  
as I do. For then you might approve her words.

#### AJAX

Well, she can certainly count on my approval  
if only she sets her mind to do as I bid her.

#### TECMESSA

Dearest Ajax, I will be all obedience.

#### AJAX

530 Then bring me my son and let me see him.

#### TECMESSA

It was only because of my fears that I removed him.

AJAX

In all this terrible business? Or do I understand you?

TECMESSA

Yes, in case the poor boy might come in your way and be killed.

AJAX

Yes, that would have been in accord with my misfortune.

TECMESSA

535 At all events I took care that it shouldn't happen.

AJAX

You did well and deserve credit for your foresight.

TECMESSA

Is there anything, then, you want me to do for you?

AJAX

Yes. Let me speak to my boy and see his face.

TECMESSA

He's not far off. The servants are looking after him.

AJAX

540 Why doesn't he come at once, then?

TECMESSA

Eurysaces! Your father is calling for you

*(To one of the servants inside.)*

You there, whose hands have care of him—bring him here!

AJAX

Is he coming? Doesn't he hear your words?

*(Enter Eurysaces, led by a servant.)*

TECMESSA

Here he is. See, the servant's bringing him.

AJAX

545 Lift him up, lift him to me. He won't be frightened,  
even by seeing this fresh-butchered gore,  
not if he really is my son. Break in  
the colt straight off to his father's savage ways;  
train him to have a nature like his sire.

550 My boy, may you have better luck than your father,  
but be like him in all else; and you will not be bad.  
You know, even now I somewhat envy you:  
you have no sense of all this misery.  
Not knowing anything's the sweetest life—  
ignorance is bliss<sup>o</sup>—

555 till the time comes when you learn of joy and grief.  
But when you come to that,  
then you must show your father's enemies  
what sort of a man you are, and what man's son.  
Till then feed on light breezes, basking  
in the tenderness of young life, your mother's joy.

560 For rest assured, the Greeks will not offer you outrage  
or hatefully insult you, even when you're without me.  
I leave you a strong guardian as doorkeeper,  
Teucer. He will protect and rear you up  
and stint you nothing, even though now he's far away,

565 gone on a distant raid in enemy country.

    You, men at arms and seafarers, my followers,  
I enjoin this act of kindness on you all:  
    pass on my command to Teucer; bid him take  
    my boy here to my home, present him  
    to Telamon and my mother, Eriboea,  
570 and let him tend and nourish their old age  
    with constancy, till at the last they find  
    their dark apartments with the god below.°

    As for my arms—  
I say no arbiter of the Greeks shall set them  
    as a prize of competition for the army;  
    certainly my destroyer shall not. Rather  
    you, my boy, take from me this great weapon  
575 from which you have your name, Eurysaces;°  
    hold and direct it by its stalwart strap,  
    this sevenfold-oxhide-thick unbreachable shield.  
The rest of my armor shall be buried with me.  
    But there's enough. Come, take the child quickly;  
    close up the house. And let there be no wailing  
580 here out of doors. Lord, what a plaintive creature  
    womankind is!

    Make fast, and hurry!  
    No good physician moans incantations  
    when the malady he's treating needs the knife.

### CHORUS LEADER

    I'm terrified by your eager urgency,  
    and take no comfort in your sharpened tongue.

### TECMESSA

585 Ajax, my lord, what is your mind bent upon?

### AJAX

    Don't probe and question me! Restraint is best.

TECMESSA

How my heart falters! Ajax, by your child  
and by the gods I beg you, don't be our betrayer!

AJAX

You're growing tedious. Don't you know by now  
590 that I owe the gods no service any more?

TECMESSA

What impious words!

AJAX

Reprove those who hear  
you.

TECMESSA

And will you not relent?

AJAX

You've said too much  
already.

TECMESSA

My lord, it is my fear that speaks!

*(To the servants.)*

AJAX

Shut the doors at  
once!

TECMESSA

In the gods' name, soften!

AJAX

You have a foolish thought  
595 if you think at this late date to school my nature.

*(Ajax, Tecmessa, and Eurysaces go inside.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*O glorious Salamis, my heart recalls,  
blessed island, where you lie  
at peace in the surf's pounding,  
radiant in all men's sight and prized forever.  
600 But Time has grown old since I  
have kept this wretched campsite under Ida,<sup>o</sup>  
losing count of the months' passing,  
605 feeling the slow wear and abrasion;  
and dark is my thought's forecast:  
shall I yet come, shall my coming be  
to the somber and detested house of Death?*

ANTISTROPHE A

*And now I face a further struggle,  
610 for Ajax, incurable, sits by, ah,  
with god-sent madness as his consort.  
You sent him forth, fair island, in a time long past,  
a warrior mighty among warriors. Now  
615 he feeds his thoughts in loneliness  
and brings grief to his friends.  
And the works of war that once his strong hands did  
now are fallen, fallen away,  
620 unappreciated, unloved by those unloving kings.*

STROPHE B

*I think, too,  
of his mother, with the white of age upon her:  
625 surely when the news of his mind's devouring sickness  
is brought to her, lamenting, lamenting,  
like the pitiful nightingale  
she will not hold back the cry of her heart's anguish,  
630 but high, rending strains will break from her,  
her hands will thud, beating her breast,  
and her gray hair will be torn.*

### ANTISTROPHE B

*Better if he  
635 were hidden in Hades, now his mind is gone;  
for though his proud lineage  
excelled the other warlike Greeks,  
he keeps no more the steady heart we knew,  
640 but ranges in extravagant madness. Wretched father!  
What an unendurable word you must hear! Calamity  
fallen upon your son, such as no other  
645 of all Aeacus' family has borne, but only he.*

*(Enter Ajax from the tent with a sword in  
his hand, followed by Tecmessa.)*

### AJAX

Strangely the long and countless drift of time  
brings all things forth from darkness into light,  
then covers them once more. Nothing so unexpected  
that anyone can say it surely will not be—  
strong oath and iron intent come crashing down.  
650 My mood, which just before was strong and rigid,  
like hardened steel, now has lost its edge—  
my speech is womanish for this woman's sake;  
and pity touches me for wife and child,  
widowed and lost among my enemies.

But now I'm going to the bathing place  
655 and meadows by the sea, to cleanse my stains,  
in hope the goddess' wrath may pass from me.  
And when I've found a place that's quite deserted,  
I'll dig in the ground, and hide this sword of mine,  
hatefullest of weapons, out of sight. May Darkness  
660 and Hades, god of death, hold it in their safe keeping.  
For never, since I took it as a gift  
which Hector, my great enemy, gave to me,  
have I known any kindness from the Greeks.  
I think the ancient proverb speaks the truth:  
665 an enemy's gift is ruinous and no gift.  
Well, then,  
from now on this will be my rule: Give way  
to the gods, and bow before the sons of Atreus.  
They are our rulers, they must be obeyed.  
I must give way, as all dread strengths give way,  
in turn and deference. Winter's hard-packed snow  
670 cedes to the fruitful summer; stubborn night  
at last withdraws, so white-horsed day can shine.  
The dread blast of the gale slackens and gives  
peace to the sounding sea; and Sleep, strong jailer,  
675 in time yields up his captive. Shall not I  
learn place and wisdom? Have I not learned this,  
only so much to hate my enemy  
as though he might again become my friend,  
680 and so much good to wish to do my friend,  
as knowing he may yet become my enemy?  
Most men have found friendship a treacherous harbor.  
Enough: this will be well.  
You, my wife, go in  
685 and fervently and continually pray the gods  
to grant fulfillment of my soul's desire.  
And you, my friends, heed my instructions too,  
and when he comes, deliver this to Teucer:  
let him take care for me and thought for you.

690 Now I am going where my way must go;  
do as I bid you, and you yet may hear  
that I, though wretched now, have found my safety.

*(Exit Ajax to the side; exit Tecmessa into the tent.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*I shudder and thrill with joy,  
I leap and take wings—lord Pan!*  
695 *Come to me over the sea  
from your snow-buffeted mountain,  
from the long, rocky ridge of Cyllene.  
Teach me (since you, self-taught, are the gods' dance leader),  
700 teach me the excited Mysian and Cnosian steps—<sup>o</sup>  
I am eager to dance!  
And over the open sea ...  
may Apollo come to me, clear to see,  
the lord of Delos—  
705 to be with me in kindness always.*

## ANTISTROPHE

*Ares the war god has cleared  
the grim grief from our eyes.*

*Ah, I exult with joy!*

*Once again, Zeus,*

*king of the bright air, your perfect daylight  
can bathe our skimming seacraft in its whiteness.*

710 *Ajax forgets his pain,*

*and now, with holy rite and due observance,  
once more recognizes divine law.*

*Great Time makes all things dim and ignites them again;°*

715 *and nothing seems beyond the verge of the speakable,*

*since Ajax has been converted*

*(amazing!) from his heart's fierceness and his stern  
strife with the sons of Atreus.*

*(Enter Messenger, from the side.)*

## MESSENGER

Friends, I would deliver this news first to you:

720 Teucer has just come back from rugged Mysia.

No sooner did he reach headquarters than  
the whole Greek army gathered to abuse him.

They'd seen him coming quite a long way off  
and, when he arrived, stood around him in a circle,

725 jabbing at him with jeers from every side:

called him the brother of a lunatic

and traitor to the army, threatened him  
with stoning to a torn and bloody death.

So far they went that eager fingers then

730 had plucked forth swords from scabbards, but the strife,

just as it hurried toward its uttermost,

grew quiet at the elders' peaceful words.

But where is Ajax? I must speak my news,

the whole story, to my lord himself.

### CHORUS LEADER

735 He is not here. He went away just now;  
his heart is changed, and bends to bear the yoke  
of a changed purpose.

### MESSENGER

Oh no!  
Perhaps the man that sent me was too slow  
in sending, or I lingered on the way.

### CHORUS LEADER

740 What is so urgent? Why do you think you're late?

### MESSENGER

Teucer declared the man should not go out,  
but stay indoors, till he himself arrives.

### CHORUS LEADER

He *has* gone out, though—seeking his truest good.  
He wants to be relieved of the gods' anger.

### MESSENGER

745 A very foolish and misguided thought,  
if Calchas can foresee events at all!

### CHORUS LEADER

What are you saying? What can you know of it?

### MESSENGER

This much I know—I happened to be near:  
750 for Calchas rose and left the kingly circle

and came to speak with Teucer separately  
without the Atridae; gently he placed his hand  
in Teucer's own, and urged and pled with him  
to use all means to keep his brother safe  
under his tent roof, and confine him there  
755 throughout the length of this now present day,  
if ever he wished to see him alive again.  
Only for this one day, the prophet said,  
will the goddess Athena drive him with her anger.  
"Wherever men forget their human nature,  
thinking thoughts too high, they are not helped  
760 by bodily bulk and stupid<sup>o</sup> boldness; no,  
they fall, through heavy disasters sent by Heaven.  
Ajax, even when he first set out from home,  
proved himself foolish, when his father gave him  
his good advice at parting. 'Child,' he said,  
765 'Resolve to win, but always with god's help.'  
But Ajax answered with a senseless boast:  
'Father, with god's help even a worthless man  
could triumph. I propose without that help  
to win my prize of fame.' In such a spirit  
770 he boasted. And when once Athena stood  
beside him in the fight, urging him on  
to strike the enemy with his deadly hand,  
he answered then, that second time, with words  
to shudder at, not speak: 'Goddess,' he said,  
'go stand beside the other Greeks; help them.  
775 For where I'm stationed, no enemy will break through.'  
With such words as these that kept no human measure  
he won from the goddess hatred and fierce anger.  
But if he lives this day out, then perhaps,  
with god's help, we may be his saviors still."  
780 This was the seer's message. Teucer rose  
at once and sent me off, bearing you these  
instructions, with strict charge to keep them. But  
if things already have deprived us of our hopes,

then Ajax's life is done—or Calchas knows nothing.

CHORUS LEADER

Tecmessa, I think you were born for every misery.  
785 Come and attend to this man's fearful story.  
The razor grazes near, and we feel no comfort.

*(Enter Tecmessa from the tent, carrying Eurysaces.)*

TECMESSA

I have only just found respite from that other  
siege of calamities. What new alarm is this?

CHORUS LEADER

Listen to the message this man has brought.  
790 It concerns Ajax, and it sounds grim.

TECMESSA

Alas, what is your message? Not that we're ruined?

MESSENGER

As to your own case, I can't say. But if Ajax  
has left his tent, there is no hope for him.

TECMESSA

But he *has* gone out. I tremble in suspense  
to know your meaning.

MESSENGER

795 Teucer sends strict directions that Ajax  
must be kept under the cover of his tent  
and not permitted to go out alone.

TECMESSA

But where is Teucer? And why does he say this?

MESSENGER

He has just returned. And he apprehends  
that Ajax's going out will be his ruin.

TECMESSA

800 Heaven help us! Who was the man that told him this?

MESSENGER

Calchas the prophet. He warned us to be on our guard  
all day, for it brings him either life or death.°

TECMESSA

Alas, friends, stand between me and my doom!  
Hurry, some of you, and bring Teucer quickly;  
the rest divide—let one group search the eastward  
805 and one the westward bendings of the shore,  
to trace his evil journey. I can see now  
that I have been deceived of his intent  
and exiled from his kindness which I knew.

But oh! my child, what shall I do? Not stay,  
810 but join the search as far as my strength supports me.  
Come, let's be at the work! No time to linger,  
if we aim to save a man that's bent on death.

CHORUS LEADER

I am ready. More than my words shall show it:  
you'll find me swift of foot and prompt in action.

*(Exit Tecmessa to the side bearing Eurysaces, along  
with  
the Messenger. The Chorus divides into two*

*semichoruses*  
*and exits to both sides. The stage is empty.)*

*Scene: An empty place by the seashore. Enter Ajax, carrying a sword.*

*(He fixes the sword in the ground.)*°

AJAX

815 My slayer's set there, firm in the ground, so the cut  
    (if I have time even for this reflection)  
    should now be deadliest. This very sword  
    was Hector's gift, a token of guest-friendship,  
    and he of all guest-friends my bitterest foe;  
    here now it stands, lodged in this hostile ground  
820 of Troy, its edge renewed with the gnawing whetstone.

    And also I've fixed it firmly, with every care,  
    to help me quickly and kindly to my death.

    This preparation I have made. And now,  
    making my invocation, as is right,

825 I call first, Zeus, on you. Grant me one small thing:  
    send some messenger, please, to bring  
    the evil news about me first to Teucer,  
    so that he may be first to lift me up  
    when I have fallen on this fresh-stained sword.

    I would not have some enemy spy me out  
830 and cast me forth, a prize for birds and dogs.

    Grant me, O Zeus, this one thing. And I call  
    on Hermes, conductor to the world below,  
    to put me to sleep quickly, in one leap  
    without convulsions on this piercing blade.

835 And I ask those dread Furies, who are ever maidens  
    and watch all the fates and sufferings of men,  
    to come with long strides, my helpers; mark my end,  
    how Atreus' sons have brought me to my ruin,  
    and sweep upon them for their ruin too.°

840 They see me falling now by my own hand;  
so may they fall too by loved and kindred hand!  
Go, swift and punishing Erinyes,  
taste the whole army's blood, and spare them nothing.

845 And you that drive your chariot up steep heaven,  
lord Helios—when you next shall see my own  
dear country, hold in check your golden reins,  
and bring the tale of my death and downfall  
to my old father and to her that nursed me.

850 Poor mother! When she hears this wretched word,  
how her laments will echo through the town!

But it does no good to bemoan things pointlessly.  
I must set about my business with all speed.  
Strong god of death, attend me now and come.

855 And yet I shall converse with you hereafter<sup>o</sup>  
and be with you in the world below. But you,  
sweet gleam of daylight now before my eyes,  
and sun god, splendid charioteer, I greet you  
for this last time and never any more.

O radiance, O my home and hallowed ground  
860 of Salamis, and my father's hearth, farewell!  
And glorious Athens, and my peers and kin  
nurtured with me—and also here the springs  
and streams and plains of Troy, my nurses all—  
farewell! This last word Ajax speaks to you;  
865 the rest he'll utter in Hades to those below.

*(He falls on the sword.<sup>o</sup> Enter, from the sides,  
the two divisions of the Chorus.)*

FIRST SEMICHORUS [*alternating between singing and  
speaking, as does the Second Semichorus*]

*Toil breeds toil upon toil;  
where, where have I not searched?  
No place allows me to share its secret.<sup>o</sup>*

870 *Listen! What noise was that?*

SECOND SEMICHORUS

*Only us, your shipmates.*

FIRST SEMICHORUS

*What news?*

SECOND SEMICHORUS

From the ships to westward we've scanned all the ground.

FIRST SEMICHORUS

875 *And discovered?*

SECOND SEMICHORUS

Labor enough; but nothing to see.

FIRST SEMICHORUS

Nor yet on the path to eastward, facing the sunrise:  
no sign of him at all.

*(The two halves of the Chorus unite.)*

CHORUS [*alternating between singing and speaking, as does Tecmessa*]

STROPHE

*What struggling fisherman  
of those that seek their haul  
880 with labor in the hours of sleep;  
what nymph of mountainside  
or seaward-rolling river  
885 has seen the fierce man*

*wandering somewhere and might cry out to me?  
I wish one would! For surely  
it's a hard thing that I must range and toil  
with never a fair course  
to bring me near my goal;  
890 but I cannot see the afflicted man's faint trace.*

*(From the side.)*

TECMESSA

*Oh! No! No!*

CHORUS

*Whose is that harsh cry bursting from the grove?*

*(Enter Tecmessa.)*

TECMESSA

*Oh! Oh!*

CHORUS LEADER

It is she, I see her now, the poor captive wife,  
895 Tecmessa. She is lost in lamentation.

TECMESSA

Friends, I am ruined, overwhelmed, undone.

CHORUS

*What is the matter?*

TECMESSA

Here at my feet lies Ajax, newly slaughtered.  
His fallen body enfolds and hides the sword.

## CHORUS

900 *Oh, now I shall not win home!  
You have dealt me death, my lord,  
your poor unhappy shipmate.  
—And I feel for her, poor wretched one, poor wife!*

## TECMESSA

He is dead, dead. We can only weep for him.

## CHORUS LEADER

905 Whose hand helped him to his fate?

## TECMESSA

His own hand and act. It's plain to see.  
This blade, packed in the ground, on which he fell,  
declares it.

## CHORUS

910 *How blind I was! And you bled alone, unprotected by friends!  
I was all deaf and stupid, totally heedless.  
Let me see him,  
rugged and ill-starred Ajax, where he lies.*

## TECMESSA

915 He is not to be looked at! I will cover him  
with this enfolding garment from all sight.

*(She places a cloak over Ajax's body.)*

Surely no one who loved him could endure  
to see the foam at his nostrils and the spout  
of darkening blood from the wound his own hand made.  
920 Alas, what shall I do? Which of your friends  
will bear you up? Where's Teucer? Oh, may he come in time

to give fit tendance to his fallen brother!  
Ajax! To be so great, and suffer this!  
Even your enemies, I think, might weep for you.

## CHORUS

### ANTISTROPHE

925 *You were bound, hard spirit,  
bound in the end (it is clear now)  
to work the term of your luckless  
life's share of affliction, that vast journey.  
What could they mean but that,  
those groans your fierce heart uttered*  
930 *by night and in the sunlight,  
fraught with hate  
for the sons of Atreus,  
fraught with a mind for harm?  
That was indeed a great  
inaugural time of sorrows,*  
935 *when the contest for greatest warrior  
was held over the priceless armor ...* °

TECMESSA [*singing*]

*Oh! The pain of it!*

CHORUS LEADER [*speaking*]

A noble grief, I know, goes to the heart.

TECMESSA

*Oh! Oh!*

CHORUS LEADER

I don't wonder, lady, that you cry out,  
940 and again cry out, your grief, deprived just now

of such a loved one.

TECMESSA [now *speaking*]

You may conjecture that;  
I know and feel it all too certainly.

CHORUS [*singing*]

*That is true.*

TECMESSA

Poor little child! What a yoke of servitude  
945 we go to! What harsh masters stand over us!

CHORUS

*They are ruthless indeed, the two sons of Atreus,  
if they do the unspeakable thing  
you have spoken in your distress:  
may the god prevent it!*

TECMESSA

950 Even in what we suffer I see the gods' hand.

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, they have given an overload of grief.

TECMESSA

I think it's Pallas, Zeus' dreadful daughter,  
who breeds this trouble, to benefit Odysseus.

CHORUS

955 *Indeed, that much-enduring man,  
how he insults us in his black heart!  
He mocks our frenzied griefs*

*with loud laughter, bitter to bear,*  
960 *and the pair of kings hear and join him.*

## TECMESSA

Well, let them laugh their laughter and exult  
in Ajax's downfall. They didn't want him living;  
perhaps, now he is dead, they will yearn for him  
when the fighting presses. Ignorant men  
965 don't know what good they hold in their hands until  
they've flung it away. His death was as bitter to me  
as it's sweet to them; but for himself a happiness.  
For he won his great desire, the death he looked for.  
Why should those others mock him any more?  
970 His death concerns the gods, not them at all.  
Let Odysseus think of this and make his empty insult.  
For them there is no Ajax; but for me,  
he's gone, and left great anguish, pain, and grief.

*(Entering from the side.)*

## TEUCER

*Oh! Oh!*

## CHORUS LEADER

975 Be silent! I think it's Teucer's voice I hear;  
and his cry goes straight to the mark of this disaster.

## TEUCER [*speaking*]

O my dear brother Ajax, have you come  
to grief, as this strong rumor says you have?

## CHORUS LEADER

He is dead, Teucer. Know the simple truth.

TEUCER

980 Then my ill luck is bearing heavily down!

CHORUS LEADER

It is true.

TEUCER

Ah, I am  
miserable!

CHORUS LEADER

You may well groan.

TEUCER

So rash and  
calamitous!

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, Teucer.

TEUCER

The grief comes sharp. But what  
of his child? Where in Troy's land can he be found?

CHORUS LEADER

985 He is alone by the tents.

*(To Tecmessa.)*

TEUCER

Go quickly, then,  
quickly, and bring him here. Some enemy else  
may snatch him, as one would a lion cub

torn from its lonely mother. Hurry and lose  
no time! When a man lies dead and helpless,  
all the world delights to mock and injure him.

*(Exit Tecmessa.)*<sup>o</sup>

### CHORUS LEADER

990 Teucer, that was his last command to you,  
to take care for his child, as you are doing.

### TEUCER

This sight of all sights that my eyes have seen  
to me is harshest, and no other road,  
of all my feet have taken, so has grieved  
995 my heart as this, dear Ajax, which I took  
as I sought the truth and tried to track it down  
after I heard the news about your fate.  
It was sharp news, and sped through all the army  
as if some god had sent it: you were dead.

1000 And when I heard it, still a long way off,  
I groaned with inward misery; now I see;  
it is true, and it destroys me.

Ah!

Come, uncover him; let me see the worst.

Hard face to gaze on, face of fierce resolve,  
how can I look at you? Oh, what a crop  
1005 of anguish you have sown for me in death!  
Where can I go? Who ever will receive me,  
now I have failed to help you in your need?  
Old Telamon is your father, and mine too:  
no doubt he'll welcome me and beam on me

1010 when I come home without you. Very likely!

He's not much given to smiling, even when things go well.  
What will he not say? What reproach will he spare me?  
"Bastard, born from the war spear, wretched coward,

deserter and abandoner"—of you,  
1015 dear Ajax! Or perhaps he will suggest  
I did it out of treachery, so that I  
might get your house and power by your death.  
These will be that harsh old man's reproaches:  
age makes him morose and stirs him up  
to causeless anger. In the end I'll be  
cast into exile and denied my country,  
1020 a slave in his account, no more a free man.  
At home those are my expectations; here in Troy  
my enemies are numerous, my assets small,  
and even these have vanished with your death. °  
What shall I do? How shall I pull you free,  
1025 brother, from off this bitter, gleaming spike,  
your murderer, by whose cut you gasped your life out?  
Do you see how in time Hector, though dead,  
was to destroy you? Only consider this  
amazing thing, the fortunes of two men:  
the sword-belt Hector had as Ajax's gift  
1030 was that which dragged him from the chariot rails,  
clamping his flesh and grating him until  
he breathed out his life; this sword Hector gave Ajax,  
who perished on it with a deadly fall.  
Did not a Fury make this blade of bronze?  
1035 And was it not Hades, that grim craftsman,  
who made that belt? In my opinion,  
this was the gods' contrivance, like all other  
fortunes of men, for the gods design them all;  
and if anyone should find my thought at fault,  
let him keep his opinion, and I mine.

#### CHORUS LEADER

1040 Cut short your speech, and quickly consider  
how best to hide him in some sort of grave,  
and what you must say next. I see a man

coming, our enemy, to laugh no doubt,  
like any troublemaker, at our misfortunes.

TEUCER

Which chief of the army is it that you see?

CHORUS LEADER

1045 Menelaus, the one for whom we made this voyage.

TEUCER

I see him now.

At closer range he's not hard to distinguish.

*(Enter Menelaus from the side, with attendants.)*

MENELAUS

You, there! I tell you not to lift that corpse  
nor bury it, but leave it where it is.

TEUCER

Why take such trouble to make this grand announcement?

MENELAUS

1050 It's my decision, and the high command's decree.

TEUCER

Perhaps you'd care to give some justification for it.

MENELAUS

Listen, then.

When we brought Ajax here from Greece,  
we thought he would be our ally and our friend:  
but instead we've found him worse than any Trojan—

1055 plotting a murderous strike at the whole army,  
a night attack, to kill us with his spear.  
And unless some god had smothered that attempt,  
we should have met the end that he has met,  
done to a helpless, miserable death,  
1060 and he be living still. But a god diverted  
his criminal rage to fall on sheep and cattle.  
Therefore I say, no man exists on earth  
who shall have the power to give him burial;  
but he shall be tossed forth  
1065 somewhere on the pale sand, to feed the seagulls.  
There it is, and don't attempt resistance.  
Maybe we couldn't rule him while he lived;  
but now he is dead, we most assuredly will,  
with a firm directing hand, whether you like it or not.  
1070 So long as he lived, he never would heed our words,  
never. Yet only a rotten common soldier  
would feel no duty to obey his betters.  
Laws will never be rightly kept in a city  
that knows no fear or reverence, and no army  
1075 without its shield of fear can be well governed.  
And a man, even if he develops a mighty body,  
had better know how small a lapse can down him.  
When a man is moved by wholesome fear and shame,  
1080 you may know that combination makes for safety;  
but insubordination and the rule  
of do-as-you-like invariably, mark my words,  
sooner or later drive a city on  
before the winds to sink beneath the depths.  
There should be, I say, some salutary fear:  
1085 and let's not think we can do just what we please,  
and then not pay a price—and one that hurts.  
There's turnabout in these things. A while ago  
he was the hot aggressor; now it's I  
who entertain large ideas. And I give you notice,  
don't bury him. For you may find, if you do,

1090 that you may fall right into your own grave.

### CHORUS LEADER

Menelaus, these are fine principles you've outlined;  
don't shame them now by outrage to the dead.

### TEUCER

Friends, I never shall be amazed again  
to see a man of humble birth go wrong,  
1095 when those who claim the noblest birth of all  
utter words as wrong as the ones that you've just heard.  
Come, tell me again: you say you brought this man  
here for the Greeks as an ally *you* enlisted?  
Didn't he make the voyage here on his own,  
1100 as his own master? How, then, are you his general?  
What gives you title to command his people,  
who followed him from home? King of Sparta  
you came, no general over us. You've no more claim  
to discipline him than he had to give you orders.  
1105 Why, you sailed here in a subordinate place,<sup>o</sup>  
not lord of all, that you should ever claim  
the right to captain Ajax! Rule your own;  
chastise their arrogant speech. But Ajax,  
in spite of your prohibitions and your brother's,  
I shall lay in his tomb, reverently and justly,  
1110 regardless of your tongue. It wasn't at all  
for your wife's sake he made the expedition,  
like some poor, toiling subject; but for the oaths  
which he had sworn—no service due to you.  
He took no stock of nobodies. Think this over,  
1115 and come then with more heralds at your back,  
and maybe the general too. As for your empty noise,  
I'll ignore it, so long as you are what you are.

### CHORUS LEADER

I can't approve such bold speech in misfortune;  
harsh words, however just they are, still bite.

MENELAUS

1120 This archer seems to think quite well of himself.

TEUCER

My archery is no contemptible science.

MENELAUS

Think how he'd boast if he bore a true warrior's shield!

TEUCER

I'm a match light-armed for you in heavy armor.

MENELAUS

That tongue of yours! What a fierce heart it fosters!

TEUCER

1125 A man who's in the right may have some boldness.

MENELAUS

So! It was right he should kill me and then prosper!

TEUCER

Kill? Truly this *is* a miracle,  
if you've been killed and still are living!

MENELAUS

A god saved me; I was dead in *his* intention.

TEUCER

Then don't affront the gods, if the gods have saved you.

MENELAUS

1130 Could it be that I'd find fault with the gods' laws?

TEUCER

Yes, if you stand there and forbid the dead to be buried.

MENELAUS

My own enemies! It's right that they not be buried.

TEUCER

Ajax, then, was your enemy on the field of battle?

MENELAUS

He hated me, as I did him. You knew that well.

TEUCER

There was some reason for it:  
1135 you were found out procuring fraudulent votes.

MENELAUS

Charge his defeat to the judges, not to me.

TEUCER

You have a gift for suave and stealthy villainy.

MENELAUS

Someone is going to get hurt for saying that.

TEUCER

No worse, I judge, than the hurt I shall inflict.

MENELAUS

1140 I tell you one thing. This man must not be buried.

TEUCER

And this shall be your answer. He shall be  
buried at once.

MENELAUS

I once saw a man of fast and saucy speech  
who had pressed sailors to make a voyage in a storm;  
when the weather got really rough, you couldn't hear  
1145 him chirping anywhere: he'd hid himself in his cloak,  
and anybody aboard could step on him at will.  
And very possibly you and your reckless speech—  
if a big whistling storm should suddenly come  
out of a little cloud—your clamorous uproar  
might be quenched in a very similar fashion.

TEUCER

1150 And I once saw a man inflated with foolishness,  
who insulted the misfortunes of his neighbors.  
And another man, closely resembling me,  
quite like me in temperament, gave him a straight look  
and said to him, "Man, don't outrage the dead."  
1155 You certainly shall regret it if you do."  
That was the advice he gave that worthless man.  
I see him now, and he is, it seems to me,  
you, and nobody else. Am I speaking in riddles?

MENELAUS

I'm leaving. I shall only look absurd  
1160 to stay and chide you, when I might use force.

*(Exit to the side.)*

TEUCER

Go, then. It does me little credit, either,  
to listen to an empty man's loud talk.

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*A great and wrathful contest is shaping.  
Teucer, hurry and find for him,  
1165 as quickly as you can, some hollow  
cavity in the earth, which shall  
become his dank tomb, a signal  
reminder of him to men in aftertime.*

TEUCER

Here, just in time for that, his wife and child  
are coming, to perform with kindred touch  
1170 the burial due his pitiable body.

*(Enter Tecmessa with Eurysaces.)*

Come, little one, stand close by as a suppliant,  
grasp your father, the creator of your life.  
Hold in your hands this lock of hair of mine

*(Cuts it, and puts it in the boy's hand.)*

and one from her, and this, a third, your own  
—a suppliant's treasure.  
1175 Keep your station, and make your supplication;  
and if anyone in the army tries to drag you  
forcibly from this corpse, may his corpse be  
thrown out unburied from his land and home,  
wretchedly, as he is a wretch, cut off  
at the root with all his family, even as I

have cut this lock of hair.  
1180 Take hold of him, child, and guard him; let no one  
remove you, but throw yourself on the body and cling fast.

*(To the Chorus.)*

And you, don't huddle near like a crowd of women,  
instead of the men you are, but rally round  
and help, till I come back, having provided  
a tomb for him, though all the world oppose me.

*(Exit Teucer to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

#### STROPHE A

1185 *Which year, I wonder, shall be our long toil's last,  
and when shall the battered count of them all be full?  
They bring upon me a ceaseless curse of spear-spied*  
1190 *trouble over the length and breadth of Troy,  
a grief and a shame to all Greeks.*

#### ANTISTROPHE A

*Whoever it was that first revealed to Hellas*  
1195 *their common scourge, detested arms and war,  
I curse him. Would the large sky first had taken him up  
or else the impartial house of Death. Generation  
after generation of toil. Ah,  
there indeed was a destroyer of men!*

#### STROPHE B

*It was he that denied me my share*  
1200 *in the sweet companionship  
of garlands and deep wine cups;*

*and miserly he grudged me  
the pipe's soft lovely clamor  
and a pleasant bed in the night;  
1205 and love, the joys of love he also stopped.  
Ah! I lie here, and no one cares  
that my hair is soaked in the thick continual dew,  
1210 reminders of foul Troy.*

### ANTISTROPHE B

*And he, valorous Ajax,  
who was once my shield  
from every flying missile  
and terror in the hours of night,  
now is handed over to his harsh destiny.  
1215 What joy, then, is left to me?  
Oh, if somehow I might find myself  
rounding the wood-topped promontory,  
Sunium's flat top where the surf crashes,  
1220 and make my salutation  
to holy Athens!*

*(Enter Teucer from the side.)*

### TEUCER

I hurried back when I saw the commander in chief,  
Agamemnon, approaching. And here he is,  
1225 looking ready to let loose his clumsy tongue.

*(Enter Agamemnon with retinue, from the side.)*

### AGAMEMNON

You, there! Are you the one they tell me of,  
who has made bold to open his big mouth  
and utter nasty speeches against me?  
And you're unpunished, so far? You,

the son of a captive slave woman! What if your mother  
1230 had been a princess? Then I think you'd strut,  
then you'd talk big! Why, as it is, being  
nothing yourself you have risen up to protect  
that man who now is nothing, and have sworn  
that I am not the general nor the admiral  
either of the Achaeans or of you,  
since Ajax, as you say, came under his own command!  
1235 These are quite some taunts to hear from a slave.  
And what was the man on whose behalf you've shouted  
these arrogant claims? Where did he go,  
or stand in battle, where I did not too?  
1240 Was he the one real man in the whole Greek army?  
Ah! That contest for Achilles' armor!  
We shall regret the day we published it  
if every moment we must be defamed  
and slandered by this Teucer, since he won't  
accept defeat or yield to the majority,  
the verdict of the judges.  
No! But you losers pelt us still with slanders,  
1245 and seek to wound us with your crafty plots.  
Yet if such tactics and behavior rule,  
no law can stand unshaken, not when we  
are to shove the lawful victors from their place,  
and give precedence to those ranked behind.  
1250 This must be curbed. It's not a man's great muscles  
or breadth of shoulders makes his value sure:  
it's men of sense that always come out on top.  
Just a small whip can suffice to guide  
a hulking ox straight forward on his road;  
1255 and I fancy something of that medicine  
is coming for you, unless you get some sense!  
That man is dead, now—just a shadow;  
and yet you seem to count on him to protect  
your loose speech! I say, learn common sense!  
1260 Think of your slave's birth; bring someone else,

a free man, here to plead your case before me.  
I'm disinclined to hear more words from you,  
being not much versed in your barbarian tongue.

### CHORUS LEADER

I wish you both might learn to have some sense!  
1265 That is the best I have to say to you.

### TEUCER

Ah! How fleeting is the gratitude  
men owe the dead, how soon shown to deceive,  
if this man now hasn't even the smallest memory,  
of you, Ajax, though oftentimes for him  
1270 you risked your life and bore the stress of war.  
All that is gone now, easily tossed away.  
You, who just now spoke that long, foolish speech,  
can't you remember any more at all  
how once you were penned close behind your defenses,  
1275 and all but reduced to nothing in the fighting,  
with flames licking the ships' quarterdecks  
already, and Hector high in the air, leaping  
over the ditch to board, but Ajax came,  
alone, to save you? Who fended off that ruin?  
1280 Wasn't it he, the very man you now  
declare fought nowhere but where you fought too?  
What do you say? Did he do his duty then?  
And when that other time he faced Hector  
alone in single combat, not conscripted,  
but chosen when each champion put his lot  
1285 into the crested helmet—Ajax then  
put in no coward's lot among the rest,  
no clod of moist earth, no! but one to leap  
lightly, first and victorious, from the helmet.  
It was he that did those things, and I stood by him:  
the slave, yes! The barbarian mother's son!

1290 Wretched man, why do you light upon *that* taunt?  
Aren't you aware that your own grandfather,  
old Pelops, was a barbarous Phrygian? Or  
that Atreus, yes, your very own father, set  
before his brother a most unholy dish  
of his own sons' flesh? And you yourself  
1295 had a Cretan for your mother, in whose bed  
an interloping foreigner was discovered,  
and she consigned, and by your father's order,  
to be eaten by the fishes of the deep.  
These are your origins. Can you censure mine?  
Telamon was my father, and he won  
1300 my mother as his valorous prize of war.  
She was a princess by her birth, the child  
of King Laomedon, and Heracles  
distinguished her to be my father's gift.  
Two royal races gave me to the world.  
1305 How shall I shame my kin if I defend them  
in their adversity, when you with shameless words  
would fling them out unburied? Listen to this:  
if you should venture to cast Ajax out,  
you must cast out the three of us as well,  
together in one heap with him. I make my choice  
1310 to stand in public and to die for him,  
rather than for your wife—or was it your brother's wife?  
So! Think of your own case, and not merely mine;  
for if you hurt me, you may wish one day  
1315 you had been a coward, rather than bold, with me.

*(Enter Odysseus from the side.)*

### CHORUS LEADER

You arrive, my lord Odysseus, just in time,  
if you have come to reconcile and not provoke.

ODYSSEUS

What is this, gentlemen? From quite some distance  
I could hear the sons of Atreus raising their voices  
over this valiant corpse.

AGAMEMNON

Indeed we were.  
1320 Hadn't we just been hearing shameful language,  
my lord Odysseus, from this fellow here?

ODYSSEUS

What language do you complain of? If he gave  
insult for insult, I could pardon him.

AGAMEMNON

I gave him ugly words:  
it was an ugly wrong he offered me.

ODYSSEUS

1325 What did he do to injure you?

AGAMEMNON

He says  
he will not leave that corpse unburied, but  
declares he'll bury it in spite of me.

ODYSSEUS

Agamemnon, may a friend speak truth to you,  
and still enjoy your friendship as before?

AGAMEMNON

1330 Speak. I would be foolish to resent your words;  
you are my truest friend in the whole army.

## ODYSSEUS

Then listen. Don't cast out this brave man's body  
unburied; don't in the gods' name be so hard.  
Vindictiveness should not so govern you  
1335 as to make you trample on the right. I too  
found this man hateful once, beyond the rest  
of all my fellow soldiers, since the time  
I won Achilles' armor. Nevertheless,  
in spite of his enmity, I cannot wish  
to pay him back with dishonor, or refuse  
1340 to recognize in him the best of all  
the men that came to Troy, except Achilles.  
It would be wrong to do him injury;  
in acting so, you'd not be injuring him—  
rather the gods' laws. It is not right to harm  
1345 a valiant man in death, even if you hate him.

## AGAMEMNON

Do you, Odysseus, take his side against me?

## ODYSSEUS

I do.  
But I hated him while it was fair to hate.

## AGAMEMNON

But now he is dead,  
shouldn't you also trample on his corpse?

## ODYSSEUS

Do not seek pleasure, my lord, in unworthy triumphs.

## AGAMEMNON

1350 Reverence doesn't come easily to a ruler.

ODYSSEUS

But regard for a friend's advice is not so hard.

AGAMEMNON

A good man should defer to his superiors.

ODYSSEUS

No more, now.

You win the victory when you yield to friends.

AGAMEMNON

Think what a man you're showing favor to!

ODYSSEUS

1355 My enemy, it's true. But he was noble.

AGAMEMNON

What will you do? Respect a corpse you hate?

ODYSSEUS

His greatness weighs more than my hate with me.

AGAMEMNON

Men who act so are changeable and unsteady.

ODYSSEUS

Men's minds are given to change in hate and friendship.

AGAMEMNON

1360 Do you, then, recommend such changeable friends?

ODYSSEUS

I cannot recommend a rigid spirit.

AGAMEMNON

You'll make us look like cowards in this transaction.

ODYSSEUS

Honorable, though, as all the Greeks will say.

AGAMEMNON

You want me, then, to let this corpse be buried?

ODYSSEUS

1365 Yes. For I too shall come to that necessity.

AGAMEMNON

In everything, I see, men labor for themselves.

ODYSSEUS

For whom should I rather labor than myself?

AGAMEMNON

Let this be called your doing, and not mine.

ODYSSEUS

However you do it, you will deserve praise.

AGAMEMNON

1370 Understand my position. I would do  
this and much more at your request. But as for him,  
whether on earth or in the underworld,  
I hate him. You may do whatever you wish.

*(Exit Agamemnon with his retinue to the side.)*

## CHORUS LEADER

Whoever fails to recognize your wisdom  
1375 and value it, Odysseus, is a fool.

## ODYSSEUS

And now I have a promise,  
Teucer, to make to you. From now on, I  
shall be as much a friend as I was once  
an enemy; and I should like to join  
in the burial of your dead—doing with you  
that labor, and omitting none of it,  
1380 which men should give the noblest of their fellows.

## TEUCER

Noble Odysseus, I can only praise you.  
How greatly you deceived my expectations!  
For though you hated him worst of the Argives,  
you alone came to help, and did not wish,  
1385 because you lived, to outrage him in death.  
That half-brained general did otherwise—  
he and his brother—and wanted Ajax's corpse  
to be thrown out and left to rot unburied.  
Therefore, may Zeus who rules on high Olympus,  
1390 remembering Fury, and avenging Justice,  
destroy them miserably, just as they  
sought to work outrage and abomination  
on my dear brother's body.

Son of Laertes,  
I feel some hesitation at your offer  
and fear I cannot let you touch the corpse:  
1395 that might offend the dead. But bear your part  
in all the rest, and if you wish to bring  
any others of the army, they shall be welcome.  
I'll see to all the rest. And you, Odysseus,  
are written in our hearts as truly noble.

ODYSSEUS

1400 I could have wished to help.  
But if your preference is otherwise,  
I shall respect your wish and take my leave.

*(Exit Odysseus)*

TEUCER [*chanting*]

*Enough then. Delay  
has grown too long already.  
Some of you hurry and dig  
the hollow trench; others*  
1405 *set the tall cauldron  
amid the surrounding flames  
to ready the holy bath;  
and one troop bring from within the tent  
his glorious suit of armor.*

*Now you, my boy,  
take hold with your little strength*  
1410 *upon your father's body,  
and help in tenderness to lift him up;  
for still the warm conduits  
spout forth his life's dark force.  
Come now, come, everyone  
that claims to be his friend,  
begin, proceed, and bear him up,*  
1415 *this man of perfect excellence—  
no nobler one has ever been than he:  
I speak of Ajax, while he lived. °*

*(The funeral cortege forms.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*What men have seen they know;*

*but what shall come hereafter  
no man before the event can see,  
1420 nor what end waits for him.*

*(Exit all, following the body.)*