

AJAX

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Ajax (in Sophocles' *Ajax*) Emotional

Overview *Ajax* appears to be the earliest of the seven extant plays of Sophocles. *Antigone* was first performed in 442 or 441 B.C., and *Ajax* is thought to have been performed around the same time. Like the Oedipus plays, like *Philoctetes*, the play of *Ajax* targets a mature man—Sophocles was probably himself in his early fifties as he wrote the *Ajax*—broken by events, yet carrying with him an aura of infectious greatness. In *Ajax* the themes of madness and greatness are forcefully combined; Ajax and Neoptoleos, both victims of war, stare into the abyss of dishonor, and respond with fatal dignity.

Character Ajax is of fabled strength in Homer's *Iliad*, exceptional in the number of Trojans he kills, frequently turning the tide of battle. Toward the end of the Trojan War, however, Ajax comes out the loser in a contest to determine who is to get the armor of Achilles—it is awarded to Odysseus. In Sophocles' play we see an Ajax who is at first crazed by the slight to his honor, who subsequently commits wild violence in a state of madness, but who then slowly recovers his dignity, and kills himself on his sword, in a final act of self-control.

Parallels Ajax was renowned throughout Greek literature, for not only was his prodigious strength admired, but his story—involving betrayal and suicide—was as gripping as his war feats. Homer places Ajax among the dead, in the *Odyssey*, and blends in him power and silence, which reinforce each other; Pindar (7th Nemean Ode; 470's) commiserates with the just fury of Ajax, who does not receive the armor of Achilles, which he deserved; Plato, in the *Republic* (380 B.C.) attributes to Ajax the soul of a lion. In the most recent, and topical texts, Ajax reappears: as a shattered hero, in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* (2013); as a teaching instrument on PTSD in Bryan Doerries' *The Theater of War* (2009).

Illustrative moments

1 Hara-kiri While having given the impression that he has come to terms with himself, Ajax actually goes to the shore with his sword, and addresses the increasingly terrified audience. 'He's firm in the ground, my Slayer,' says Ajax, 'and his cut should now be deadliest.' Ajax prepares to bring to a head the turbulent sequence of emotions and actions which have swept him up: animal slaughter, return to sanity, agreement to hang in there, and now the decision to bring his tortured life to an end. He will punish his punishers once and for all.

2 Vengeful Ajax praises the sharp edges of the sword, given to him by Hector, as he prepares to fall on the blade. He asks that the news of his death should first be conveyed to his half-brother Teucer. He calls on Hermes to care for his body. Then he calls on the Furies to take terrible revenge on Atreus' sons (Agamemnon and Menelaus), and to 'taste the whole army's blood, and spare them nothing.' In other words, Ajax has planned to have the last laugh, with a revenge which will wipe his enemies off the board.

3 Tenderness As he perorates over his sword, Ajax thinks of 'my old father, and her that nursed me.' He imagines the wretched wailing of his mother, when she learns of his death: 'How her grief's note will quaver through the town.!' This tender note, which we have heard from Ajax in speech with his young son, marks an emotional breakthrough in the stark play. Ajax checks the wellsprings of tears: 'But I must leave this idle vein of weeping...' he says, preparing for a final salute to the earth. His heart is broken with wounded pride.

4 Departing In his final salute to the world, Ajax pays his last regards to the Sun God, Helios the 'splendid charioteer.' Images of light sharpen the poignancy of his final thoughts: of the hearth in his

father 's house, the radiance of the sky, and of 'glorious Athens.' Always the warrior, ever the prize winner, Ajax returns to the elemental sense of belonging to the earth, just as he is on the brink of leaving it. His final salute is to 'all springs and streams, my nurses, you that wet the plains of Troy...'

Reading Sophocles, *Ajax*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Discussion questions

Why does Ajax kill himself? Is it as a means of escaping from his troubles? Or is suicide an heroic action in his eyes?

Was the overlooking of Ajax, in the distribution of the arms of Achilles, an accident, or a clever inside job on the part of Odysseus? What is the significance of Odysseus' ultimate compassion for Ajax?

Do you see a connection between PTSD and the madness of Ajax? Is war famous for generating traumas of this kind?