

AJAX

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Ajax by Sophocles

Story

The background of the Trojan War, familiar through Homer to all fifth century Athenians, looms over Sophocles' *Ajax* (440 B.C.E.). The play opens on the information that the great Greek warrior, Achilles, has been killed in battle. Ajax views himself as the natural successor to this great hero, his cousin in fact, and vows to kill Agamemnon and Menelaus—the present leaders of the Greek force—who have decided to award the armor of Achilles to Odysseus, instead of to Ajax. However the gods are overseeing Ajax' plans, and intervene to prevent the double murder of the leading Greek commanders; Athena takes the initiative on behalf of the Greeks.

Always insightful, when it comes to heroes' minds and intentions, Athena decides to delude Ajax, in order to save Menelaus and Agamemnon. She causes Ajax to mistake for Menelaus and Agamemnon the sheep collected as spoils by the Greek army at Troy, and to slaughter those animals, as though they were the Greek leaders. Ajax carries out the frightful massacre, treating us, as he does, to the drama of psychosis—never far from consideration in an ancient culture haunted by prophecies, spirits, and interventionist gods.

In the midst of his delusional acts, Ajax comes to his senses, and is overwhelmed by shame. His mind immediately turns to committing suicide. At this his mistress, Tecmessa, implores the hero not to leave her and her young baby without protection. Ajax' brother, Teucer, arrives at the hero's tent with the prophecy—provided by the seer Kalchas, who had motivated central decisions for the Greek forces—that Ajax would die if he left his tent that day. Tecmessa and a cohort of soldiers set out in search of Ajax, but what they find is the self-murdered hero, who has killed himself on his sword. At the point of discovering the body a huge new crisis arises; Teucer orders that he should take the body, so that he can protect it, while Menelaus demands that the body should be left where it is.

Unlike the many Greek tragedies that devolve into downfall and loss, the present tragedy moves away from the horrifying scenes of Ajax's madness, and of his helpless delusion, into a development of the dispute theme, which opened the drama. The dispute involves the resolution of what to do with Ajax' body, which has essentially replaced the armor of Achilles, as the point of contention of the play. (Thus the armor of Achilles is treated as though it were the actual power of Achilles.) Menelaus and Agamemnon want to leave the body where it is, as a prey for vultures, while Teucer wants to give the body a decent burial—for the kinds of traditional reasoning Antigone insists on in the burial of her scorned brother. In the end Odysseus is the one arguing persuasively that one should provide a decent burial even for enemies.

What is the unity in the play? What has the delusional insanity of Ajax to do with the issue of a proper burial? This seemingly multifocal play comes down heavily, in the end, on the always sensitive Hellenic issue of honor. Ajax is dishonored by the awarding of the arms of Achilles to Odysseus. Odysseus himself, though, is sensitive to the honor due even our dead enemies, and in the end joins Teucer in his respect for Ajax.

Characters

Ajax Is renowned for his strength and power in the Trojan War fighting, but at the same time for his warrior pride, which bites him hard when Achilles' armor is given to Odysseus.

Teucer is a loyal brother to Ajax, determined to bury him properly, and eager to support the prophecy of Kalchas, concerning the mental dangers of Ajax.

Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey*, while fighting at Troy, is widely viewed as the canniest, slyest fighter. He proves himself far sighted and generous when it comes to dealing with the body of Ajax.

Themes

Honor The armor of Achilles is a symbol of heroic power and dignity, and Ajax sacrifices his life rather than accept losing the honor of having Achilles' armor. Odysseus proves his greatness by honoring the dignity of Ajax' body.

Madness Nothing short of personal dishonor could have readied the way for the madness of Ajax. Athena assaults Ajax with madness, but only because he has reduced himself to an unbalanced point of no return.