

# AJAX

## Sophocles

**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.

### 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## MAIN CHARACTER

**AJAX** (Emotional)

**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 (7<sup>th</sup> 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 Doerris' *The Theater of War* (2009).

## Illustrative moments

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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...'

### **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?

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