

# Seven Tragedies of Sophocles

## Ajax

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# *Ajax*

(Dramatis Personae)

**Athena**

**Odysseus**

**Ajax**

**Chorus of Salaminian Sailors**

**Tecmessa**

**Messenger**

**Teucer**

**Menelaus**

**Agamemnon**

**Athena**

Odysseus, Laertes' son, I have always seen  
in you a man that hunts his enemies down to seek  
his opportunity. Now too I see you by the tents  
and ships of Ajax where he keeps his station at the margin  
of the camp, playing the hound and measuring his new  
made spoor to see if he is in the tent or not.  
Keen scented as some Laconian hound you make  
your way successfully to him. For the man has but  
just now gone in, his head and both sword deadly hands  
all drenched with sweat. So now there is no further need 10  
for you to peep around the opening to see within,  
but tell to me the cause of your keen spirit here  
that you might learn the truth from one who knows.

**Odysseus**

Athena, you are the dearest of the immortals to me,  
and though I cannot see you, still I hear and recognise  
your voice and clasp it joyous to my heart,  
bronze voiced it's Etruscan trumpet call. You are  
quite right in seeing that I cast around upon the trail  
of my warrior foe, yes, Ajax of the mighty shield.  
For I am tracking him and no man else, long since. 20  
For in this night he has done us a deed of wrong  
that cannot be conceived, if indeed the deed is his;  
for we know nothing certain yet, are all at sea;  
So I have volunteered to yoke this search  
upon myself. For we have just now found  
all the cattle beasts we captured slain, by human hand,  
and with them their herdsmen dead.  
All men lay the guilt for this upon this very man.  
What's more one of our scouts did see him all alone  
and loping across the plain, his sword awash with blood, 30  
and revealed this news to me; at once I hurried to track  
him down - and at times I read the traces clear enough,  
but am confused at other times, cannot identify the spoor.  
Your coming here is opportune; for I would be guided by you  
in all things in what is to come, as I was in days gone by.

**Ath.**

I know, Odysseus, and have long been keeping pace  
with your chase as your keen and eager guardian.

**Od.**

And are my efforts to the point, dear mistress mine?

**Ath.**

Be well assured, these crimes were his.

**Od.**

Why did his hand erupt in senseless violence? 40

**Ath.**

Dire rage consumed him on account of Achilles' arms.

**Od.**

But why then launch his assault upon the herds?

**Ath.** He thought his hand was coloured with your blood.  
**Od.** And so this plan was framed against the Greeks?  
**Ath.** And had I been neglectful he would have achieved his end.  
**Od.** How did he dare to form this dreadful plan?  
**Ath.** He made his guileful raid by night and by himself.  
**Od.** Did he come close to achieving his end?  
**Ath.** He reached the entrance to the two generals' tents.  
**Od.** What kept his eager hand from murder then? 50  
**Ath.** I kept him from gratifying his blood lust, and placed  
hallucination in his sight, and turned him against  
the mingled flocks of sheep and cattle beasts,  
which herdsmen watched as unshared spoil;  
then falling on the horned beasts he slaughtered them,  
a dervish hacking through their spines, now thinking  
he has the sons of Atreus in hand to kill, while now  
he thinks to fall upon some others of the generals.  
And as this warrior male continued on his way  
in madness, I spurred him further into disaster's trap. 60  
When finally these labours wearied him, he bound  
in chains the cattle that had survived alive and all  
the sheep and brought them here back to the tent,  
like human prisoners rather than a haul of beasts.  
And now inside the tent he tortures his captive prey.  
Now I will show you evidence of his insanity,  
that you may see and go and tell the Greeks.  
Take courage then, and do not think you'll come  
to harm from him; I will deflect his gaze from you  
that his eyes may not notice your coming near. 70

You there, the man that hauls these fellows' arms  
behind their backs with chains, approach I say;  
I summon Ajax. Hurry out from the tent!  
**Od.** What are you doing, Athena? Don't call him out!  
**Ath.** Be silent, do not play the coward here.  
**Od.** By the gods no, but let him be content to stay within.  
**Ath.** What do you fear? He has only ever been a man.  
**Od.** Yes, but my deadly enemy both then and now.  
**Ath.** Is not though sweetest laughter laughed at enemies?  
**Od.** I still would rather that he stayed inside. 80  
**Ath.** You shrink from witnessing madness at first hand?  
**Od.** If he were sane I would not fear confronting him.  
**Ath.** But he cannot see you now, however close.  
**Od.** How can that be if he is not blind?  
**Ath.** I will veil his eyes and darken his sight.

**Od.** All things are possible for a cunning god.  
**Ath.** Stand here in silence then and wait where you are.  
**Od.** I'll stay if I must, but would rather be far from here.  
**Ath.** Hey, Ajax there! I summon you again!  
Why such little regard for a friend? 90  
**Ajax** Athena, greetings, greetings Zeus born child!  
Your company has profited me well, and I shall crown  
you with golden gifts of booty for this trophy won.  
**Ath.** I approve your words, but tell me this;  
have you dipped your sword deep in Argive blood?  
**Aj.** That boast is mine and I shall deny it not.  
**Ath.** You turned your armoured fist against the sons of Atreus ?  
**Aj.** To such effect they never shall dishonour Ajax more.  
**Ath.** The men are dead then, if I understand you well.  
**Aj.** Yes, they are dead and let them take my weapons now. 100  
**Ath.** So be it, but what then of Laertes's son, Odysseus?  
What fate have you worked for him? Did he escape?  
**Aj.** You ask where I've put that accursed fox?  
**Ath.** I do. The man who always blocks your way, Odysseus.  
**Aj.** My most welcome guest and prisoner, Athena,  
squats inside. I would not have him die just yet.  
**Ath.** Before you accomplish what? Some further gain?  
**Aj.** First I'll bind him to the roof pole of the tent.  
**Ath.** What harm do you plan for the poor wretch then.  
**Aj.** He will not die until I've whipped his back to blood. 110  
**Ath.** You should not torture the poor wretch so.  
**Aj.** All else I grant to you, Athena, and that happily,  
but he will pay no other price but this to me.  
**Ath.** If you have pleasure in doing this thing, then take  
it in hand and do not neglect your ingenuity.  
**Aj.** I go to my work. And this is what I say to you:  
prove always such an ally as you have to me today.  
**Ath.** Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the power of gods?  
What man could once you have found more full  
of forethought, more adept at appropriate deeds? 120  
**Od.** I know of none other, but now I feel an all  
embracing pity for him, although my enemy,  
because he has been yoked to infatuation dire,  
and I think of my own case no less than his.  
For I see that we are nothing real, but mere  
illusions and insubstantial shades.  
**Ath.** Then contemplate his fate such as it is and speak  
no proud word against the gods, nor adopt  
for yourself an arrogant style, should you

outstrip another in main force or in wealth. 130  
A single day may overturn and bring to naught  
all human gains. Gods love men temperate  
and wise and loathe their opposites.

### Chorus

Telamon's son, whose island home of Salamis  
confronts the surrounding salt waves of the sea,  
when your fortunes are high I salute you,  
but when you are struck by the anger of Zeus,  
or the fierce clacking of tongues from the Greeks,  
I harbour great dread in my heart, am afraid,  
like some winged dove wearing fear in its eyes. 140  
Even so of the night just now past  
loud shameful rumours perturb us,  
that you did descend to the plain  
of wild horse, and did slaughter  
the cattle, Greek spoils ,  
booty won by the spear and as yet undivided,  
a butcher with glittering sword.  
Constructing such slanderous tales  
Odysseus feeds each eager ear,  
and convinces too many. For plausible lies 150  
he repeats about your present condition  
and every man hears and rejoices at what  
he has said, exulting in this your disaster.  
For the shafts never miss the great  
hearted men, while none would believe  
one who told such a tale about me.  
For envy will ambush the man who has might.  
And yet we humble folk, divorced from the strong,  
cannot provide a sound defence upon the wall;  
the weak act best when allied with the strong, 160  
but strong men still succeed supported by the lesser sort.  
But it is impossible for stupid men to learn  
and understand ideas such as these.  
Such are the men who raise this din  
and we have not the strength  
to rebut their charges, lord, without your help.  
For when they escape the notice of your eye  
they prattle on like flocks of winged birds,  
but, should you perchance appear,  
they in fear of the mighty vulture would be 170  
of a sudden struck quite dumb.

**str.** Did the bull ruling daughter of Zeus,  
all powerful Rumour,  
that mothers  
our shame, did Artemis  
drive him against that whole population of bulls,  
perhaps in rage at unrewarded victory,  
or cheated of spoils that  
bring fame, or by unlicensed shootings of deer?  
Or did the armour plated Lord of War exact  
a vengeance with this night-time ploy, 180  
for his despite and rejection of the helping spear?

**ant.** Your own sound mind would never have  
urged such a march to destruction, Lord Ajax,  
as when you fell on the flocks. Such madness  
is sent by the gods, but still let Lord Zeus, Apollo, both  
ward off the evil slanders of the Greeks.  
And if with suppositious tales  
the great kings manufacture secret lies,  
or Odysseus, son of Sisyphus' dissolute line,  
do not hide your face in these huts by the sea, 190  
to win us ill fame and repute.

**ep.** Up, rouse yourself from  
your seat, or wheresoever  
you linger away from the fight, inflaming  
the goddess of mischief  
The pride of your enemies thus has license  
to roam, unchecked, enjoying the woodland air,  
while men crow giving tongue  
to deep insult and the load  
of my grief is maintained. 200

**Tecmessa**

Men that work the ship of Ajax,  
earth born, of the race of Erechtheus,  
we have reason for grief, whose care  
is Telamon's house far away.  
For Ajax, the dread, mighty Ajax,  
him of savage strength, is laid low  
by a storm of darkling disease.

**Ch.** What new change to deep grief  
is brought by the night that is past?

- Speak, Phrygian daughter of Teleutas, 210  
 since warrior Ajax who took you to wife,  
 a wife won by the spear, he still loves you,  
 and so you might speak well informed.
- Tec.** How might I speak the unspeakable?  
 You will hear of a fate to match death.  
 For seized with madness in the night  
 our famous Ajax is subjected to scorn.  
 Of such are the sights you may see  
 in the tent, victims blood-stained  
 and slain by this man's fell hand. 220
- Ch.** I can neither endure nor escape  
 the tale you reveal of our fiery lord,  
 the tale spread abroad by those of the Greeks who are kings,  
 which their large propaganda increases.  
 I stand in dread of what  
 may come; for clearly the man  
 will die if with the hand  
 of madness on his blood black sword 230  
 he killed the cattle and the men  
 that kept the horses safe.
- Tec.** I tell you he came back home to us from the fields,  
 from the fields, his captive flock in tow.  
 Some here he slaughtered on the ground, while some  
 he disembowelled with blows to the flank.  
 He then seized twin white footed rams,  
 decapitated one of them, ravaged one's tongue tip  
 and flung it from him, while a third upright  
 he bound to a post, 240  
 snatched up a heavy duty horsewhip  
 and flogged it with the whistling double toothed goad,  
 hurling such abuse the while as no mortal man  
 did ever learn from god.
- Ch.** This the time for each man-jack of us to shroud  
**ant.** our heads, to steal our feet away and take our place  
 at the swift yoked oars to set forth our ship  
 and voyage the open sea. 250  
 So dire are the threats launched  
 by the two, empowered sons of Atreus  
 against us. I am afraid to share  
 the pain with him of death

by stoning, struck down  
in the clench of unknowable fate.

**Tec.** The storm and lightning flash have left him calm,  
sharp squalls subside like wind from the south.  
Returning consciousness entails new pain;  
To witness self inflicted grief, 260  
with no man else to blame,  
submits the mind to bitter pangs.

**Ch.** If sanity returns, I hope all may be well;  
the payment is less when the threat is gone.

**Tec.** If given the choice, which option would  
you take: betray your friends for private gain,  
or share with them and so ease a common grief?

**Ch.** The twofold evil, lady, is the worse to bear.

**Tec.** Although his attack is gone, we still are lost.

**Ch.** I do not understand the meaning of your words. 270

**Tec.** This man when still in the grip of lunacy,  
himself delighted in his crimes, while we  
who lived with him had our sanity shocked;  
but now he has some respite from disease,  
he is completely overwhelmed with shock,  
as we are too, no less than we were before.  
So is not this therefore a double share of ills?

**Ch.** You are right and I fear this visitation came  
from god. How else otherwise can his heart  
be no lighter now he's well than when he was sick. 280

**Tec.** Be well assured that his case is exactly so.

**Ch.** What and when was the start of this attack?  
We share your pain so tell us what befell.

**Tec.** You share our fate and so I'll tell you all.  
Deep night it was and the evening lamps by now  
were dimmed. Then Ajax seized his sword, two edged,  
and sought to steal out, onto the deserted track.  
I reproached him then and asked his purposes,  
'Why, Ajax, are you setting out, unbidden, on  
this enterprise, although no summons came, 290  
no trumpet was heard? The army now is all asleep.'  
His answer was a short and characteristic reproof,  
'Silence, woman, is womankind's best ornament!'  
I took heed and was silent while he rushed out alone.  
What happened away from here I cannot tell,  
but back he came driving a milling mass of bulls

and sheep dogs, bound up with a flock of woolly sheep.  
 Decapitating some he slit the upstretched throats  
 of others, or chopped through their spines and abused  
 them, fettered like human prisoners, though victim beasts. 300  
 At last he rushed out through the doors, boasting to some  
 figment of his brain, much mocking now the sons  
 of Atreus and now Odysseus, exulting in the scale  
 of harm he had inflicted on them by his raid;  
 and then he rushed inside again and by degrees  
 and over time regained somehow his proper mind,  
 and when he saw the tent filled with his carnage, then  
 he beat his head and howled and devastated sat  
 amidst the death and devastation of the slaughtered sheep,  
 and raked, jaws clenched, his hair with nailed fist. 310  
 Long grew the time he sat there speechless till at last  
 he hurled dread threats of what he'd do to me,  
 if I did not reveal to him the disaster's full extent,  
 and he asked me what his current situation was.  
 I was terrified, my friends, and, in my fear,  
 I told him all I knew of what was done.  
 At once he gave vent to shrill cries of lament,  
 such as I had never heard from him before.  
 For always before he had laid down such cries  
 to be the mark of cowards and mean spirited men; 320  
 he never had been one to weep and keen, but more  
 like the bellowing bull his roars of grief.  
 but overtaken now by such an evil fate,  
 he takes no food nor drink this man, but silent sits  
 where he fell among the beastly victims of his sword.  
 It is clear that he is pondering some dreadful deed;  
 for some such plan his words and groans betray.  
 But, friends, I came out here to ask you in,  
 to see if you might help as best you can.  
 Warriors are only swayed by a comrade's argument. 330  
**Ch.** Tecmessa, Teleutas' child, you fill me with fear  
 reporting our Ajax runs mad in the midst of disaster.  
**Aj.** Oh, oh, oh...  
**Tec.** He threatens more perhaps. Or did you not catch  
 the feelings of pain in the cry that he raised?  
**Aj.** Oh, oh, oh...  
**Ch.** The man is either ill again, or feels again  
 the present pain of sickness past.  
**Aj.** My child, my child...

**Tec.** Oh no, poor wretched me... Eurysaces, he call for you. 340  
 What is it that he wants? Where are you? Oh no, no, no!

**Aj.** Teucer? Teucer, where are you? Your mission,  
 will it last for evermore, and I destroyed?

**Ch.** The man seems sane enough. Come, open up.  
 Perhaps on seeing me he will gain more self control.

**Tec.** See there, I open the door that you may see  
 first hand what he has done and what his state.

**Aj.** Ah, friends,  
**str.** my friends and fellow sailors, alone of my friends 350  
 you remain, alone you keep faith to your pledge;  
 do you see the great wave  
 that breaks round and surrounds me  
 with envious storms of disaster?

**Ch.** Your words of witness, it seems, were only too true.  
 The evidence proclaims insanity was present here.

**Aj.** Ah, friends,  
**ant.** my friends and mates that manned my ship,  
 who sped its oars across the broad salt sea,  
 to you alone can I look, to you alone  
 to bring me relief in disaster. 360  
 So all of you kill me at once!

**Ch.** Pray, silence, my lord! Do not by piling evil up  
 on evil seek to mound an even greater peak of pain.

**Aj.** Do you see the warrior bold and staunch of heart,  
**str.** him fearless when joined in battle with the foe,  
 but now his hand an awesome threat to trusting beasts?  
 I am made a mockery, so great the indignity I have been dealt.

**Tec.** Do not, lord Ajax, please, I beg of you, do not dare this!

**Aj.** Get out! Go, take yourself off and come not back!  
 Agh! Agh! 370

**Ch.** No, by the gods, be swayed by her and learn to be wise!

**Aj.** Fortune's fool am I who lost  
 the villains from my grasp  
 and fell instead on horned beasts,  
 on goats to bring me fame, indeed,  
 and spilled their dark life's blood.

**Ch.** Why still grieve at events that are past and done?  
 These things could not by fate be other than they are.

**Aj.** Oh, Odysseus, Laertes' son, you stoop

- ant.** to anything, you constant instrument of evil, 380  
the army's scheming, loathsome scum.  
What gales of laughter you will enjoy at my expense!
- Ch.** Men laugh, men cry and all at the gods' behest.
- Aj.** I would my eyes were on him now in spite of my dishonour.  
Agh! Agh!
- Ch.** Make no proud boast! Can you not see the peril you are in?
- Aj.** O Zeus, ancestral father and lord,  
pray tell me how I might destroy  
my enemies, that scheming blight,  
with both  
twin-sceptred kings alike, 390  
then die likewise at last myself.
- Tec.** If pray you must for this, then also pray for me  
to die! What need have I to live when you are dead?
- Aj.** Agh!
- str.** My life is merely darkness now,  
so come to me, most friendly dark, and take  
me, take me down, yes take me down  
to live with death; for it is not right that I  
should look to the race  
of gods for help, nor to the race of mere mortal, ephemeral man. 400  
The all powerful  
daughter of Zeus  
racks me to torture and death.  
Where then can one flee?  
Once fled where stay?  
For all I had is gone,  
friends, in payment for this,  
crazed prize of obsession, I would  
that the host might lift up its sword  
in its hand to destroy me.
- Tec.** For a worthwhile man to say such things is tragic indeed, 410  
the like of which would never before have dared pass his lips.
- Aj.** Agh!
- ant.** Salt-beaten paths of the sea,  
caves marine and sea-girt pastures green,  
long, long and weary the time you  
have held me at Troy;  
no more, though, no more  
alive, as any sane man in his senses might guess.  
And neighbouring  
steams of Scamander,

that are so friendly to Greeks, 420  
 no more will you look  
 on this man again, the like  
 of which, I'll boast,  
 the land of Troy had never before  
 seen come in arms from the lands  
 of Greece, but now I lay  
 me down, all honour lost and gone.  
**Ch.** I cannot stop your words, nor yet can invite speech  
 in one that has fallen so deeply into disaster.

**Aj.** Such grief! Who could have thought my name would match 430  
 so well in meaning with my fate, yes, Ajax, meaning grief -  
 and I may use my name to give repeat expression to my grief...  
 Yes, Ajax, Ajax, Ajax, Ajax, Ajax, Ajax.....  
 whose father once came home from this land  
 of Ida and brought fair fame with him, who of all  
 the host had nobly won the first and fairest prize of all;  
 and I am that man's son, who came to this same land  
 of Troy with a strength to match my father's strength,  
 and my hands' work was strong enough and more, but yet  
 I am dishonoured and am as good as dead among 440  
 the Greeks, but still I am convinced, am sure as I  
 could ever be, that had Achilles lived to be the one  
 to grant his prize of arms, rewarding strength  
 and valour, no other man but I would have laid hold  
 of them, but now the sons of Atreus have procured  
 them for a cheat, and have renounced the claim  
 of Ajax's worth. And if these eyes of mine, and if  
 my twisted mind had not deserted my intent,  
 they could not have lived to vote for any other man.  
 Now, though, the fierce eyed daughter divine 450  
 of Zeus has foiled my hand as I aimed it against  
 them, seeding my mind with sick insanity,  
 so that I bloodied my hands on these beasts;  
 and they escaped and laugh out loud at me,  
 in spite of me, but if a god would do one harm,  
 a villain might escape the better, stronger man.  
 And now what must I do? For I am patently  
 anathema to gods, the army of the Greeks  
 abhors me, as do the plains and town of Troy.  
 Should I set sail, desert this anchorage, abandon 460  
 Atreus's sons and make my Aegean voyage home?  
 And turning up at home what kind of face

could I present to Telamon? And could he bear  
to look on me, denuded of the prizes valour brings,  
when he had won before fame's mighty crown.

No, that I could not stand! Well, shall I hurl  
myself in single combat on the Trojan lines  
to do some useful work, and so then die at last?  
But that might do the Atreids some good...

That must not be! I must seek out some kind  
of enterprise to show my aged father that his son  
was not entirely gutless in his character.

It is the coward's way to hanker after length of life,  
when life itself brings nothing else but grief.

What joy can we have in a succession of days,  
when those days are but a variable prelude to death?

I would not rate at any price the kind of man  
who would warm himself with empty hopes.

The noble man must either live in a noble way  
or nobly die. You have heard all I have to say.

**Ch.** No one would ever deny that what you have said  
rings true, lord Ajax, and comes direct from the heart,  
but yet, my lord, be patient, put aside these thoughts  
and allow your friends to overrule your present will.

**Tec.** I beg you, lord Ajax, remember, mankind has no  
heavier burden to bear than the luck necessity grants.

I myself was born of a father freeborn himself,  
and as strong and as rich as any Phrygian was;  
but now I am a slave. This was the will of the gods,  
of your warrior's hand as well. Since this is so,

since also I have come to share your bed, I wish you well  
and beg of you by Zeus, who cares for the hearth,  
and by your bed in which we have joined as one, do not  
neglect me so I win the harsh taunts hurled by your  
antagonists, nor make me subject to another's hand.

For if you were to die and by your death abandon me,  
on that same day, be well assured, I would be seized  
as spoil by force by the Greeks, and along with me  
your son for both of us to live a life of abject slavery.

Then one of the chieftains will speak bitter words  
of abuse, 'See here is his spear-bride and concubine,  
yes, Ajax's whore, the whore of the man who was strong  
in our ranks, and see the sad state of one fallen so far.'

Just so will one of them speak, when I am a victim of fate,  
but these words will be a shame to you and your kin.

Spare a thought for your father that you leave

470

480

490

500

to a dismal old age, and for your mother too,  
 who also is possessed of many years, whose pleas  
 to the gods so often demand safe return home for you;  
 pity too, my lord, your son who, if stripped in his youth 510  
 of your care and bereft of your presence here, a prey  
 to hateful guardians, and think on the mass of grief  
 you set in place both for him and for me when you die.  
 I have no one else to whom I might look but to you.  
 For my native land you laid waste with your spear,  
 while, as for my mother and father, still another fate  
 removed them both to dwell in Hades' deadly home.  
 What place should I have to live except with you?  
 On you alone depends my total welfare and my wealth.  
 So spare also a thought for me; a man should keep 520  
 in mind the pleasures that he's had, such as they were.  
 For kindness ever breeds kindness itself, but should  
 a man be careless of the pleasures he's received,  
 he could no longer keep his reputation for nobility.  
**Ch.** I would that you could find pity in your heart for her,  
 as I do, Ajax, - for then you would approve her words.  
**Aj.** She will win praise enough and more from me,  
 if only she dares to accomplish well the task I set.  
**Tec.** Beloved Ajax, I will obey your will in everything.  
**Aj.** Then bring me here my son that I may look on him. 530  
**Tec.** I was afraid and sent him out of my care.  
**Aj.** Because of these disasters do you mean, or why?  
**Tec.** In case the poor boy confront your madness and die.  
**Aj.** That would have been consistent with my present luck.  
**Tec.** And so I took care to spare him such a fate.  
**Aj.** I approve your care and the forethought shown.  
**Tec.** And what can I do to help you now?  
**Aj.** Give me the chance to see and speak to him.  
**Tec.** The servants have him in safekeeping close to hand.  
**Aj.** Then why delay his presence here? 540  
**Tec.** My son, your father is calling you! Servants, bring  
 him in, whichever of you is acting as guide.  
**Aj.** Does he come to your call, or can he not hear?  
**Tec.** One of the servants is bringing him near.  
**Aj.** Up with him, then, up! He'll not be afraid  
 to look upon this spectacle of recent death,  
 if he is in any proper sense his father's son.  
 He must be broken right away to his father's  
 pitiless ways, and his nature moulded to mine.  
 May you be but luckier than I, my son. In all else 550

I would wish you the same - and so you will do well;  
but as for now, I find I envy you for this at least,  
that you are unaware of what has happened here.  
For life is best before the dawn of consciousness,  
before you learn the meaning of either grief or joy,  
but when awareness comes, you then must show  
your father's enemies the man you were born to be.  
Till then sustain yourself on gentle breezes, enjoy  
your childhood, bringing joy to your mother here.  
I know that none of the Greeks would think to taunt 560  
you hatefully, despite your lack of my presence here.  
For I shall leave my brother Teucer to watch and be  
unsparing in his care for your young life, although  
he wanders far away in his present hunt for enemies.  
So, comrades of the shield, my crew of salts, I put  
this joint responsibility on each and every one  
of you, to announce to him my wish in this: I bid  
him carry my son back home with him to Salamis,  
presenting him there to Telamon and my mother, Eriboea,  
that he might be a perpetual comfort to their age, 570  
until they gain the caverns of the god of death himself -  
and let not Teucer, nor any other chairman of the games,  
nor yet my bane Odysseus, gift my arms to any Greek.  
But you accept from me this shield of careful work,  
my son, from which you take your name, Eurysaces,  
and weave its seven layered bulk to keep the spears away;  
my other arms will all be buried by my side.  
But, quickly now, take back this child from me,  
secure the house, and don't give way to tears and grief  
outside. Great gods, why does a woman so love to weep? 580  
Secure the house, and quickly! Chanting spells is not  
the doctor's task when what the cancer needs is knife!

**Ch.** You make me afraid when I hear this urgency.  
I do not like the bitterness of your tongue.

**Tec.** Lord Ajax, what is it you intend to do?

**Aj.** Do not judge me, do not ask. Restraint is good.

**Tec.** But I fear for us - and I beg you, on your son's life  
and by the gods, do not betray and leave us now.

**Aj.** You are becoming tedious! Why can't you see  
that I am no longer obliged to please the gods? 590

**Tec.** Hush, lord!

**Aj.** Speak only to those who wish to hear.

**Tec.** I cannot persuade you?

**Aj.** Noise, too much noise!

**Tec.** I fear for you, my lord.  
**Aj.** Shut tight the doors at once!  
**Tec.** Be gentle, I beg of you.  
**Aj.** I think you are quite mad  
if you think at this late stage to school my heart.  
**Ch.** Famed Salamis, happy wave  
**str.** washed homeland in the midst of the sea,  
and ever renowned among men, 600  
while long time I, poor wretch that I am,  
the countless months detain, ever beside  
the grassy slopes of Ida's mount  
encamped, time wasted,  
fearful and expectant always  
of taking Hell's unseen path one cannot refuse.  
And Ajax's incurable illness  
**ant.** has lain in wait to ambush me, poor wretch, 610  
and a madness divine shares the house.  
The wild warrior once you despatched, Salamis,  
almighty in war is made now a source of distress  
to his friends, obsessed and alone  
in his mind, while the virtuous works  
of his hands from before are fallen as naught,  
thankless, unloved with the thankless dour sons of Atreus. 620  
His mother, aged in days with the whiteness of age  
**str.** now upon her, when she hears of the sickness  
assailing his heart,  
will give tongue  
in her grief;  
repeated, repeated her cries, harsh and shrill, 630  
not hers the sweet nightingale call,  
but piercing her hymn of lament,  
as her hands on her breast beat out  
their percussion of pain and tear the white hair on her head.  
Better off to bed down with Death this man,  
**ant.** mind sick and deluded, born the best of his clan,  
who came to be best of the Greeks  
in the trials of war,  
no more, though, at home with his self, 640  
but alien now to his heart. And his father,  
to learn at the end of this rage  
that brought doom to his son!  
No living man of this house  
has before ever met with a life so ill fated as this.

Aj. All things times creates in its numberless span, births things  
 unseen to the light and conceals them again at the end;  
 no one thing now should be unexpected, but oaths that once  
 were dread are overthrown, and wills that were strong.

And even I, who once was a man dread, strong and firm, 650  
 like iron drop-forged, am become like a woman when I hear  
 what this wife has to say. I am sorry to leave her a prey,  
 as a widow with my orphaned son, to those hostile to me.  
 But I shall go to the washing place and the meadows down  
 by the sea to clean this foulness from my skin, and try  
 to escape from the goddess Athena's grievous rage;  
 I'll go somewhere removed from the beaten track  
 and hide this my most deadly weapon to me, this sword,  
 establishing it upright firm in the dirt where none may see.

Let Night and Death both keep it under the ground! 660  
 For from the time I took it in my hand as a gift  
 from Hector, the man who was my deadliest foe,  
 I never have been held in esteem by the Greeks.  
 For mankind's traditional wisdom holds true:  
 what an enemy gifts is no gift, but bring only harm.  
 In time to come we will know to leave all in the lap  
 of the gods, and shall learn to respect the Atreids' will.  
 They are in command and we must obey - yes, indeed.  
 For both the dread and the strong must yield

to ceremony. Snowy storms retreat in the face 670  
 of this law and of the summer's fruitful heat;  
 night's dismal course gives way to day's  
 pale horse, inviting the sun to shine in turn;  
 wind blasts of horrid squall grow calm and ease  
 the sounding sea to slumber; all conquering sleep  
 first binds, then sets its victims free, is not perpetual.  
 Then how shall I not also learn to moderate myself?  
 I understand at last that one should only hate

an enemy so much as suits a potential friend, 680  
 and I shall in future only aim to serve a friend  
 as suits a future enemy. For friendship is itself  
 a treacherous haven amongst the most of men.  
 But as to that, it will be well... so go you then  
 inside and, woman, pray to the gods that they  
 fulfil entire the wishes of my heart's desire,  
 and you, my friends, respect my wishes too  
 like her, and signal Teucer, if he comes to care  
 for me and mine and also show good will to you;

for I must go to the place where I must go; 690

do you then what I say, and perhaps you soon  
will learn that even in my pain I am safe.

**Ch.** I thrill with desire, am flown with delight.

**str.** Hail, all hail the great god Pan,  
lord Pan, yes, Pan reveal  
yourself from rock-ridged,  
sea-battered Cyllene, snow blitzed, my lord  
and master of the dance  
divine, hasten the choric steps  
Dionysiac, Cretan measures, self taught. 700  
For now am I minded to dance.  
And, lord Apollo, come step  
with me, clearing the sea of Icarus,  
Apollo, famed Delian King,  
a constant and kindly companion through time.  
Dread Ares has lifted the dark cloud from our eyes.

**ant.** Be glad and rejoice! Once more,  
lord Zeus, you may bring  
the bright cheer of the day  
to the swift, sharp prowed ships, since Ajax, free 710  
now from his pain, accomplishes  
all that is due to the gods,  
is most pious now in his dealings with them.  
All things are brought down by long passage of time;  
There is nothing unheard of its truth  
I'd deny, since Ajax has changed  
in his heart when I'd abandoned  
all hope that his peace could be made with Atreus's sons.

**Messenger**

My friends, firstly I would tell you this, that Teucer  
has just returned from the Mysian heights, and when 720  
he reached the leaders' tent in the midst of the camp  
he became the object of general abuse from the Greeks.  
For recognising him from afar as he made his way near,  
they formed a circle around him and then with taunts  
they harassed him on all sides, each and every one  
of them, calling him brother of the insane plotter against  
their force, adding threats he would scarce escape death,  
being ground to a pulp with their stones. And as a result  
they reached such a pitch of excitement drawn swords  
sprang from their sheaths and appeared in their hands. 730  
Strife's rush to its inevitable conclusion was stopped  
only by the older men's words of appeasement.

Where, though, is Ajax your lord, so that I can tell him?  
As lord and a party to this I must needs tell him all.

**Ch.** He is gone from within but recently, to yoke  
new plans to match his latest disposition.

**Me.** Oh no, no!  
The man who sent me on this mission was too late  
in sending me, or I myself am shown to be too slow.

**Ch.** What is this emergency you have failed? 740

**Me.** Teucer declared that Ajax should stay out of sight,  
and not venture outside until he himself arrived.

**Ch.** Well, he has gone, intent on doing what will be of benefit  
to him, seeking absolution from the anger of the gods.

**Me.** Your words are quite misguided, full of foolishness,  
if Calchas' prophecies were accurate.

**Ch.** What prophecies? What does Calchas know of this?

**Me.** I'll tell you what I know for I was present there:  
when Calchas left the council and the ring of chiefs  
and was alone, had separated from the Atreids, 750  
he placed his kind right hand in Teucer's hand  
and spoke and urged him by all possible means  
to keep Ajax confined inside his quarters, and never  
to let him out for the bright duration of this one day,  
if Teucer wanted ever to see him alive again.  
For Ajax is the slave of the goddess Athena's rage,  
he said, for this one day and this one day alone.  
For the prophet declared that mortal men  
who harboured boastful and foolish thoughts 760  
fell humbled by the gods' malevolence. Men born  
of mortal stock should think but mortal thoughts.  
When Ajax left his home, why even then he was  
found out in a foolishness, despite his father's good advice.  
For his father said to him, 'Seek power in arms,  
my son, but seek to sustain that power with help  
from the gods!' But Ajax replied in a boastful  
and foolish manner, 'Father, a nothing man  
might obtain power with the help of gods.  
For my part I will win my fame without their aid.'  
Big boastful words! And then a second time, 770  
when the goddess Athena was urging him on  
to turn his bloodied hand against the enemy,  
unprecedented in pride he answered her back,  
'Mistress, take your stance beside the other Greeks.  
The fighting enemy will never overwhelm my post!  
And by such vaunting words he earned Athena's harsh

rage, his ambitions outstripping by far his mortal state.  
 But if he survives this day, perhaps with the help  
 of the god's we might prove to be his saviours.

So much did the prophet speak and Teucer rose 780  
 from his place and sent me straight away to bring  
 these messages into your care. If though my task  
 has failed and Calchas is wise, then Ajax dies.

**Ch.** Tecmessa, unlucky child of an ill starred race,  
 come, listen to the meaning of this man's words.  
 Our lives and fortunes rest on the razor's edge.

**Tec.** What makes you rouse me from my rest, when I  
 had just now won some freedom from my pain?

**Ch.** You must listen to this man who bring us news 790  
 of Ajax's fate, such news as stirs my sympathy.

**Tec.** Well friend, what news? Our fate is sealed?

**Me.** I do not know your fate, but as for Ajax, if he  
 is gone outside why then I surely fear for him.

**Tec.** He is outside and so your words are a torture to me.

**Me.** Teucer's orders were to keep him in restraint  
 inside the tent and not to let him out alone.

**Tec.** Where is Teucer? What his grounds for saying this?

**Me.** He has but just come back. His expectation is  
 that Ajax's going out will bring about his death.

**Tec.** From whom did he learn this dreadful news? 800

**Me.** From Thestor's son, the prophet Calchas who said  
 this present day would find him safe or dead.

**Tec.** My friends, stand by me now in this necessity,  
 and send for Teucer to come and quickly now,  
 while others go to the western and the eastern bays  
 to search for trace of Ajax's ill-omened path.  
 For I realise now that I was misled by the man,  
 am exiled from the love we used to share.  
 Oh, my son, what shall I do? For I must act!  
 Yes, I will go to the limits of my strength. 810  
 So, let us make haste and move - no time to rest,  
 if we would save this man so bent on death.

**Ch.** I am ready to leave, and will prove the fact.  
 Swift feet will swiftly accomplish the deed.

**Aj.** My slayer is set in place to do its cutting work  
 to best effect, if time there is to work it properly,  
 sword gift of Hector, the man I hate the most of all  
 guest friends, and loathe the most to look upon.  
 It is firmly fixed in the hostile soil of Troy,  
 new whetted on the iron eating stone; 820

and I have taken care to fix it well myself,  
 that it may bring to me a swift and easy death.  
 So, all is well prepared... and now, lord Zeus,  
 be you my helper, first and foremost, as is right.  
 What I shall ask of you shall be no big request.  
 Be sure to send someone to bring the evil news  
 to Teucer that he may be the first to lift me up  
 from where I fall upon this fresh to be anointed sword,  
 and do not let some enemy spy me out before him,  
 to throw me out as fodder for the dogs and birds. 830  
 Such is my meagre prayer to you, lord Zeus, and I call  
 on chthonian Hermes too to lay me carefully to rest,  
 with a speedy, unconvulsive lurch upon the sword,  
 when I rip it through my ribs and lungs.  
 I summon those eternal virgins too to help, who keep  
 an everlasting watch on all the sufferings of men,  
 the holy Furies that stride long, to learn of me how I  
 am done to wretched death by the sons of Atreus.  
 And let them clamp their teeth in company upon  
 those double dyed destructive scum, when they see 840  
 me throw myself upon the sword- and then  
 destroy them too, as I myself have been destroyed\*...  
 Yes, come, select swift flock of Furies, come,  
 feed, spare none of the people of the host!  
 And you, lord Helios, high heaven's charioteer,  
 when you behold my native land of Salamis,  
 rein in and check your golden glancing reins  
 and tell of my fate, and my destruction's tale  
 to father, aged Telamon and to my poor mother too.  
 Poor creature! When she hears your words, 850  
 she will vent great cries of grief throughout the town...  
 but there is no point in idle grief on this account.  
 The business must be begun and with all speed.  
 Death, Death, come, supervise me now...  
 although I'll speak you face to face in hell.  
 But to you, bright visage of this present day,  
 and to you, swift chariot of the Sun, this is  
 my last and final, nevermore again, farewell.  
 Light of the sun and holy earth of Salamis, my home  
 the sound foundation of my father's hearth, 860  
 and famous Athens with your kindred race...  
 you present springs and rivers, plain of Troy,

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\* The text is extremely problematic here; see e.g. Jebb's note ad loc. What is printed here is simply a piece of English, which does not clash too harshly with the required sense.

I bid you too farewell, for you have nourished me...  
this is the last word Ajax speaks to you...  
the rest I'll tell to those below in Hades' house.

**Semi-chorus 1**

Toil brings toil on top of toil.

Where, where,

oh, where have I not been?

No place betrays its hidden mystery to me.

There... there...

870

I hear the sound again.

**Semi. 2** Our fellow mariners they are that share our ship...

**Semi. 1** What news, what news?

**Semi. 2** All the westward harbours have been traced.

**Semi. 1** No luck at all, then?

**Semi. 2** Despite our best efforts there's nothing to see.

**Semi. 1** And neither has the man been seen along  
the path which fronts the rays of the rising sun.

**Ch.** I would some working fisherman,

**str.** intent on his vigilant task,

880

or some Olympian goddess,

sea nymph divine,

from Bosphorus' flowing streams

might speak, if they have seen him,

hard of heart

and wandering! So hard it is

that I, who shared his wandering toils

cannot come close to his path to help,

nor anywhere see this man so sick.

890

**Tec.** Ah, no, no, no!

**Ch.** Whose was the cry that burst from the nearby woods?

**Tec.** Ah, no - the pain!

**Ch.** I see Tecmessa, poor pitiable bride of the spear,  
quite drowned in her pity and fear.

**Tec.** I am destroyed, my friends, am desolate and sacked.

**Ch.** What have you found?

**Tec.** Her lies our Ajax newly slain and dead,  
embracing in his heart the hidden sword.

**Ch.** Our homes, our homes!

900

My lord, your death destroys us too,

the men who sailed with you, but desperate now!

And your poor wretched wife...

**Tec.** No his is wretchedness, our task it is to grieve.  
**Ch.** Whose was the hand that did this deed?  
**Tec.** No other hand but his. See! This weapon here,  
 tight planted in the earth bears witness to his clasp.  
**Ch.** His madness, my despair! Alone in his blood,  
 no friends by his side. 910  
 I was so blind to everything, ignored the evidence,  
 neglected all. Where now lies  
 Ajax, intransigent man of the fatal name?

**Tec.** This is no fit sight for any man, so I shall cover him  
 completely in this shrouding robe, since none could bear,  
 however close he was to him, to look upon the foam  
 of black and bubbling blood that spewed up through the nose  
 and flooded from the black and fatal wound itself.  
 What can I do! Which friend will guard you here? 920  
 And where is Teucer? If only he could timely come  
 to set his fallen brother's limbs in order here.  
 Unhappy Ajax, from what heights to this!  
 A fate to earn compassion even from an enemy.

**Ch.** In the course of time, poor wretch, it ever was  
**ant.** your fate in stubbornness to fulfil at the last  
 a dreadful fate of griefs  
 unspeakable. For night  
 and day alike in savage rage  
 you cursed the sons of Atreus 930  
 with hateful words,  
 with hate implacable.  
 That time was the lavish start  
 of grief, when the noble contest  
 for Achilles' arms was set.

**Tec.** Ah, no, no, no!  
**Ch.** I know the loyal grief that bites close to the heart.  
**Tec.** Ah, no, no, no!  
**Ch.** I have no doubt, my lady, that your grief will twice 940  
 give tongue to mourn the loved one lost.  
**Tec.** You may have no doubts, but I know full too well.  
**Ch.** Yes, that is so.  
**Tec.** Oh, child, what fresh bonds of slavery are ours  
 to find, what kind of masters will look over us?  
**Ch.** Your cry of grief  
 finds inspiration in the work

of Atreus' two sons so hard of heart.  
 May the god prevent it!

**Tec.** Our fate stands as it stands because of the work of gods. 950

**Ch.** And they have laid on us a burden far too hard to bear.

**Tec.** The terrible goddess Athena, child of Zeus,  
 gave birth to this curse for Odysseus's sake.

**Ch.** No doubt in the dark of his heart he exults  
 the patient Odysseus  
 and laughs out loud at mad Ajax's pain, laughs out  
 long and loud. 960

**Tec.** Then let them laugh and rejoice in our man's ill luck.  
 Alive perhaps they felt no need of him, but now that he  
 is dead, they will grieve their lack in the demands of war.  
 For foolish men do not appreciate the noble prize  
 they have, until it is discarded from their hands.  
 His death pains me and falsely pleasures them,  
 for him it is a pure delight. For he has gained all that  
 he wanted for himself, and that was simply death.  
 Why then should they exult in overbearing mockery?  
 He died at the hands of god. They had no part in it. 970  
 And let Odysseus gloat at this along with them.  
 For Ajax is no more for them - for me his loss  
 bequeaths a legacy of pain and lament.

**Teucer** Oh no, no, no!

**Ch.** Be silent now, for I do believe I hear the voice  
 of Teucer, raised in grief because of this disaster.

**Teu.** Oh, dearest Ajax, brother, my brother, no...  
 Your fate has matched the potent words of prophecy?

**Ch.** Know, Teucer, that the man is dead.

**Teu.** The weight of my fate then is heavy indeed. 980

**Ch.** It is as it is.

**Teu.** I too then I am destroyed.

**Ch.** Distress is natural.

**Teu.** This death was rash and premature.

**Ch.** Yes, Teucer, and by far.

**Teu.** And so I grieve for him.  
 But what of his child? Tell me where he is in this land of Troy.

**Ch.** By the tents alone.

**Teu.** Then bring him here  
 as quickly as you can, in case some enemy shall seize  
 him like some lion cub whose mother is alone.

	Come, hurry and work together now. For all men like to mock the fallen dead.	
<b>Ch.</b>	Your present care for his son reflects the dead man's wishes, Teucer, while yet he lived.	990
<b>Teu.</b>	Of all the horrors I have witnessed this is the sorriest sight of all by far; of all the journeys I have ever made, this journey most of all does grieve my soul, sweet Ajax, now that in my course I have seen and traced your fate. For news of you, how you had died spread, god sent, and swiftly through the Greeks. And when I heard this on my way I cried aloud and now this sight unmans me. Ah! Come, lay him bare that I might see it all. The fatal daring of this face is hard to look upon - such sorrows you sowed for me by your death! For where now can I go midst the races of man, since I am proven useless in your time of toil? And Telamon, of course, the father that we share, would welcome me with kindly smiles upon his face, if I returned alone! Of course he would... his smile is not so very sweet when fortune is his friend. He will be blunt. What curse will not be his to lay on me, the bastard offspring of his spear won bride, a craven who betrayed you, Ajax, his best loved son, through cowardice, or, worse, through jealous craft to win by default your share of strength in Salamis? Weighed down with age and evil temper, he will say such things, a man who unprovoked is prone to strife. And finally, disowned I will be exiled from the land, pronounced by his curse as slave and free no more. So much then for home... In Troy I have made many enemies; few the things to advantage me here! Your death has revealed all this to me... Oh! What then shall I do? And how to ease your corpse up from this sharp gleaming fatal blade, poor man, on which your life expired? So you see how he, Hector, intended in time and in death to destroy you? Observe, by the gods, the fate of these two men. For Hector was tied fast to the chariot rail with the belt he'd had from Ajax and dragged and mangled endlessly, until he finally died,	1000
		1010
		1020
		1030

while Ajax received this gift from Hector,  
on which he, Ajax, fatally fell and also died.  
Did not some Fury forge this brazen sword,  
and Death, a deadly craftsman, make that belt?  
I would ever express the view that the gods  
contrived both these and all such incidents.  
However, if some man in his heart disagrees,  
he is as welcome to his view as I to mine.

**Ch.** No more now, rather tell us how you plan  
to bury him, and what excuses you will make. 1040

For I see his enemy, coming perhaps to laugh  
at our griefs with taunts to match his evil kind.

**Teu.** Which of the warriors is it that you see?

**Ch.** Lord Menelaus for whom we made the voyage here.

**Teu.** I see him. Close he is not hard to recognise.

### Menelaus

You there, I tell you, do not attempt to lift  
that corpse, but leave it precisely as it is!

**Teu.** What is it prompts such a waste of words?

**Men.** My pleasure, and also that of Agamemnon. 1050

**Teu.** Perhaps you would care to justify yourself?

**Men.** Of course - we had hoped to bring him here  
from Salamis as an ally and a friend to us,  
but have found him more an enemy than Troy;  
this man was plotting death to all the host,  
set out at night against us with his deadly spear;  
and had not some god subverted his plan,  
we would have suffered the fate he now enjoys  
in death, would have won an ignoble end,  
while yet lived. But as it is, the god did turn  
his injured pride against the cattle and the sheep. 1060

Therefore, there is no man of strength enough  
that he might entomb this body in a grave,  
but rather, tossed out on the yellow sand,  
it will provide a feast and fodder for the gulls.

Let none lift up his heart in rage at this decision!  
We could not rule him while he lived, but now  
he's dead, we surely shall. Our hands will shape  
his fate, in spite of you. For never while he lived  
was he willing to pay attention to my words. 1070

It is the mark of a worthless man if one from the ranks  
disdains to give heed to his betters' commands.

For neither could the city's laws be ever safe

and sound, without the added sanction of fear,  
 nor could an army ever be run on disciplined lines,  
 without the constant spectres of fear and shame.  
 For any man, however big his physical strength,  
 must learn he can fall from the smallest mishap,  
 While the man who is prone to both fear  
 and shame, be well assured that man is safe. 1080  
 But wherever a man may do as he likes in pride,  
 know well his city someday is destined to fall  
 headlong, though it ran with a favourable breeze.  
 Yes, I approve the principle of calculated threat,  
 and let us not believe we can act to indulge  
 our whims without due penalty and pain.  
 Change creeps by turns. Time past this man  
 was hotly arrogant, while now I wax proud.  
 And so I say you shall not bury him, in case  
 in doing so you fall yourself into the grave. 1090  
**Ch.** The wisdom you enunciate is sound, my lord,  
 be not then so arrogant yourself toward the dead.  
**Teu.** I could never again be surprised, my friends, to find  
 a man ignoble in birth, of no real worth, in error,  
 when those with pretensions to nobility and birth  
 make such errors of judgement in what they say.  
 Come, once more from the start, are you saying you  
 took Ajax up, and brought him here as ally to the Greeks?  
 And I thought he set sail himself, as master of his ship!  
 In what was he yours to command? What right have you  
 to rule the men whom he led here from home? 1100  
 You came as a Spartan king, no power over us;  
 There was no set agreement made for you to lord  
 it over him, no more than for him to lord it over you.  
 You sailed here as just another under chief, and not  
 supreme commander. You have no power over him.  
 Rule those that are rightly yours to rule, scourge them  
 with high and mighty words, while as for him,  
 I'll lay him in a proper grave, whatever you may say,  
 or the other general too... I do not fear your threats. 1110  
 He did not come campaigning here for you to get  
 your wife back like your labouring rank and file,  
 but because of the oaths with which he was bound.  
 Least of all for you! He took no account of nobodies!  
 Bring Agamemnon with you and a crowd of heralds  
 next time you come! I would not turn my head  
 at the din you make, while you are as you are.

**Ch.** I have no fondness for such talk at crisis time;  
harsh words, however just they are, will bite.

**Men.** This archer fellow seems quite flushed with pride. 1120

**Teu.** Do not underestimate the skill I have acquired.

**Men.** Your boasts would deafen, if you possessed a shield.

**Teu.** Unarmed I'd more than a match your weaponry.

**Men.** That tongue of yours feeds a terrible pride.

**Teu.** With justice on his side a man may well be proud.

**Men.** And is it just my slayer here should prosper then?

**Teu.** Your slayer? You talk in riddles... both dead and alive?

**Men.** The goddess kept me safe. He thought me dead.

**Teu.** Do not dishonour the gods that kept you safe.

**Men.** And how could I demean the laws of the gods? 1130

**Teu.** If your presence here forbids the burial of our dead.

**Men.** He was my mortal enemy. It is not right to bury him.

**Teu.** Did Ajax ever show himself your public enemy?

**Men.** We hated each other. You knew this too.

**Teu.** You showed yourself a thief and corrupter of votes.

**Men.** The decision was clearly the judges', not mine

**Teu.** You worked your manifold dirty deals in secrecy.

**Men.** These taunts will end in pain for you.

**Teu.** No greater pain than the pain that I shall work.

**Men.** One word I have. You must not be bury this man! 1140

**Teu.** And but one reply - he will have his burial.

**Men.** I once saw a man as bold of tongue as you, who urged  
his crew to sail in the season of storms, but upon whose lips  
you could not find a sound, when he was caught in a gale,  
but, cowering beneath his cloak, he would let  
whichever of his crew tread all over him at will.  
As for you and your boisterous tongue, should some  
great storm spring even from some tiny cloud,  
it will put a welcome stop, I believe, to your clamour.

**Teu.** And I have seen a man full of stupidity, 1150  
who laughed out loud at his neighbours' grief.  
Some other body saw him next, as it might be me,  
or like in mood to me, who spoke like this to him,  
'You, fellow, pray, do not abuse the dead.  
For if you do, know well that you will suffer too.'  
Such were his words of warning to this foolish man.  
And now I see the very man, who is, it seems,  
why, no one else but you - perhaps I puzzle you?

**Men.** I shall go. I do not wish to earn the disgrace  
of bandying words with underlings. 1160

- Teu.** So, creep away. I would not earn the disgrace  
of heeding the ramblings of some demented fool.
- Ch.** This grave issue will be brought to trial.  
As quickly, Teucer, as you can, make haste  
to look out a hollow tomb for Ajax where  
he will keep to his mouldering grave, a place  
that will live for ever in the minds of men.
- Teu.** And see, both the widow of this man and his child  
are drawing nearer, just as the time is ripe for them  
to prepare the wretched corpse of Ajax for the grave. 1170  
My child, come here, and stand close by and place  
your hand upon your father's corpse as suppliant.  
Seat yourself, as one who has a prayer to make, with locks  
of hair in hand, mine, yours and your mother's third,  
the suppliant's stock in trade. And if any of the force  
should try to drag you from the corpse's side, then may  
that villain die wretched far from home, no burial  
for him, cut off both root and branch from all his race,  
as even now I cut this lock of hair from off my head.  
Accept it, boy, and keep it safe and do not let yourself 1180  
be moved, but set you down and hold him tight.  
And you, stand by his side like the men you are,  
stand by in his defence, until I shall return  
from organising this man's tomb, in spite of all.
- Ch.** What end is set for me, what term  
**str.** to years unnumbered of toil,  
inflicting the wreck and ruin of war and spear  
across the broad plains  
of Troy, a curse and cause 1190  
of shame and disgrace to the Greeks?  
I would that man had hid  
**ant.** himself among the clouds, or in death's house  
that welcomes all, that man who taught Greeks  
open war with instruments of death.  
Sufferings breeds suffering.  
That man has devastated humankind.  
He granted me no share  
**str.** in pleasure of garlands, 1200  
of wine deep cups in sympotic company,  
nor in sweet music of the pipes,  
this man of doom, nor let me pass

the night in sweet  
 repose.\* He has robbed  
 me too of love's delights...  
 Neglected now I lie me down,  
 hair always wet with chilling dew,  
 in constant awareness  
 of gloomy Troy. 1210  
**ant.** In times gone by brave Aja  
 was my constant guardian  
 against the terrors of the night time raid;  
 but he is now the victim  
 of an evil fate. What pleasures, then,  
 will wait on me?  
 I would I were where  
 the wooded cape stands guard, sea washed  
 above the sea, beneath the flat  
 acropolis of Sunium, that I 1220  
 might hail and greet  
 Athens' sacred town.

**Teu.** I have hurried back because I saw the general,  
 lord Agamemnon, coming here in haste himself;  
 No doubt he will unleash his tongue to our despite.

### Agamemnon

Men tell me you have dared pour deadly imprecations  
 on my head - and do you think to get away with that?  
 Yes, you're the one I mean, the spear-bride's bastard son:  
 Had you been born and nurtured as a noble mother's son,  
 your arrogance would surely show itself in word and walk, 1230  
 since though you now are nothing and do speak for this,  
 this as nothing now, you still have sworn that we did come  
 without a right to rule the Greeks by land or sea, but he  
 yes, Ajax sailed, according to your claim, as master of himself.  
 Are these not overweening gibes to hear from slaves?  
 What kind of man was this whose praise you bark  
 in arrogance, where did he go or stand that I did not?  
 Do not we Greeks have warriors apart from him alone?  
 We likely shall regret indeed the competition  
 for Achilles' arms, proclaimed to all the Greeks, 1240  
 if we are proven criminal by Teucer on all counts,  
 and if you reject the judgement reached by a fair

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\* I have borrowed the phrase, "pass the night in sweet repose" from Jebb's note ad loc; as so often Jebb has precisely the right feel, and here there is no overt archaizing.

majority of judges, reject defeat and still assail  
us constantly with slanders, trying to subvert  
our rule by guile, though beaten in the race.

Behaviour such as this would never grant  
desired stability to any law, were we to throw  
aside the men who won according to the law,  
and then promote the laggards to the front.

We must be on our guard in this! For the big,  
broad shouldered bully boys are not 'responsible',  
whereas, as rulers, men of wisdom are the best.

Big bodied bulls are kept to the straight  
and narrow path with just a tiny whip.

I see this medicine soon overtaking you,  
unless you take yourself in hand, since though  
this man is dead, a ghost by now, inspired by him  
you let your mouth run freely on in arrogance.

Control yourself! Remember what you are,  
and bring another here, a free born man,  
to plead your case to us instead of you.

For I no longer care to hear you speak;  
I cannot understand your barbarous tongue.

**Ch.** Both of you should show some self control;  
that is the best advice that I can give.

**Teu.** It is a sorry thing, the speed with which a dead  
man's credit disappears and is betrayed,  
if a man like this lacks words so soon to show  
his gratitude to you, for whom repeatedly  
you, Ajax, risked your life in labour with the spear;

but all of that is gone, forgotten, flung aside.  
You have had a lot to say and none of it  
makes sense: perhaps you don't remember  
any more the time when you were trapped  
behind your lines, as good as dead as the tide  
of battle turned, and he came alone to save  
you, the flames already licking round  
the after castles of the fleet, with Hector  
hurdling the trench, attacking the ships.

Who kept him at bay? Did not this man do that,  
whom you deny set foot where you did not?  
Did he not do very well by you that day?

There was still another time when he met  
Hector, man on man, as a volunteer who won  
the right by lot, no piece of mouldering clay for him,  
some lump of moistened earth, but such as would

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leap lightly from the crested helmet first.  
 This was the man who acted so, with me at his side,  
 the slave, the one whose mother was barbarian.  
 What twist of memory provokes your taunts? 1290  
 Did you forget that the man who got your sire  
 was himself barbarian, Phrygian Pelops of old?  
 And Atreus, who in turn fathered you, did serve  
 his brother an impious feast of his children's flesh?  
 Your own mother too was born of Cretan stock.  
 Her father found her with a man, and so decreed  
 that she should be consigned as food for the silent fish.  
 Being such how dare you reproach my lineage?  
 I was born the son of Telamon. He fathered me,  
 this man who took my mother to his bed, first prize 1300  
 of valour won in war, a woman born herself  
 of royal blood, child of Laomedon - and Herakles  
 himself gave her to Telamon as choicest gift of all.  
 As a noble from two most noble parents sprung,  
 how should I disgrace my own blood kin, whom you  
 would order thrust outside, no grave, because of this  
 his present fate - have you no shame, to order that?  
 Know this, that if you throw his corpse away,  
 you will throw three more away to lie with him.  
 For I declare it is clearly more appropriate 1300  
 for me to die, contesting hard on his behalf,  
 than for your wife, or yet for your brother's wife!  
 Consider here your interests, not mine.  
 For if you do me harm, you then will wish yourself  
 a coward born before your boldness damaged me.  
**Ch.** My lord Odysseus, your coming is timely indeed,  
 if you are here not to join the battle but to call a halt.  
**Od.** What is the matter, my friends? Far off I heard  
 the outcry of the Atreids about this noble corpse.  
**Ag.** It was because we were just subjected to the most 1310  
 insulting talk, Odysseus, from this fellow here.  
**Od.** What insults? For I could forgive any man  
 who responds in kind to vulgar insult.  
**Ag.** Yes, I insulted him, but he had showed me no respect.  
**Od.** What had he done, that caused you such offence?  
**Ag.** He said that he would not allow that corpse to stay  
 unburied, but would cover it in spite of me.  
**Od.** May I frankly speak the truth to you as to a friend,  
 just as before we always pulled our oars in time?

Ag. Speak. Otherwise I would be mad, since I 1320  
count you my greatest friend among the Greeks.

Od. Then hear me. Do not risk the anger of the gods  
by harshly tossing out this man's unburied corpse;  
And, most of all, do not allow your violence of hate  
for him so to act as to make you trample justice down.  
For once this man was also my most bitter enemy  
among the army, when I won Achilles' arms,  
but still I would not choose in any way to heap  
dishonour on his present state, nor yet deny  
that in him alone I saw the very best of the Greeks 1340  
as did arrive at Troy, save for Achilles himself.  
Neither is it right he be dishonoured at your hands;  
You would cause him no harm, only abuse the laws  
of the gods. For it is not right to hurt a noble man  
when he is dead, not even if you nurse a hate for him.

Ag. You fight for him, Odysseus, in this against me?

Od. I do. I hated him when to hate him was right.

Ag. And is it not right to trample him in death?

Od. Do not indulge yourself in gains that are illusory.

Ag. It is no easy task for a king to read the will of gods. 1350

Od. But it is to respect a friend's good advice.

Ag. A noble man should heed those in command.

Od. Be still - concede to friends and be victorious!

Ag. Think of the kind of man he was you now defend.

Od. He was my enemy and yet he was a noble man.

Ag. What will you do? Respect an enemy once he's dead?

Od. His virtue far outweighs the enmity I felt.

Ag. Such men as these show no stability.

Od. But many men blow hot and cold.

Ag. And you approve of friends like these? 1360

Od. I am not a one to praise rigidity.

Ag. You will show us up as cowardly today.

Od. Rather as men of justice in the eyes of Greece.

Ag. So you are urging me to give this body burial?

Od. I am. I too shall come to this.

Ag. It is always the same - each man looks after himself.

Od. Whose best interests should I serve if not my own?

Ag. The task is yours. I want no credit here.

Od. Whatever you do, your credit is high.

Ag. Then know this very well, for you I would 1370  
grant any favour such as this and even more,  
but that man whether in the world below or here  
shall be my bitter enemy - so do then what you must.

- Ch.** If any man denies the wisdom in your soul,  
Odysseus, as shown in this, he is a fool.
- Od.** Then let me make it plain to Teucer that I am now  
as much a friend to Ajax as once I was his enemy.  
And I wish to take a part in burying him,  
to share the work and not to leave undone any one  
of the duties mortals owe to the best of men. 1380
- Teu.** Most noble Odysseus, your words deserve  
my total praise. For you have foiled my expectation.  
Although you were of all the Greeks the one  
most hostile, you alone came to his aid, forbore  
from heaping living insults on the dead man's head,  
unlike our thundering general who came to do so,  
both him and his brother, at one in their desire  
to mock and throw the corpse away without a burial.  
And so may the reverend father at home on Olympus,  
and the mindful Fury and Justice that governs all 1390  
to the end, destroy those evil men in that they wished  
to mock and throw outside the body of this man.  
And as for you, son of your aged father Laertes,  
I shall keep you from his grave, nor let you place  
a hand on it, in case I cause displeasure to the dead;  
in all else work with us, and if you wish to bring  
some people from the army, we shall not object.  
I shall prepare all that I have to do - and know  
you are deemed by us to be a man true nobility.
- Od.** I would have liked to help, but if that is not congenial 1400  
to you, so be it, and I shall go away content.
- Teu.** Enough - already too much time  
has wasted. Some of you quickly dig  
a hollow grave, some set in place  
the cauldron in the fire, to heat  
the sacred, cleansing waters;  
and let another group bring out  
his armour from the tent.  
Child, take hold of him with me  
and lovingly, beneath his ribs, 1410  
as best you can, uplift his form...  
for still the warm blood flows  
black from his mouth. Come all who say  
they loved him, come, hurry to do  
some service for this most perfect man.

Of mortals none was better,  
while he lived, than Ajax.

**Ch.** Many the things men learn from sight.  
Before sight comes no man foretells  
his future or his fate.

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