

Ajax  
By Sophocles

Translated by R. C. Trevelyan

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Dramatis Personae

ATHENA  
ODYSSEUS  
AJAX  
CHORUS OF SALAMINIANS  
TECMESSA, concubine of AJAX  
MESSENGER  
TEUCER, half-brother of AJAX  
MENELAUS  
AGAMEMNON  
Mute Persons  
EURYSACES, child of AJAX and TECMESSA  
Attendants, Heralds, etc.

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Before the tent of AJAX in the Greek camp at Troy. It is dawn. ODYSSEUS is discovered examining the ground before the tent. ATHENA appears from above.

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ATHENA Son of Laertes, ever do I behold thee  
Scheming to snatch some vantage o'er thy foes.  
And now among the tents that guard the ships  
Of Ajax, camped at the army's outmost verge,  
Long have I watched thee hunting in his trail,  
And scanning his fresh prints, to learn if now  
He be within or forth. Skilled in the chase  
Thou seemest, as a keen-nosed Spartan hound.  
For the man but now has passed within, his face  
And slaughterous hands streaming with sweat and blood.  
No further need for thee to peer about  
Inside these doors. But say what eager quest  
Is thine, that I who know may give thee light.

ODYSSEUS Voice of Athena, dearest of Gods to me,  
How clearly, though thou be invisible,  
Do I hear thy call, and seize it with my soul,  
As when a bronze-mouthed Tyrrhene trumpet sounds!  
Rightly thou judgest that on a foe's trail,  
Broad-shielded Ajax, I range to and fro.  
Him, and no other, I have long been tracking.  
This very night against us he has wrought  
A deed incredible, if in truth 'tis he.  
For we know nothing sure, but drift in doubt.  
Gladly I assumed the burden of this task.  
For not long since we found that our whole spoil  
Had been destroyed, both herds and flocks, slaughtered  
By some man's hand, their guardians dead beside them.  
Now 'tis on him that all men lay this guilt:  
And a scout who had seen him swiftly bounding  
Across the plain alone with reeking sword,  
Informed me and bore witness. I forthwith,  
Darting in hot chase, now pick out his tracks,  
But now, bewildered, know not whose they are.  
Timely thou comest. As in past days, so  
In days to come I am guided by thy hand.

ATHENA I know it, Odysseus: so on the path betimes  
A sentinel friendly to thy chase I came.

ODYSSEUS Dear mistress, do I labour to good purpose?

ATHENA Know 'twas by yonder man these deeds were wrought.

ODYSSEUS And why did he so brandish a frenzied hand?

ATHENA In grievous wrath for Achilles' panoply.

ODYSSEUS Why then upon the flocks did he make this onslaught?

ATHENA Your blood he deemed it was that stained his hand.

ODYSSEUS Was this outrage designed against the Greeks?

ATHENA He had achieved it too, but for my vigilance.

ODYSSEUS What bold scheme could inspire such reckless daring?

ATHENA By night he meant to steal on you alone.

ODYSSEUS Did he come near us? Did he reach his goal?

ATHENA He stood already at the two chiefs' doors.

ODYSSEUS What then withheld his eager hand from bloodshed?

ATHENA 'Twas I restrained him, casting on his eyes  
O'ermastering notions of that baneful ecstasy,  
That turned his rage on flocks and mingled droves  
Of booty yet unshared, guarded by herdsmen.  
Then plunging amid the thronging horns he slew,  
Smiting on all sides; and one while he fancied  
The Atreidae were the captives he was slaughtering,  
Now 'twas some other chief on whom he fell.  
And I, while thus he raved in maniac throes,  
Urged him on, drove him into the baleful toils.  
Thereafter, when he had wearied of such labours,  
He bound with thongs such oxen as yet lived,  
With all the sheep, and drove them to his tents,  
As though his spoil were men, not horned cattle.  
Now lashed together in the hut he tortures them.  
But to thee too will I expose this madness,  
That seeing thou mayst proclaim it to all the Greeks.  
Boldly await him here, nor apprehend  
Mischance; for I will turn aside his eyes,  
Foiling his vision lest he see thy face. (She calls to AJAX within  
the tent.) Harken, thou who art pinioning with cords  
The wrists of captives; hither, I bid thee, come.  
Thou, Ajax, hear me: come to thy tent's door.

ODYSSEUS What dost thou, Athena? Do not summon him forth.

ATHENA Abide in silence. Earn not the name of coward.

ODYSSEUS Nay, by the Gods, let him remain within.

ATHENA What dost thou dread? Was he not once a man?

ODYSSEUS Yes, and to me a foeman, and still is.

ATHENA To mock foes, is not that the sweetest mockery?

ODYSSEUS I am content he should remain indoors.

ATHENA To look upon a madman art thou afraid?

ODYSSEUS Had he been sane, no fear had made me shrink.

ATHENA Even now he shall not see thee, near as thou art.

ODYSSEUS How so, if still with the same eyes he sees?

ATHENA His orbs will I make dark, though vision is theirs.

ODYSSEUS Well, all is possible, when 'tis a god contrives.

ATHENA Stand then silent, abiding as thou art.

ODYSSEUS Stay I must; yet I fain would be far hence.

ATHENA Ho, Ajax! Once again I summon thee.  
So slight is thy regard for thine ally? (AJAX appears in the tent door, with a blood-stained scourge in his hand.)

AJAX Oh hail, Athena! Hail thou Zeus-born maid!  
Nobly hast thou stood by me. Now will I crown thee  
With trophies all of gold for this rich conquest.

ATHENA Thy words are welcome. But now tell me this:  
Hast thou dyed well thy sword in the Argive host?

AJAX Such vaunt is mine. I disclaim not that glory.

ATHENA Against the Atreidae didst thou arm thy hand?

AJAX So that Ajax nevermore shall they insult.

ATHENA The men are dead, if rightly I take thy meaning.

AJAX Yes, dead. Now let them rob me of my arms.

ATHENA 'Tis well. And what then of Laertes' son?  
In what plight does he stand? Or has he escaped thee?

AJAX Wouldst thou know where is that accursed fox?

ATHENA Even so-Odysseus, thine old adversary.

AJAX Goddess, a most dear captive in my tent  
He sits. I do not mean him to die yet.

ATHENA Till thou hast done what, gained what further vantage?

AJAX Till bound fast to a pillar beneath my roof-

ATHENA What evil wilt thou inflict on the poor wretch?

AJAX His back the scourge must crimson ere he dies.

ATHENA Nay, do not torture so the wretched man.

AJAX Athena, in all else will I do thy will;  
But his shall be no other doom than this.

ATHENA Thou then, since thy delight is to act thus,  
Smite, spare not, abate nought of thy intent.

AJAX To my work I return: and thus I charge thee,  
As now, so always fight thou upon my side. (AJAX goes back into the tent.)

ATHENA Seest thou, Odysseus, how great the strength of gods?

Whom couldst thou find more prudent than this man,  
Or whom in act more valiant, when need called?

ODYSSEUS I know none nobler; and I pity him  
In his misery, albeit he is my foe,  
Since he is yoked fast to an evil doom.  
My own lot I regard no less than his.  
For I see well, nought else are we but mere  
Phantoms, all we that live, mere fleeting shadows.

ATHENA Warned therefore by his fate, never do thou  
Thyself utter proud words against the gods;  
Nor swell with insolence, if thou shouldst vanquish  
Some rival by main strength or by wealth's power.  
For a day can bring all mortal greatness low,  
And a day can lift it up. But the gods love  
The wise of heart, the froward they abhor. (ATHENA vanishes and ODYSSEUS  
departs. The CHORUS OF SALAMINIANS enters.)

CHORUS (singing) Son of Telamon, lord of Salamis' isle,

On its wave-washed throne mid the breaking sea,  
I rejoice when fair are thy fortunes:  
But whene'er thou art smitten by the stroke of Zeus,  
Or the vehement blame of the fierce-tongued Greeks,

Then sore am I grieved, and for fear I quake,  
As a fluttering dove with a scared eye.  
Even so by rumour murmuring loud  
Of the night late-spent our ears are assailed.  
'Tis a tale of shame, how thou on the plains  
Where the steeds roam wild, didst ruin the Danaan  
Flocks and herds,  
Our spear-won booty as yet unshared,  
With bright sword smiting and slaughtering.  
Such now are the slanders Odysseus forges  
And whispers abroad into all men's ears,  
Winning easy belief: so specious the tale  
He is spreading against thee; and each new hearer  
Rejoices more than he who told,  
Exulting in thy degradation.  
For the shaft that is aimed at the noble of soul  
Smites home without fail: but whoe'er should accuse me  
Of such misdeeds, no faith would he win.  
'Tis the stronger whom creeping jealousy strikes.  
Yet small men reft of help from the mighty  
Can ill be trusted to guard their walls.  
Best prosper the lowly in league with the great;  
And the great have need to be served by the less.  
But none to the knowledge of such plain truths  
May lead minds witless and froward.  
Even such are the men who murmur against thee:  
And vainly without thine aid, O King,  
We strive to repel their accusing hate.  
For whene'er they are safe from the scorn of thy glance,

They chatter and screech like bids in a flock:  
But smitten with dread of the powerful vulture,  
Doubtless at once, should'st thou but appear,  
They will cower down dumbly in silence.

(strophe)

Was it the Tauric Olympian Artemis,  
(Oh, the dread rumour of woe,  
Parent of my grievous shame!)  
Who drove thee forth to slaughter the herds of the people,

In wrath perchance for some unpaid-for victory,  
Whether defrauded of glorious spoil, or offerings  
Due for a stag that was slain?  
Or did the bronze-clad Demon of battle, aggrieved

On him who scorned the might of his succouring spear,  
Plot revenge by nightly deception?

(antistrophe)

Ne'er of itself had thy heart, son of Telamon,  
Strayed into folly so far  
As to murder flocks and herds.  
Escape from heaven-sent madness is none: yet Apollo  
And Zeus avert these evil rumours of the Greeks.  
But should the story be false, these crafty slanders  
Spread by the powerful kings,  
And by the child of the infamous Sisyphid line,  
No more, my master, thus in the tent by the sea  
Hide thy countenance, earning an ill fame.

(epode)

Nay, but arise from thy seat, where'er so long wrapt in

Brooding pause from the battle thou hast lurked: arise,  
Heaven-high kindle the flame of death.  
But the insolence of thy foes boldly  
Thus wanders abroad in the wind-swept glens.  
Meanwhile all men mocking  
With venomous tongues taunt thee:  
But grief in my heart wanes not. (TECMESSA enters. The following  
lines between TECMESSA and the CHORUS are chanted responsively.)

TECMESSA Liegemen of Ajax, ship-companions,  
Ye children of earth-sprung Erechthid race,  
Lamentation is now our portion, to whom  
Dear is the far-off house of Telamon,  
Now that the stern and terrible Ajax  
Lies whelmed by a storm  
Of turbid wildering fury.

CHORUS To what evil change from the day's woe now  
Has night given birth?  
Thou daughter of Phrygian Teleutas, speak;  
For a constant love has valiant Ajax  
Borne thee, his spear-won prisoner bride.  
Then hide from us nought that thou knowest.

TECMESSA How to utter a tale of unspeakable things!  
For disastrous as death is the hap you will hear.

In the darkness of night madness has seized  
Our glorious Ajax: he is ruined and lost.  
Hereof in the tent may proof be seen;  
Sword-slain victims in their own blood bathed,  
By his hand sacrificially slaughtered.

CHORUS (strophe)

What tidings of the fiery warrior tellest thou,  
Not to be borne, nor yet to be disputed,  
Rumoured abroad by the chiefs of the Danaan host,  
Mightily still spreading and waxing!  
Woe's me! I dread the horror to come. Yea, to a public death doomed

Will he die, if in truth his be the hand that wielded  
The red sword that in frenzy hath slain the herds and mounted herdsmen.

TECMESSA Ah me! Thence was it, thence that he came to me

Leading his captive flock from the pastures!  
Thereof in the tent some did he slaughter,  
Others hewed he asunder with slashing sword;  
Then he caught up amain two white-footed rams,  
Sliced off from the one both the head and the tongue,  
And flings them away;  
But the other upright to a pillar he binds,  
Then seizing a heavy horse-harnessing thong  
He smites with the whistling doubled lash,  
Uttering fierce taunts which an evil fiend  
No mere mortal could have taught him.

CHORUS (antistrophe)

'Tis time that now each with shamefully muffled head  
Forth from the camp should creep with stealthy footsteps.

Nay, on the ship let us muster, and benched at the oars  
Over the waves launch her in swift flight.  
Such angry threats sound in our ears hurled by the brother princes,

The Atreidae: and I quake, fearing a death by stoning,  
The dread portion of all who would share our hapless master's ruin.

TECMESSA Yet hope we: for ceased is the lightning's flash:

His rage dies down like a fierce south-wind.

But now, grown sane, new misery is his;  
For on woes self-wrought he gazes aghast,  
Wherein no hand but his own had share;  
And with anguish his soul is afflicted.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS Nay, if 'tis ceased, there is good cause to hope.  
Once 'tis past, of less moment is his frenzy.

TECMESSA And which, were the choice thine, wouldst thou prefer,  
To afflict thy friends and feel delight thyself,  
Or to share sorrow, grieving with their grief?

LEADER The twofold woe, lady, would be the greater.

TECMESSA Then we, though plagued no more, are undone now.

LEADER What mean thy words? Their sense is dark to me.

TECMESSA Yonder man, while his spirit was diseased,  
Himself had joy in his own evil plight,  
Though to us, who were sane, he brought distress.  
But now, since he has respite from his plague,  
He with sore grief is utterly cast down,  
And we likewise, no less than heretofore.  
Are there not here two woes instead of one?

LEADER Yes truly. And I fear, from some god came  
This stroke; how else? if, now his frenzy is ceased,  
His mind has no more ease than when it raged.

TECMESSA 'Tis even as I said, rest well assured.

LEADER But how did this bane first alight upon him?  
To us who share thy grief show what befell.

TECMESSA Thou shalt hear all, as though thou hadst been present.

In the middle of the night, when the evening braziers  
No longer flared, he took a two-edged sword,  
And fain would sally upon an empty quest.  
But I rebuked him, saying: "What doest thou,  
Ajax? Why thus uncalled wouldst thou go forth?  
No messenger has summoned thee, no trumpet  
Roused thee. Nay, the whole camp is sleeping still."

But curtly he replied in well-worn phrase:  
"Woman, silence is the grace of woman."  
Thus schooled, I yielded; and he rushed out alone.  
What passed outside the tent, I cannot tell.  
But in he came, driving lashed together  
Bulls, and shepherd dogs, and fleecy prey.  
Some he beheaded, the wrenched-back throats of some  
He slit, or cleft their chins; others he bound  
And tortured, as though men they were, not beasts.  
Last, darting through the doors, as to some phantom  
He tossed words, now against the Atreidae, now  
Taunting Odysseus, piling up huge jeers  
Of how he had gone and wreaked his scorn upon them.  
Soon he rushed back within the tent, where slowly  
And hardly to his reason he returned.  
And gazing round on the room filled with havoc,  
He struck his head and cried out; then amidst  
The wrecks of slaughtered sheep a wreck he fell,  
And sat clutching his hair with tight-clenched nails.  
There first for a long while he crouched speechless;  
Then did he threaten me with fearful threats,  
If I revealed not all that had befallen him,  
Asking what meant the plight wherein he lay.  
And I, friends, terror-stricken, told him all  
That had been done, so far as I had knowledge.  
Forthwith he broke forth into bitter wailing,  
Such as I ne'er had heard from him before  
For always had he held that such laments  
Befitted cowards only, and low-souled men:  
But uttering no shrill cries, he would express  
His grief in low groans, as of a moaning bull.  
But now prostrate beneath so great a woe,  
Not tasting food nor drink, he sits among  
The sword-slain beasts, motionless where he sank.  
And plainly he meditates some baleful deed,  
For so portend his words and lamentations.  
But, O friends!-'twas for this cause I came forth-  
Enter and help, if help at all you can:  
For by friends' words men so bestead are won.

LEADER Child of Teleutas, fearful are thy tidings,  
That our prince has been maddened by his griefs.

AJAX (within) Alas! Woe, woe!

TECMESSA Soon, I fear, worse will follow. Heard you not?

'Twas Ajax. Oh, how dreadful was that cry.

AJAX Alas! Woe, woe!

LEADER He seems either still frenzied, or else grieving

For his past frenzies, now he sees their work.

AJAX Alas! My son, my son!

TECMESSA Woe's me! Eurysaces, 'tis for thee he calls.  
What can he purpose?-Where art thou?-Ah, woe!

AJAX Teucer, come!-Where is Teucer? Will he never  
Come back from cattle-raiding?-while I perish!

LEADER He seems in his right mind. But open the doors.  
Perhaps even the sight of me may sober him. (She opens the doors  
of the tent. AJAX is revealed sitting among the slain beasts.)

TECMESSA See, I have opened. You may now behold  
What he has done, and in what plight he lies.

AJAX (chanting) Alas!  
My shipmates and friends, you that alone to me  
Loyal and true remain, of all friends alone,  
Behold how great a billow lately rising from the storm of blood

Surging around engulphs me!

LEADER Ah me, too true, it seems, was thy report.  
This sight reveals the work of no sane mind.

AJAX (chanting) Alas!  
My mates, skilled and tried in brave seamanship,  
Ye who embarking drove the wave-cleaving oar,  
In you, in you alone I see a help and refuge from despair.

Smite me, and spill my blood too.

LEADER Keep silence from dread words; nor curing ill  
By ill, so swell the misery of this curse.

AJAX (chanting) Behold now the bold, the man stout of heart,

Who ne'er shrank in fight against foes-behold  
How I have spent my rage on beasts that feared no harm!  
Ah me, the mockery! To what shame am I brought low

TECMESSA Ajax, my master, I entreat thee, speak not so.

AJAX (chanting) Away hence, I command thee! Take thyself elsewhere.

Aiai! Aiai!

LEADER Oh, by the Gods, we pray thee, yield to wisdom's voice.

AJAX (chanting) Oh, wretch that I was to allow  
Those cursed foes to slip from my hands, and assaulting  
Horned kine and goodly flocks, madly to spill  
Their life in streams of dark blood!

LEADER Why still be afflicted, now the deed is done past cure?

Never can these things be as though they had not been.

AJAX (chanting) Thou all-spying knave, of all deeds of shame

The prompt, easy tool, Odysseus the wise!  
Villain, of all the camp the most foul and vile!  
Huge laughter doubtless shakes thee now for sheer delight.

LEADER As God appoints, so every man laughs or laments.

AJAX (chanting) Would I might meet him, crushed and broken though  
I be.  
Alas! Woe, woe!

LEADER Speak no proud words. Seest thou not to what woe thou art  
sunk?

AJAX (chanting) O Zeus, of my fathers the sire,  
Might I but kill that hateful and crafty dissembler,  
Yea, and those two brother kings, partners in pride,  
Then last myself too perish!

TECMESSA If thus thou prayest, pray therewith for me, that

Die with thee. Why, when thou art dead, should I live on?

AJAX (chanting) Alas!

Shadow that art my light!  
Erebus, oh to me verily bright as day!  
Receive, receive me your habitant.  
Receive me now no more worthy to seek help of the gods,  
Nor any more from fellow mortal men to claim kindness:  
No, but she the strong  
Zeus-born deity  
Miserably tortures me.  
Whither should I then flee?  
Whither seek for rest?  
Since my former glory is gone, my friends,  
With yonder victims, yonder spoils by frenzy won,  
Since all the host with swords uplifted  
Sternly would slay me,

TECMESSA Ah, woe is me! from such a noble warrior  
To hear such words as once he ne'er had deigned to speak!

AJAX (chanting) Alas!  
Billowy paths of foam,  
Eddying caves, and ye coppices by the shore,  
A weary, weary time tarrying here  
Beneath the walls of Troy me have you kept, but from this hour

Alive you shall not keep me. Truth I speak: let none doubt it.

O Scamander's wave,  
Stream whose neighbouring flow  
Oft have the Argives blest,  
Never, nevermore  
Me shall you behold,  
Me (a proud word will I utter now)  
Whose peer in battle Troy has never seen yet come  
From Hellas' land: but now dishonoured  
Thus am I prostrate.

LEADER In truth I know not how to restrain thy speech, nor yet

To suffer it; so grievous is thy couch of woe.

AJAX Aiai! Who ever would have thought my name  
Would harmonise so aptly with my woes?  
For now well may I wail that sound out twice,  
Yea thrice; such woeful destinies are mine,  
Whose father from this land of Ida won  
Fame's noblest guerdon over the whole host,

And crowned with praises only sailed back home;  
But I, his son, who to the self-same Troy  
Came after him, in might no less than he,  
Nor rendering meaner service by my deeds,  
Dishonoured by the Argives perish thus.  
Yet this methinks I know for truth, were now  
Achilles living and called on to adjudge  
As the award of valour his own arms,  
No man's hand would have grasped them before mine.  
But now the Atreidae to a scheming knave  
Have dealt them, thrusting by my valiant deeds.  
And if these eyes, these wits had not in frenzy  
Swerved from my purpose, never would they thus  
Pervert judgment against another man.  
But the irresistible fierce-eyed goddess, even  
As I was arming my right hand to slay them,  
Foiled me, smiting me with a maddening plague,  
So that I stained my hand butchering these cattle.  
Thus my foes mock me, escaped beyond my reach,  
Through no goodwill of mine: but if a god  
Thwart vengeance, even the base may escape the nobler.  
And what should I now do, who manifestly  
To Heaven am hateful; whom the Greeks abhor,  
Whom every Trojan hates, and this whole land?  
Shall I desert the beached ships, and abandoning  
The Atreidae, sail home o'er the Aegean sea?  
With what face shall I appear before my father  
Telamon? How will he find heart to look  
On me, stripped of my championship in war,  
That mighty crown of fame that once was his?  
No, that I dare not. Shall I then assault  
Troy's fortress, and alone against them all  
Achieve some glorious exploit and then die?  
No, I might gratify the Atreidae thus.  
That must not be. Some scheme let me devise  
Which may prove to my aged sire that I,  
His son, at least by nature am no coward.  
For 'tis base for a man to crave long life  
Who endures never-varying misery.  
What joy can be in day that follows day,  
Bringing us close then snatching us from death?  
As of no worth would I esteem that man  
Who warms himself with unsubstantial hopes.  
Nobly to live, or else nobly to die  
Befits proud birth. There is no more to say.

LEADER The word thou hast uttered, Ajax, none shall call

Bastard, but the true offspring of thy soul.  
Yet pause. Let those who love thee overrule  
Thy resolution. Put such thoughts aside.

TECMESSA O my lord Ajax, of all human ills  
Greatest is fortune's wayward tyranny.  
Of a free father was I born the child,  
One rich and great as any Phrygian else.  
Now am I a slave; for so the gods, or rather  
Thy warrior's hand, would have it. Therefore since  
I am thy bedfellow, I wish thee well,  
And I entreat thee by domestic Zeus,  
And by the embraces that have made me thine,  
Doom me not to the cruel taunts of those  
Who hate thee, left a bond-slave in strange hands.  
For shouldst thou perish and forsake me in death,  
That very day assuredly I to  
Shall be seized by the Argives, with thy son  
To endure henceforth the portion of a slave.  
Then one of my new masters with barbed words  
Shall wound me scoffing: "See the concubine  
Of Ajax, who was mightiest of the host,  
What servile tasks are hers who lived so daintily!"  
Thus will men speak, embittering my hard lot,  
But words of shame for thee and for thy race.  
Nay, piety forbid thee to forsake  
Thy father in his drear old age-thy mother  
With her sad weight of years, who many a time  
Prays to the gods that thou come home alive.  
And pity, O king, thy son, who without thee  
To foster his youth, must live the orphaned ward  
Of loveless guardians. Think how great a sorrow  
Dying thou wilt bequeath to him and me.  
For I have nothing left to look to more  
Save thee. By thy spear was my country ravaged;  
And by another stroke did fate lay low  
My mother and my sire to dwell with Hades.  
Without thee then what fatherland were mine?  
What wealth? On thee alone rests all my hope.  
O take thought for me too. Do we not owe  
Remembrance, where we have met with any joy?  
For kindness begets kindness evermore  
But he who from whose mind fades the memory  
Of benefits, noble is he no more.

LEADER Ajax, would that thy soul would feel compassion,

As mine does; so wouldst thou approve her words.

AJAX Verily my approval shall she win,  
If only she find heart to do my bidding.

TECMESSA Dear Ajax, in all things will I obey.

AJAX Then bring me here my son, for I would see him.

TECMESSA Nay, but I sent him from me in my fears.

AJAX During my late affliction, is that thy meaning?

TECMESSA Lest by ill chance he should meet thee and so perish.

AJAX Yes, that would have been worthy of my fate.

TECMESSA That at least I was watchful to avert.

AJAX I praise thine act and the foresight thou hast shown.

TECMESSA Since that is so, what shall I do to serve thee?

AJAX Let me speak to him and behold his face.

TECMESSA He is close by in the attendants' charge.

AJAX Why is his coming then so long delayed?

TECMESSA (calling) My son, thy father calls thee.-Bring him thither

Whichever of you is guiding the child's steps.

AJAX Is the man coming? Has he heard thy call?

TECMESSA See, he is here already with the child. (An attendant enters,  
leading the child, EURYSACES.)

AJAX Lift him up, lift him hither. He will not shrink  
In terror at sight of yonder new-spilt blood,  
If he be rightly mine, his father's son.  
Early must he be broken to his sire's  
Stern rugged code, and grow like-natured with him.

O son, mayst thou prove happier than thy father,  
In all else like him, and thou'lt prove not base.  
Yet even now might I envy thee herein,  
That of these woes thou hast no sense at all.  
For the life that is unconscious is most sweet-  
Until we learn what joy and sorrow are.  
But that once learnt, then midst thy father's foes  
Thou must show what thou art, and of what breed.  
Till then be nurtured on soft airs, cherishing  
Thy tender life, and be thy mother's joy.  
None of the Greeks, I know, will do thee wrong  
With cruel outrage, even though I be gone.  
So trusty a guardian will I leave thee, Teucer,  
Who will not stint his loving care, though now  
He is gone far away, in chase of foes.  
But you, my warriors, comrades in seafaring,  
On you too I impose this task of love;  
And fail not to announce my will to Teucer,  
That to my home he take the child and show him  
To Telamon and my mother Eriboea,  
That henceforth he may comfort their old age.  
And charge him that no game-steward make my arms  
A prize for the Greeks-nor he who ruined me.  
But this take thou, my son Eurysaces;  
Hold it and wield it by its firm-stitched thong,  
This sevenfold spear-proof shield, whence comes thy name.

But else with me my arms shall be interred. (Speaking now to TECMESSA)  
Come, take the child hence quickly, and bolt the doors:

And let there be no weeping and lamenting  
Before the hut. Women love tears too well.  
Close quickly. It is not for a skilful leech  
To drone charms o'er a wound that craves the knife.

LEADER I am fearful, listening to this eager mood.  
The sharp edge of thy tongue, I like it not.

TECMESSA O my lord Ajax, what art thou purposing?

AJAX Question me not. To be discreet is best.

TECMESSA Ah me, heavy is my heart. Now by thy child,  
By the gods, I entreat, forsake us not.

AJAX Vex me no further. Know'st thou not that I

To the gods owe no duty any more?

TECMESSA Utter no proud words.

AJAX Speak to those who listen.

TECMESSA Wilt thou not heed?

AJAX Too much thou hast spoken already.

TECMESSA Yes, through my fears, O king.

AJAX Close the doors quickly.

TECMESSA For the gods' love, relent.

AJAX 'Tis a foolish hope,  
If thou shouldst now propose to school my mood. (The doors are closed  
upon AJAX. TECMESSA goes out with EURYSACES.)

CHORUS (singing, strophe 1)

O famed Salamis, thou amidst  
Breaking surges abidest ever  
Blissful, a joy to the eyes of all men.  
But I the while long and wearily tarrying  
Through countless months still encamped on the fields of Ida

In misery here have made my couch,  
By time broken and worn,  
In dread waiting the hour  
When I shall enter at last the terrible shadow abode of Hades.

(antistrophe 1)

Now dismays me a new despair,  
This incurable frenzy (woe, ah  
Woe's me!) cast by the gods on Ajax,  
Whom thou of old sentest forth from thy shores, a strong

And valiant chief; but now, to his friends a sore grief,

Devouring his lonely heart he sits.  
His once glorious deeds  
Are now fallen and scorned,  
Fallen to death without love from the loveless and pitiless sons of

Atreus.

(strophe 2)

His mother, 'tis most like, burdened with many days,  
And whitened with old age, when she shall hear how frenzy

Has smitten his soul to ruin,  
Ailino! ailino!  
Will break forth her despair, not as the nightingale's  
Plaintive, tender lament, no, but in passion's wailing  
Shrill-toned cries; and with fierce strokes  
Wildly smiting her bosom,  
In grief's anguish her hands will rend her grey locks.

(antistrophe 2)

Yea, better Hell should hide one who is sick in soul,  
Though there be none than he sprung from a nobler lineage

Of the war-weary Greeks, yet  
Strayed from his inbred mood  
Now amidst alien thoughts dwells he a stranger.  
Hapless father! alas, bitter the tale that waits thee,  
Thy son's grievous affliction.  
No life save his alone  
Of Aeacid kings such a curse has ever haunted. (AJAX enters, carrying  
a sword. As he speaks, TECMESSA also enters.)

AJAX All things the long and countless lapse of time  
Brings forth. displays, then hides once more in gloom.  
Nought is too strange to look for; but the event  
May mock the sternest oath, the firmest will.  
Thus I, who late so strong, so stubborn seemed  
Like iron dipped, yet now grow soft with pity  
Before this woman, whom I am loath to leave  
Midst foes a widow with this orphaned child.  
But I will seek the meadows by the shore:  
There will I wash and purge these stains, if so  
I may appease Athena's heavy wrath.  
Then will I find some lonely place, where I  
May hide this sword, beyond all others cursed,  
Buried where none may see it, deep in earth.  
May night and Hades keep it there below.  
For from that hour my hand accepted it,  
The gift of Hector, deadliest of my foes,

Nought from the Greeks towards me hath sped well.  
So now I find that ancient proverb true,  
Foes' gifts are no gifts: profit bring they none.  
Therefore henceforth I study to obey  
The Gods, and reverence the sons of Atreus.  
Our rulers are they: we must yield. How else?  
For to authority yield all things most dread  
And mighty. Thus must Winter's snowy feet  
Give place to Summer with her wealth of fruits;  
And from her weary round doth Night withdraw,  
That Day's white steeds may kindle heaven with light.  
After fierce tempest calm will ever lull  
The moaning sea; and Sleep, that masters all,  
Binds life awhile, yet loosens soon the bond.  
And who am I that I should not learn wisdom?  
Of all men I, whom proof hath taught of late  
How so far only should we hate our foes  
As though we soon might love them, and so far  
Do a friend service, as to one most like  
Some day to prove our foe; since oftenest men  
In friendship but a faithless haven find.  
Thus well am I resolved. (To TECMESSA) Thou, woman, pass

Within, and pray the gods that all things so  
May be accomplished as my heart desires.  
And you, friends, heed my wishes as she doth;  
And when he comes, bid Teucer he must guard  
My rights at need, and withal stand your friend.  
For now I go whither I needs must pass.  
Do as I bid. Soon haply you shall hear,  
With me, for all this misery, 'tis most well. (AJAX departs. TECMESSA  
goes into the tent.)

CHORUS (singing, strophe)

I thrill with rapture, flutter on wings of ecstasy.  
Io, Io, Pan, Pan!  
O Pan, Pan! from the stony ridge,  
Snow-bestrewn of Cyllene's height  
Appear roving across the waters,  
O dance-ordering king of gods,  
That thou mayst join me in flinging free  
Fancy measures of Nysa and of Cnossus.  
Yea for the dance I now am eager.  
And over the far Icarian billows come, O king Apollo,  
From Delos in haste, come thou,

Thy kindly power here in our midst revealing.

(antistrophe)

Ares hath lifted horror and anguish from our eyes.  
Io, Io! Now again,  
Now, O Zeus, can the bright and blithe  
Glory of happier days return  
To our swift-voyaging ships, for now  
Hath Ajax wholly forgot his grief,  
And all rites due to the gods he now  
Fain would meetly perform with loyal worship.  
Mighty is time to dwindle all things.  
Nought would I call too strange for belief, when Ajax thus beyond  
hope  
Hath learnt to repent his proud feuds,  
And lay aside anger against the Atreidae. (A MESSENGER enters.)

MESSENGER My friends, these tidings I would tell you first:

Teucer is present, from the Mysian heights  
But now returned, and in the central camp  
By all the Greeks at once is being reviled.  
As he drew near they knew him from afar,  
Then gathering around him one and all  
With taunts assailed him from this side and that,  
Calling him kinsman of that maniac,  
That plotter against the host, saying that nought  
Should save him; stoned and mangled he must die.  
And so they had come to such a pitch that swords  
Plucked from their sheaths stood naked in men's hands.  
Yet when the strife ran highest, it was stayed  
By words from the elders and so reconciled.  
But where is Ajax? I must speak with him.  
He whom it most concerns must be told all.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS He is not within, but has just now gone forth

With a new purpose yoked to a new mood.

MESSENGER Alas! Alas!  
Then too late on this errand was I sped  
By him who sent me; or I have proved too slow.

LEADER What urgent need has been neglected here?

MESSENGER Teucer forbade that Ajax should go forth  
Outside his hut, till he himself should come.

LEADER Well, he is gone. To wisest purpose now  
His mind is turned, to appease heaven's wrath.

MESSENGER These words of thine are filled with utter folly,  
If there was truth in Calchas' prophecy.

LEADER What prophecy? And what know you of this thing?

MESSENGER Thus much I know, for by chance I was present.

Leaving the circle of consulting chiefs  
Where sat the Atreidae, Calchas went aside,  
And with kind purpose grasping Teucer's hand  
Enjoined him that by every artifice  
He should restrain Ajax within his tents  
This whole day, and not leave him to himself,  
If he wished ever to behold him alive.  
For on this day alone, such were his words,  
Would the wrath of divine Athena vex him.  
For the overweening and unprofitable  
Fall crushed by heaven-sent calamities  
(So the seer spoke), whene'er one born a man  
Has conceived thoughts too high for man's estate:  
And this man, when he first set forth from home,  
Showed himself foolish, when his father spoke to him  
Wisely: "My son, seek victory by the spear;  
But seek it always with the help of heaven."  
Then boastfully and witlessly he answered:  
"Father, with heaven's help a mere man of nought  
Might win victory: but I, albeit without  
Their aid, trust to achieve a victor's glory."  
Such was his proud vaunt. Then a second time  
Answering divine Athena, when she urged him  
To turn a slaughterous hand upon his foes,  
He gave voice to this dire, blasphemous boast:  
"Goddess, stand thou beside the other Greeks.  
Where I am stationed, no foe shall break through."  
By such words and such thoughts too great for man  
Did he provoke Athena's pitiless wrath.  
But if he lives through this one day, perchance,  
Should heaven be willing, we may save him yet.  
So spoke the seer; and Teucer from his seat

No sooner risen, sent me with this mandate  
For you to observe. But if we have been forestalled,  
That man lives not, or Calchas is no prophet.

LEADER (calling) Woful Tecmessa, woman born to sorrow,

Come forth and hear this man who tells of a peril  
That grazes us too close for our mind's ease. (TECMESSA enters from  
the tent.)

TECMESSA Why alas do you break my rest again  
After brief respite from relentless woes?

LEADER Give hearing to this messenger, who brings  
Tidings that grieve me of how Ajax fares.

TECMESSA Ah me, what sayest thou, man? Are we undone?

MESSENGER I know not of thy fortune; but for Ajax,  
If he be gone abroad, my mind misgives.

TECMESSA Yes, he is gone. I am racked to know thy meaning.

MESSENGER Teucer commands you to keep him within doors,  
And not to let him leave his tent alone.

TECMESSA And where is Teucer, and why speaks he thus?

MESSENGER He has but now returned, and he forebodes  
That this going-forth will prove fatal to Ajax.

TECMESSA Woe's me, alas! From whom has he learned this?

MESSENGER From the seer, Thestor's son, this very day,  
Which is fraught either with his death or life.

TECMESSA Ah me, my friends, avert this threatening doom

Speed some of you to hasten Teucer hither:  
Others go search the bays, some west, some east,  
And track my lord's ill-omened going-forth.  
Yes, now I know I have been deceived by him,  
And from his former favour quite cast out.  
Alas, child, what shall I do? Sit still I must not:  
But far as I have strength I too will go.

Let us start quickly-'tis no time for loitering,  
If we would save one who is in haste to die.

LEADER I am ready, as not words alone shall prove,  
But speed of act and foot to make words good. (The CHORUS, TECMESSA  
and MESSENGER go out. The scene changes to a lonely place by the sea-  
shore.

Bushes and under- brush are in the background. AJAX enters alone.)

AJAX The slayer stands so that his edge may cleave  
Most surely (if there be leisure for such thought),  
Being the gift of Hector, of all friends  
Most unloved, and most hateful to my sight.  
Then it is planted in Troy's hostile soil,  
New-sharpened on the iron-biting whet.  
And heedfully have I planted it, that so  
With a swift death it prove to me most kind.  
Thus have I made all ready. Next be thou  
The first, O Zeus, to aid me, as is right.  
It is no mighty boon that I shall crave.  
Send some announcer of the evil news  
To Teucer, that he first may lift me up,  
When I have fallen upon this reeking sword,  
Lest ere he come some enemy should espy me  
And cast me forth to dogs and birds a prey.  
This, O Zeus, I entreat thee, and likewise call  
On Hermes, guide to the underworld, to lay me  
Asleep without a struggle, at one swift bound,  
When I have thrust my heart through with this sword.  
Next I call on those maidens ever-living  
And ever watchful of all human miseries,  
The dread swift-striding Erinyes, that they mark  
How by the Atreidae I have been destroyed:  
And these vile men by a vile doom utterly  
May they cut off, even as they see me here.  
Come, O ye swift avenging Erinyes,  
Spare not, touch with affliction the whole host.  
And thou, whose chariot mounts up the steep sky,  
Thou Sun, when on the land where I was born  
Thou shalt look down, check thy gold-spangled rein,  
And announce my disasters and my doom  
To my aged sire and her who nurtured me.  
She, woful woman, when she hears these tidings  
Will wail out a loud dirge through all the town.  
But I waste labour with this idle moan.  
The act must now be done, and that with speed.

O Death, Death, come now and look upon me.-  
No, 'tis there I shall meet and speak to thee.  
But thee, bright daylight which I now behold,  
And Helios in his chariot I accost  
For this last time of all, and then no more.  
O sunlight! O thou hallowed soil, my own  
Salamis, stablished seat of my sire's hearth,  
And famous Athens, with thy kindred race,  
And you, ye springs and streams, and Trojan plains,  
Farewell, all ye who have sustained my life.  
This is the last word Ajax speaks to you.  
All else in Hades to the dead will I say. (He falls on his sword.  
His body lies partially concealed by the underbrush. SEMI-CHORUS 1  
enters.)

SEMI-CHORUS 1 (chanting) 'Tis toil on toil, and toil again.

Where! where!  
Where have not my footsteps been?  
And still no place reveals the secret of my search.  
But hark!  
There again I hear a sound. (SEMI-CHORUS 2 enters.)

SEMI-CHORUS 2 (chanting) 'Tis we, the ship-companions of your voyage.

SEMI-CHORUS 1 (chanting) Well how now?

SEMI-CHORUS 2 (chanting) We have searched the whole coast westward  
from the ship.

SEMI-CHORUS 1 (chanting) You have found nought?

SEMI-CHORUS 2 (chanting) A deal of toil, but nothing more to see.

SEMI-CHORUS 1 (chanting) Neither has he been found along the path  
That leads from the eastern glances of the sun.

CHORUS (singing, strophe)

From whom, oh from whom? what hard son of the waves,  
Plying his weary task without thought of sleep,  
Or what Olympian nymph of hill or stream that flows  
Down to the Bosphorus' shore,  
Might I have tidings of my lord  
Wandering somewhere seen

Fierce of mood? Grievous it is  
When I have toiled so long, and ranged far and wide  
Thus to fail, thus to have sought in vain.  
Still the afflicted hero nowhere may I find. (TECMESSA enters and  
discovers the body.)

TECMESSA Alas, woe, woe!

CHORUS (chanting) Whose cry was it that broke from yonder copse?

TECMESSA Alas, woe is me!

LEADER OF THE CHORUS It is the hapless spear-won bride I see,  
Tecmessa, steeped in that wail's agony.

TECMESSA I am lost, destroyed, made desolate, my friends.

LEADER What is it? Speak.

TECMESSA Ajax, our master, newly slaughtered lies  
Yonder, a hidden sword sheathed in his body.

CHORUS (chanting) Woe for my lost hopes of home!  
Woe's me, thou hast slain me, my king,  
Me thy shipmate, hapless man!  
Woful-souled woman too!

TECMESSA Since thus it is with him, 'tis mine to wail.

LEADER By whose hand has he wrought this luckless deed?

TECMESSA By his own hand, 'tis evident. This sword  
Whereon he fell, planted in earth, convicts him.

CHORUS (chanting) Woe for my blind folly! Lone in thy blood thou  
liest, from friends' help afar.  
And I the wholly witless, the all unwary,  
Forbore to watch thee. Where, where  
Lieth the fatally named, intractable Ajax?

TECMESSA None must behold him. I will shroud him wholly

In this enfolding mantle; for no man  
Who loved him could endure to see him thus  
Through nostrils and through red gash spouting up

The darkened blood from his self-stricken wound.  
Ah me, what shall I do? What friend shall lift thee?  
Where is Teucer? Timely indeed would he now come,  
To compose duly his slain brother's corpse.  
O hapless Ajax, who wast once so great,  
Now even thy foes might dare to mourn thy fall.

CHORUS (chanting, antistrophe)

'Twas fate's will, alas, 'twas fate then for thou  
Stubborn of soul at length to work out a dark  
Doom of ineffable miseries. Such the dire  
Fury of passionate hate  
I heard thee utter fierce of mood  
Railing at Atreus' sons  
Night by night, day by day.  
Verily then it was the sequence of woes  
First began, when as the prize of worth  
Fatally was proclaimed the golden panoply.

TECMESSA Alas, woe, woe!

CHORUS (chanting) A loyal grief pierces thy heart, I know.

TECMESSA Alas, woe, woe!

CHORUS (chanting) Woman, I marvel not that thou shouldst wail

And wail again, reft of a friend so dear.

TECMESSA 'Tis thine to surmise, mine to feel, too surely.

CHORUS (chanting) 'Tis even so.

TECMESSA Ah, my child, to what bondage are we come,  
Seeing what cruel taskmasters will be ours.

CHORUS (chanting) Ah me, at what dost thou hint?  
What ruthless, unspeakable wrong  
From the Atreidae fearest thou?  
But may heaven avert that woe!

TECMESSA Ne'er had it come to this save by heaven's will.

CHORUS (chanting) Yes, too great to be borne this heaven-sent burden.

TECMESSA Yet such the woe which the dread child of Zeus,  
Pallas, has gendered for Odysseus' sake.

CHORUS (chanting) Doubtless the much-enduring hero in his dark spy's  
soul exults mockingly,  
And laughs with mighty laughter at these agonies  
Of a frenzied spirit. Shame! Shame!  
Sharers in glee at the tale are the royal Atreidae.

TECMESSA Well, let them mock and glory in his ruin.  
Perchance, though while he lived they wished not for him,  
They yet shall wail him dead, when the spear fails them.

Men of ill judgment oft ignore the good  
That lies within their hands, till they have lost it.  
More to their grief he died than to their joy,  
And to his own content. All his desire  
He now has won, that death for which he longed.  
Why then should they deride him? 'Tis the gods  
Must answer for his death, not these men, no.  
Then let Odysseus mock him with empty taunts.  
Ajax is no more with them; but has gone,  
Leaving to me despair and lamentation.

TEUCER (from without) Alas, woe, woe!

LEADER OF THE CHORUS Keep silence! Is it Teucer's voice I hear  
Lifting a dirge over this tragic sight? (TEUCER enters.)

TEUCER O brother Ajax, to mine eyes most dear,  
Can it be thou hast fared as rumour tells?

LEADER Yes, he is dead, Teucer: of that be sure.

TEUCER Alas, how then can I endure my fate!

LEADER Since thus it is...

TEUCER O wretched, wretched me!

LEADER Thou hast cause to moan.

TEUCER O swift and cruel woe!

LEADER Too cruel, Teucer!

TEUCER Woe is me! But say-  
His child-where shall I find him? Tell me where.

LEADER Alone within the tent.

TEUCER (to TECMESSA) Then with all speed  
Go, bring him thither, lest some foe should snatch him  
Like a whelp from a lioness bereaved.  
Away! See it done quickly! All men are wont  
To insult over the dead, once they lie low. (TECMESSA departs.)

LEADER Yes, Teucer, while he lived, did he not charge thee  
To guard his son from harm, as now thou dost?

TEUCER O sight most grievous to me of all sights  
That ever I have looked on with my eyes!  
And hatefullest of all paths to my soul  
This path that now has led me to thy side,  
O dearest Ajax, when I heard thy fate,  
While seeking thee I tracked thy footsteps out.  
For a swift rumour, as from some god, ran  
Through the Greek host that thou wast dead and gone.  
While yet far off I heard it, and groaned deep  
In anguish; now I see, and my life dies.  
Ay me!  
Uncover. Let me behold woe's very worst. (The cover is lifted from  
the body.) O ghastly sight! victim of ruthless courage!

What miseries hast thou dying sown for me!  
Whither, among what people, shall I go,  
Who in thy troubles failed to give thee succour?  
Oh doubtless Telamon, thy sire and mine,  
With kind and gracious face is like to greet me,  
Returned without thee: how else?-he who is wont  
Even at good news to smile none the sweeter.  
What will he keep back? What taunt not hurl forth  
Against the bastard of a spear-won slave,  
Him who through craven cowardice betrayed  
Thee, beloved Ajax-or by guile, that so  
I might inherit thy kingdom and thy house.  
So will he speak, a passionate man, grown peevish  
In old age, quick to wrath without a cause.

Then shall I be cast off, a banished man,  
Proclaimed no more a freeman but a slave.  
Such is the home that waits me; while at Troy  
My foes are many, my well-wishers few.  
All this will be my portion through thy death.  
Ah me, what shall I do? How draw thee, brother,  
From this fell sword, on whose bright murderous point  
Thou hast breathed out thy soul? See how at last  
Hector, though dead, was fated to destroy thee!  
Consider, I pray, the doom of these two men.  
Hector, with that same girdle Ajax gave him  
Was lashed fast to Achilles' chariot rail  
And mangled till he had gasped forth his life.  
And 'twas from him that Ajax had this gift,  
The blade by which he perished and lies dead.  
Was it not some Erinys forged this sword,  
And Hades the grim craftsman wrought that girdle?  
I at least would maintain that the gods plan  
These things and all things ever for mankind.  
But whosoever's judgment likes not this,  
Let him uphold his doctrine as I mine.

LEADER Speak no more, but take counsel how to inter  
Our dear lord, and what now it were best to say:  
For 'tis a foe I see. Perchance he comes  
To mock our misery, villain that he is.

TEUCER What chieftain of the host do you behold?

LEADER Menelaus, for whose sake we voyaged hither.

TEUCER 'Tis he. I know him well, now he is near. (MENE LAUS enters  
with his retinue.)

MENE LAUS You, Sir, I warn you, raise not yonder corpse  
For burial, but leave it as it lies.

TEUCER For what cause do you waste such swelling words?

MENE LAUS 'Tis my will, and his will who rules the host.

TEUCER Let us know then what pretext you allege.

MENE LAUS We hoped that we had brought this man from home

To be a friend and champion for the Greeks:

But a worse than Phrygian foe on trial we found him.  
Devising death for the whole host, by night  
He sallied forth against us, armed for slaughter.  
And had not some god baffled this exploit,  
Ours would have been the lot which now is his:  
While we lay slain by a most shameful doom,  
He would have still been living. But his outrage,  
Foiled by a god, has fallen on sheep and herds.  
Wherefore there lives no man so powerful  
That he shall lay this corpse beneath a tomb;  
But cast forth somewhere upon the yellow sands  
It shall become food for the sea-shore birds.  
Then lift not up your voice in threatening fury.  
If while he lived we could not master him,  
Yet in death will we rule him, in your despite,  
Guiding him with our hands, since in his life  
At no time would he hearken to my words.  
Yet 'tis a sign of wickedness, when a subject  
Deigns not to obey those placed in power above him.  
For never can the laws be prosperously  
Stablished in cities where awe is not found;  
Nor may a camp be providently ruled  
Without the shield of dread and reverence.  
Yea, though a man be grown to mighty bulk,  
Let him look lest some slight mischance o'erthrow him.  
He with whom awe and reverence abide,  
Doubt not, will flourish in security.  
But where outrage and licence are not checked,  
Be sure that state, though sped by prosperous winds,  
Some day at last will founder in deep seas.  
Yes, fear should be established in due season.  
Dream not that we can act as we desire,  
Yet avoid payment of the price in pain.  
Well, fortune goes by turns. This man was fiery  
And insolent once: 'tis mine now to exult.  
I charge thee, bury him not, lest by that act  
Thou thyself shouldst be digging thine own grave,

LEADER Menelaus, do not first lay down wise precepts,  
Then thyself offer outrage to the dead.

TEUCER (to the CHORUS) Never, friends, shall I marvel any more,

If one of low birth acts injuriously,  
When they who are accounted nobly born  
Can utter such injurious calumnies. (To MENELAUS) Come, once more

speak. You say you brought him hither?  
Took him to be a champion of the Greeks?  
Did he not sail as his own master, freely?  
How are you his chieftain? How have you the right  
To lord it o'er the folk he brought from home?  
As Sparta's lord you came, not as our master.  
In no way was it your prerogative  
To rule him, any more than he could you.  
As vassal of others you sailed hither, not  
As captain of us all, still less of Ajax.  
Go, rule those whom you may rule: chastise them  
With proud words. But this man, though you forbid me,  
Aye, and your fellow-captain, by just right  
Will I lay in his grave, scorning your threats.  
It was not for the sake of your lost wife  
He came to Troy, like your toil-broken serfs,  
But for the sake of oaths that he had sworn,  
Not for yours. What cared he for nobodies?  
Then come again and bring more heralds hither,  
And the captain of the host. For such as you  
I would not turn my head, for all your bluster.

LEADER Such speech I like not, either, in peril's midst:

For harsh words rankle, be they ne'er so just.

MENELAUS This Bowman, it seems, has pride enough to spare.

TEUCER Yes, 'tis no mean craft I have made my own.

MENELAUS How big would be your boasts, had you a shield!

TEUCER Shieldless, I would outmatch you panoplied.

MENELAUS How terrible a courage dwells within your tongue!

TEUCER He may be bold of heart whose side right favours.

MENELAUS Is it right that my assassin should be honoured?

TEUCER Assassin? How strange, if, though slain, you live!

MENELAUS Heaven saved me: I was slain in his intent.

TEUCER Do not dishonour then the gods who saved you.

MENELAUS What, I rebel against the laws of heaven?

TEUCER,

Yes, if you come to rob the dead of burial.

MENELAUS My own foes! How could I endure such wrong?

TEUCER Did Ajax ever confront you as your foe?

MENELAUS He loathed me, and I him, as well you know.

TEUCER Because to defraud him you intrigued for votes.

MENELAUS It was the judges cast him, and not I.

TEUCER Much secret villainy you could make seem fair.

MENELAUS That saying will bring someone into trouble.

TEUCER Not greater trouble than we mean to inflict.

MENELAUS My one last word: this man must not have burial.

TEUCER Then hear my answer: burial he shall have.

MENELAUS Once did I see a fellow bold of tongue,  
Who had urged a crew to sail in time of storm;  
Yet no voice had you found in him, when winds  
Began to blow; but hidden beneath his cloak  
The mariners might trample on him at will.  
And so with you and your fierce railleries,  
Perchance a great storm, though from a little cloud  
Its breath proceed, shall quench your blatant outcry.

TEUCER And I once saw a fellow filled with folly,  
Who gloried scornfully in his neighbour's woes.  
So it came to pass that someone like myself,  
And of like mood, beholding him spoke thus.  
"Man, act not wickedly towards the dead;  
Or, if thou dost, be sure that thou wilt rue it."  
Thus did he monish that infatuate man.  
And lo! yonder I see him; and as I think,  
He is none else but thou. Do I speak riddles?

MENELAUS I go. It were disgrace should any know  
I had fallen to chiding where I might chastise.

TEUCER Begone then. For to me 'twere worst disgrace  
That I should listen to a fool's idle blustering. (MENE LAUS and his  
retinue depart.)

CHORUS (chanting) Soon mighty and fell will the strife be begun.

But speedily now, Teucer, I pray thee,  
Seek some fit place for his hollow grave,  
Which men's memories evermore shall praise,  
As he lies there mouldering at rest. (TECMESSA enters with EURYSACES.)

TEUCER Look yonder, where the child and wife of Ajax  
Are hastening hither in good time to tend  
The funeral rites of his unhappy corpse.  
My child, come hither. Stand near and lay thy hand  
As a suppliant on thy father who begat thee.  
And kneel imploringly with locks of hair  
Held in thy hand-mine, and hers, and last thine-  
The suppliant's treasure. But if any Greek  
By violence should tear thee from this corpse,  
For that crime from the land may he be cast  
Unburied, and his whole race from the root  
Cut off, even as I sever this lock.  
There, take it, boy, and keep it. Let none seek  
To move thee; but still kneel there and cling fast.  
And you, like men, no women, by his side  
Stand and defend him till I come again,  
When I have dug his grave, though all forbid. (TEUCER goes out.)

CHORUS (singing, strophe 1)

When will this agony draw to a close?  
When will it cease, the last of our years of exile?  
Years that bring me labour accursed of hurtling spears,  
Woe that hath no respite or end,  
But wide-spread over the plains of Troy  
Works sorrow and shame for Hellas' sons.

(antistrophe 1)

Would he had vanished away from the earth,  
Rapt to the skies, or sunk to devouring Hades,  
He who first revealed to the Greeks the use of arms  
Leagued in fierce confederate war!  
Ah, toils eternally breeding toils!  
Yea, he was the fiend who wrought man's ruin.

(strophe 2)

The wretch accurst, what were his gifts?  
Neither the glad, festival wreath,  
Nor the divine, mirth-giving wine-cup;  
No music of flutes, soothing and sweet:  
Slumber by night, blissful and calm,  
None he bequeathed us.  
And love's joys, alas! love did he banish from me.  
Here couching alone neglected,  
With hair by unceasing dews drenched evermore, we curse  
Thy shores, O cruel Ilium.

(antistrophe 2)

Erewhile against terror by night, javelin or sword, firm was our  
trust:  
He was our shield, valiant Ajax.  
But now a malign demon of fate  
Claims him. Alas! When, when again  
Shall joy befall me?  
Oh once more to stand, where on the wooded headland  
The ocean is breaking, under  
The shadow of Sunium's height; thence could I greet from far

The divine city of Athens. (TEUCER enters, followed by AGAMEMNON  
and his retinue.)

TEUCER In haste I come; for the captain of the host,  
Agamemnon, I have seen hurrying hither.  
To a perverse tongue now will he give rein.

AGAMEMNON Is it you, they tell me, have dared to stretch your lips

In savage raillery against us, unpunished?  
'Tis you I mean, the captive woman's son.  
Verily of well-born mother had you been bred,  
Superb had been your boasts and high your strut,  
Since you, being nought, have championed one who is nought,

Vowing that no authority is ours  
By sea or land to rule the Greeks or you.  
Are not these monstrous taunts to hear from slaves?  
What was this man whose praise you vaunt so loudly?  
Whither went he, or where stood he, where I was not?

Among the Greeks are there no men but he?  
In evil hour, it seems, did we proclaim  
The contest for Achilles' panoply,  
If come what may Teucer is to call us knaves,  
And if you never will consent, though worsted,  
To accept the award that seemed just to most judges,  
But either must keep pelting us with foul words,  
Or stab us craftily in your rage at losing.  
Where such discords are customary, never  
Could any law be established and maintained,  
If we should thrust the rightful winners by,  
And bring the rearmost to the foremost place.  
But such wrong must be checked. 'Tis not the big  
Broad-shouldered men on whom we most rely;  
No, 'tis the wise who are masters everywhere.  
An ox, however large of rib, may yet  
Be kept straight on the road by a little whip.  
And this corrective, I perceive, will soon  
Descend on you, unless you acquire some wisdom,  
Who, though this man is dead, a mere shade now,  
Can wag your insolent lips so freely and boldly.  
Come to your senses: think what you are by birth.  
Bring hither someone else, a man born free,  
Who in your stead may plead your cause before us.  
For when you speak, the sense escapes me quite:  
I comprehend not your barbarian tongue.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS Would that you both might learn wisdom and temperance.

There is no better counsel I can give you.

TEUCER Alas! how soon gratitude to the dead  
Proves treacherous and vanishes from men's minds,  
If for thee, Ajax, this man has no more  
The least word of remembrance, he for whom oft  
Toiling in battle thou didst risk thy life.  
But all that is forgotten and flung aside.  
Thou who but now wast uttering so much folly,  
Hast thou no memory left, how in that hour  
When, pent within your lines, you were already  
No more than men of nought, routed in battle,  
He alone stood forth to save you, while the flames  
Were blazing round the stern-decks of the ships  
Already, and while Hector, leaping high  
Across the trench, charged down upon the hulls?

Who checked this ruin? Was it not he, who nowhere  
So much as stood beside thee, so thou sayest?  
Would you deny he acted nobly there?  
Or when again chosen by lot, unbidden,  
Alone in single combat he met Hector?  
For no runaway's lot did he cast in,  
No lump of clammy earth, but such that first  
It should leap lightly from the crested helm?  
His were these exploits; and beside him stood  
I the slave, the barbarian mother's son.  
Wretch, with what face can you fling forth such taunts?  
Know you not that of old your father's father  
Was Pelops, a barbarian, and a Phrygian?  
That your sire Atreus set before his brother  
A feast most impious of his own children's flesh?  
And from a Cretan mother you were born,  
Whom when her father found her with a paramour,  
He doomed her for dumb fishes to devour.  
Being such, do you reproach me with my lineage?  
Telamon is the father who begat me,  
Who, as the foremost champion of the Greeks,  
Won as his bride my mother, a princess  
By birth, Laomedon's daughter: a chosen spoil  
She had been given him by Alcmena's son.  
Thus of two noble parents nobly born,  
How should I shame one of my blood, whom now,  
Laid low by such calamity, you would thrust  
Unburied forth, and feel no shame to say it?  
But of this be sure: wheresoever you may cast him,  
Us three also with him will you cast forth.  
For it beseems me in his cause to die  
In sight of all, rather than for the sake  
Of your wife-or your brother's should I say?  
Look then not to my interest, but your own.  
For if you assail me, you shall soon wish rather  
To have been a coward than too bold against me. (ODYSSEUS enters.)

LEADER In good time, King Odysseus, hast thou come,  
If 'tis thy purpose not to embroil but reconcile.

ODYSSEUS What is it, friends? Far off I heard high words

From the Atreidae over this hero's corpse.

AGAMEMNON Royal Odysseus, but now from this man  
We have been listening to most shameful taunts.

ODYSSEUS How shameful? I could find excuse for one  
Who, when reviled, retorts with bitter words.

AGAMEMNON Yes, I repaid his vile deeds with reviling.

ODYSSEUS What has he done thee whereby thou art wronged?

AGAMEMNON He says he will not leave yon corpse unhonoured  
By sepulture, but will bury it in my spite.

ODYSSEUS May now a friend speak out the truth, yet still  
As ever ply his oar in stroke with thine?

AGAMEMNON Speak: I should be witless else; for thee  
Of all the Greeks I count the greatest friend.

ODYSSEUS Then listen. For the gods' sake venture not  
Thus ruthlessly to cast forth this man unburied:  
And in no wise let violence compel thee  
To such deep hate that thou shouldst tread down justice.

Once for me too this man was my worst foe,  
From that hour when I won Achilles' arms;  
Yet, though he was such towards me, I would not so  
Repay him with dishonour as to deny  
That of all Greeks who came to Troy, no hero  
So valiant save Achilles have I seen.  
So it is not just thou shouldst dishonour him.  
Not him wouldst thou be wronging, but the laws  
Of heaven. It is not righteousness to outrage  
A brave man dead, not even though thou hate him.

AGAMEMNON Thou, Odysseus, champion him thus against me?

ODYSSEUS Yes; but I hated him while hate was honourable.

AGAMEMNON Shouldst thou not also trample on him when dead?

ODYSSEUS Atreides, glory not in dishonouring triumphs.

AGAMEMNON 'Tis hard for a king to act with piety.

ODYSSEUS Yet not hard to respect a friend's wise counsel.

AGAMEMNON A good man should obey those who bear rule.

ODYSSEUS Relent. 'Tis no defeat to yield to friends.

AGAMEMNON Reflect who it is to whom thou dost this grace.

ODYSSEUS This man was once my foe, yet was he noble.

AGAMEMNON Can it be thou wilt reverence a dead foe?

ODYSSEUS His worth with me far outweighs enmity.

AGAMEMNON Unstable of impulse are such men as thou.

ODYSSEUS Many are friends now and hereafter foes.

AGAMEMNON Do you then praise such friends as worth the winning?

ODYSSEUS I am not wont to praise a stubborn soul.

AGAMEMNON Cowards you would have us show ourselves this day.

ODYSSEUS Not so, but just men before all the Greeks.

AGAMEMNON You bid me then permit these funeral rites?

ODYSSEUS Even so: for I myself shall come to this.

AGAMEMNON Alike in all things each works for himself.

ODYSSEUS And for whom should I work, if not myself?

AGAMEMNON Let it be known then as your doing, not mine.

ODYSSEUS So be it. At least you will have acted nobly.

AGAMEMNON Nay, but of this be certain, that to thee  
Willingly would I grant a greater boon.  
Yet he, in that world as in this, shall be  
Most hateful to me. But act as you deem fit. (AGAMEMNON and his retinue  
go out.)

LEADER After such proof, Odysseus, a fool only  
Could say that inborn wisdom was not thine.

ODYSSEUS Let Teucer know that I shall be henceforth  
His friend, no less than I was once his foe.  
And I will join in burying this dead man,  
And share in all due rites, omitting none  
Which mortal men to noblest heroes owe.

TEUCER Noble Odysseus, for thy words I praise thee  
Without stint. Wholly hast thou belied my fears.  
Thou, his worst foe among the Greeks, hast yet  
Alone stood by him staunchly, nor thought fit  
To glory and exult over the dead,  
Like that chief crazed with arrogance, who came,  
He and his brother, hoping to cast forth  
The dead man shamefully without burial.  
May therefore the supreme Olympian Father,  
The remembering Fury and fulfilling Justice  
Destroy these vile men vilely, even as they  
Sought to cast forth this hero unjustly outraged.  
But pardon me, thou son of old Laertes,  
That I must scruple to allow thine aid  
In these rites, lest I so displease the dead.  
In all else share our toil; and wouldst thou bring  
Any man from the host, we grudge thee not.  
What else remains, I will provide. And know  
That thou towards us hast acted generously.

ODYSSEUS It was my wish. But if my help herein  
Pleases you not, so be it, I depart. (ODYSSEUS goes out.)

TEUCER 'Tis enough. Too long is the time we have wasted

In talk. Haste some with spades to the grave:  
Speedily hollow it. Some set the cauldron  
On high amid wreathing flames ready filled  
For pious ablution.  
Then a third band go, fetch forth from the tent  
All the armour he once wore under his shield.  
Thou too, child, lovingly lay thy hand  
On thy father's corpse, and with all thy strength  
Help me to lift him: for the dark blood-tide  
Still upward is streaming warm through the arteries.  
All then who openly now would appear  
Friends to the dead, come, hasten forwards.  
To our valiant lord this labour is due.  
We have served none nobler among men.

CHORUS (chanting) Unto him who has seen may manifold knowledge

Come; but before he sees, no man  
May divine what destiny awaits him.

THE END