



AJAX

SOPHOCLES

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translated by
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ARGUMENT

The arms of Achilles, claimed by Ajax as the bravest warrior in the host, were through intrigue given to Odysseus, and Ajax vows vengeance both on the winner and on the awarders of the prize. But Athena, his patron goddess, whom his arrogance has estranged, sends him a delusion so that he mistakes for his foes the sheep and cattle of the Greeks. Athena, when the play opens, is discovered conversing with Odysseus outside the tent of Ajax; she will show him his mad foe mauling the beasts within. The mad fit passes and Ajax bewails his insensate folly and declares that death alone can wipe out the shame. His wife Tecmessa and the Chorus try to dissuade him, but he will not be comforted and calls for his son Eurysaces. The child is brought, and after leaving his last injunctions for his brother Teucer, Ajax takes a tender farewell. He then fetches his sword from the tent and goes forth declaring that he will purge himself of his stains and bury his sword. Presently a Messenger from the camp announces that Teucer has returned from his foray and has learnt from Calchas, the seer, that if only Ajax can be kept within the camp for that day all may yet be well. The Chorus and Tecmessa set forth in quest of Ajax, and Tecmessa discovers him lying transfixed by his sword. Teucer finds the mourners gathered round the corpse and is preparing to bury him, when Menelaus hurries up to forbid the burial. After an angry wrangle with Teucer, Menelaus departs, but is succeeded by Agamemnon, who enforces his brother's veto and is hardly persuaded by Odysseus to relent. Ajax is carried by his Salaminians to his grave, a grave (so they prophesy) that shall be famous for all time.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Athena

Odysseus, King of Ithaca

Ajax, son of Telamon and Euboea, leader of the men of Salamis

Tecmessa, his captive wife, daughter of Teleutas, King of Phrygia

Eurysaces, their infant son

Treucer, son of Telamon by Hesione

Menelaus, King of Sparta

Agamemnon, his brother, captain of the host

Messenger, one of Ajax's men

Chorus, mariners of Salamis

Scene: The shore on the Northern coast of the Troad before the tent of
Ajax. Time: Early morning.

AJAX

*(Enter ODYSSEUS, scanning recent footprints in the sand;
ATHENA, invisible to ODYSSEUS, is seen by the spectators
above the stage in the air.)*

ATHENA Son of Laertes, ever on the prowl
 To seize some coign of vantage 'gainst thy foes,
 Now at the tent of Ajax by the ships,
 Where he is posted on the flank, I see thee
 Following the trail and scanning his fresh tracks,
 To learn if Ajax be within or no.
 Bravely thy long search brings thee to the goal,
 Like a keen-scented hound of Spartan breed;
 The man has even now returned, his brow
 Bedewed with sweat and hands besmeared with gore.
 No further need to peer within these doors;
 Say rather what the purpose of thy search
 Thus keenly urged, and learn from one who knows.

ODYSSEUS Voice of Athena, Goddess most by me
 Beloved, how clearly, though I see thee not,
 Those accents strike my ear and thrill my soul,
 Like some Tyrrhenian trumpet, brazen-mouthed.
 Yea, thou hast well divined why thus I cast
 About in hot pursuance of a foe,
 Ajax, the bearer of the sevenfold shield:
 Him and none other I have tracked full long.
 Last night a monstrous thing he wrought on us,
 If it be he in sooth—'tis all surmise.
 So for the hard task of discovery
 I volunteered. This very morn we found
 Our herds, the spoil of war, all hacked and hewn,
 Slain with their herdsmen by some human hand.

On him with one consent all lay the guilt:
And by a scout who marked him o'er the plain,
In mad career, alone, with reeking sword,
I duly was informed, and instantly
I sped upon the spoor, and now the tracks
I recognise, and now am all at fault,
Without a clue to tell me whose they are.
Most welcome then thy advent; thine the hand
That ever guided and shall guide my path.

ATHENA I know, Odysseus, and set forth betimes
To meet thee and abet thee in this chase.

ODYSSEUS Tell me, dear mistress, will my quest succeed?

ATHENA Know that the guilty man is he thou seek'st.

ODYSSEUS What moved him to this rash, insensate deed?

ATHENA Resentment touching dead Achilles' arms.

ODYSSEUS Why did he fall upon the innocent sheep?

ATHENA He thought his hands were gory with *your* blood.

ODYSSEUS What, was this onslaught planned against the Greeks?

ATHENA Aye, and it had succeeded, but for me.

ODYSSEUS How could he venture such fool-hardiness?

ATHENA He schemed a night attack, by stealth, alone.

ODYSSEUS And did he reach us and arrive his goal?

ATHENA At the tent door of the two chiefs he stood.

ODYSSEUS What then arrested him athirst for blood?

ATHENA I, by the strong delusion that I sent,
A vision of the havoc he should make.
I turned his wrath aside upon the flocks

And the promiscuous cattle in the charge
Of drovers, booty not apportioned yet.
On them he fell and hewing right and left
Dealt death among the hornèd herd; and now
It was the two Atridae whom he slew,
And now a third, and now some other chief.
'Twas I that goaded him while thus distraught,
And thrust him deeper in the coils of fate.
Then pausing in this toil he turned to bind
The oxen left alive with all the sheep,
And drave them home, as if his spoil were men,
And not poor innocent beasts with hoofs and horns,
And now is mangling them fast bound within,
Thou too this raving madness shalt behold,
That thou mayst bruit the sight to all the Greeks.
Be of good heart and stand thy ground; no harm
Shall come from him, for I will turn aside
His vision, lest he should behold thy face.

(To AJAX within the tent.)

Ho, thou that bind'st with cords behind their backs
Thy captives' hands, ho Ajax, hear'st thou not?
I summon thee to come before the tent.

ODYSSEUS What dost thou, Goddess? Nowise call him forth.

ATHENA Bridle thy tongue; earn not a coward's name.

ODYSSEUS Nay, nay; suffice it that he bide within.

ATHENA What fear'st thou? Is he not, as erst, a man?

ODYSSEUS Yea, and to me sworn foeman, and is still.

ATHENA What mockery sweeter than to mock at foes?

ODYSSEUS Enough for me that he abide within.

ATHENA What, fear to see a madman face to face?

ODYSSEUS I had not quailed to face him, were he sane.

ATHENA Insane, he shall not see thee now, though near.

ODYSSEUS If he has eyes as erst, how can that be?

ATHENA I will obscure his vision, howe'er clear.

ODYSSEUS Well, when a god works, all is possible.

ATHENA Peace! stand thy ground and budge not from the spot.

ODYSSEUS So will I—yet had liefer been far hence.

ATHENA (*To AJAX.*)
Ho, Ajax! once again I summon thee.
Say, why this scant regard for thine ally?

(*Enter AJAX.*)

AJAX Hail O Athena, Zeus-born maiden, hail!
Thine aid how opportune! for this I'll crown
Thy shrine with votive spoils of purest gold.

ATHENA Fair words; but tell me, hast thou well imbrued
Thy sword with carnage of the Argive host?

AJAX A glorious deed that I will not disclaim.

ATHENA Haply thou has assailed the Atridae too?

AJAX So that they ne'er will outrage Ajax more.

ATHENA If I interpret rightly, they are dead.

AJAX Both dead; now let them cheat me of my arms!

ATHENA Good; and how fares it with Laertes' son?
How hast thou left him? or has he escaped?

AJAX He! That sly fox—wouldst know what's come of him?

ATHENA Of him—Odysseus, thy antagonist.

AJAX A welcome guest he sits within, fast bound.
 I have no mind that he should die as yet.

ATHENA What would'st thou first? what further profit win?

AJAX I'll bind him to a pillar of my tent.

ATHENA What vengeance wilt thou wreak on the poor wretch?

AJAX Flay with my scourge his back before he die.

ATHENA O torture not the wretch so savagely.

AJAX In all but this, Athena, have thy will;
 This and none else, must be his punishment.

ATHENA Well, since it is thy pleasure, be it so:
 Lay on, abate no jot of thine intent.

AJAX I will to work then, and I look to thee
 To be my true ally all times, as now. (*Exit AJAX.*)

ATHENA Odysseus, see how great the might of gods.
 Couldst thou have found a man more circumspect,
 Or one more prompt for all emergencies?

ODYSSEUS I know none such, and though he be my foe,
 I still must pity him in his distress,
 Bound, hand and foot, to fatal destiny;
 And therein mind my case no less than his.
 Alas! we living mortals, what are we
 But phantoms all or unsubstantial shades?

ATHENA Warned by these sights, Odysseus, see that thou
 Utter no boastful word against the gods,
 Nor swell with pride if haply might of arm
 Exalt thee o'er thy fellows, or vast wealth.
 A day can prostrate and a day upraise
 All that is mortal; but the gods approve

Sobriety and frowardness abhor. (*Exeunt* ATHENA *and*
ODYSSEUS. *Enter* CHORUS.)

CHORUS Son of Telamon, thou whose isle,
Sea-girt Salamis, doth smile
O'er the surge, thy joys I share
When thy fortunes promise fair;
But if stroke of Zeus assail,
Or the slanderous tongues prevail
Of the Danaï, to blast
Thy repute, I cower aghast,
Like a dove with quivering eye.
For of yesternight there fly
Bitter complaints and loud-voiced blame
Crowding on us to our shame—
How thou speddest o'er the meads
Rich in troops of unbacked steeds,
And with flashing sword didst slay
All the yet unparted prey
Of the Greeks, in foray ta'en,
Spoiling all their hard earned gain.
Such the scandal, as we hear,
Odysseus breathes in every ear;
And he wins belief, for now
Thou dost seem thy guilt to avow,
And the rumour spreads and swells.
Even more than he who tells,
Every hearer takes delight
In thy woes, for envious spite.
So it falls; the noblest heart
Is a target for each dart;
Aimed at me such shafts would fail:
Envy doth the great assail.
Yet without the great the small
Ill could guard the city wall;
Leagued together small and great
Best defend the common state.
Fools this precept will not heed,
And these men are fools indeed
Who against thee rail; and we

Can do nothing without thee,
To confound their charge, O King.
Like to birds they flap the wing,
And chatter, when they 'scape thine eye;
But if hovering in the sky
The great vulture should appear,
Mute they cower in sudden fear.

(Strophe)

Was it the Tauric Artemis, Jove's daughter,
(O dread report, begetter of my shame!)
Drave thee the flocks, our common stock, to slaughter?
Didst thou in victory rob her of her claim
To tithe of spoil, her part,
When to thy bow there fell some noble hart?
Or did the mail-clad God of War resent
Thy negligence thank-offering to pay?
By him at night was the delusion sent
That led astray?

(Antistrophe)

Ne'er wouldst thou, Ajax, of thine own intent
Have wrought this havoc and the cattle slain.
Such frenzy comes from Heaven in punishment.
(Zeus and Apollo prove the rumour vain!)
And if the great chiefs falsely charge thee, King,
Spreading foul scandal, or the accursed race
Of Sisyphus,¹ let not this ill fame cling
To us thy friends; no longer hide thy face,
Quit, we implore,
Thy tent upon the shore.

Rouse thee, my King, where'er thou sittest brooding;
Too long thou mak'st the stour of battle cease,
While in the camp red ruin flames to heaven,
And, like the west wind souging in the trees,
Unchecked the mockery goes
Of thy o'erweening foes.
My woe no respite knows!

(Enter TECMESSA from the tent.)

TECMESSA Crew of Ajax, men who trace
Back to Erechtheus your famed race,
Woe is ours who muse upon
The far-off house of Telamon;
For our lord of dreaded might
Stricken lies in desperate plight,
And his soul is dark as night.

CHORUS What the change so grievous, say,
Of the morn from yesterday?
Daughter of Teleutas, tell;
Stalwart Ajax loves thee well,
Thee his spear-won bride; 'tis thine
What befalls him to divine.

TECMESSA Ah, how tell a tale so drear?
Sad as death what thou shalt hear
Of great Ajax, undone quite,
Smit with madness, in the night.
Look within and see the floor
Reeking with his victims' gore;
Slain by his own hand there lies
His ungodly sacrifice.

CHORUS

(*Strophe*)

O fatal tidings of the hot-brained chief,
Intolerable, yet without relief!
What flagrant charge amid the Greek host goes
That spread by rumour grows?
Ah me, doom stalks amain!
And if with his dark blade the man hath slain
The herds and mounted herdsmen, sure he dies,
A malefactor shamed before all eyes.

TECMESSA Ah me, 'twas thence I saw him come
Driving his captive cattle home.
Of some he gashed the throats amain,
There where they stood upon the ground;
And some were ripped and rent in twain.

Then two white-footed rams he found;
Of one, beheaded first, the tongue
He snipped, then far the carcase flung.
The other to a pillar lashed
Erect, with doubled rein, he thrashed,
And as he plied the whistling thong
He uttered imprecations strong,
Dread words a god, no man, had taught.

CHORUS (*Antistrophe*)

'Tis time to veil the head and steal away
On foot, or straight embarking ply the oar,
And let the good ship bear us from the bay;
Such bitter threats the Atridae on us pour.
Me too, if I be by him, they will stone;
 He stands alone,
Fate marks him for her own.

TECMESSA No more; for like the southern blast
When lightnings flash, his rage is past.
But, now he is himself again,
Reviving memory brings new pain.
What keener anguish than to know
Thyself sole cause of self-wrought woe?

CHORUS Nay, if he have surcease, good hope is mine
All may be well, for men are less concerned
With evil doing when the trouble's past.

TECMESSA Come tell me, which wouldst choose, if choice were free,
To vex thy friends while thou thyself wert glad,
Or share the pain, grieving with them that grieve?

CHORUS The twofold sorrow, lady, is the worse.

TECMESSA Then are we losers now our plague is past.

CHORUS What meanest thou? it passes my poor wit.

TECMESSA Yon man, while stricken, had himself delight
In his sick fancies, though his presence grieved

Us who were sane; but now that he is whole,
Eased of his frenzy, he is racked with grief,
And we are no less troubled than before.
Are there not here two ills in place of one?

CHORUS 'Tis even so, and much I fear it prove
A stroke from heaven, if indeed, now cured,
He is no gladder than he was when sick.

TECMESSA His case is as thou sayest, rest assured.

CHORUS But tell us how the plague first struck him down.
We share thy sorrow and would know it all.

TECMESSA Hear then the story of our common woe.
At dead of night when all the lamps were out,
He took his two-edged sword, as if intent
On some wild expedition. So I chid him,
Saying, "What dost thou, Ajax, why go forth?
No summons, messenger or trumpet blast,
Hath called thee; nay, by now the whole host sleeps."
He answered lightly with an ancient saw,
"Woman, for women silence is a grace."
Admonished thus I held my tongue; but he
Sped forth alone. What happened afterwards
I know not, but he came back with his spoil,
Oxen and sheep-dogs with their fleecy charge.
Some he beheads, of some the upturned necks
He cuts, or cleaves the chine; others again
He buffeted and mangled in their bonds,
Mauling the beasts, as if they had been men.
At last he darted through the door and held
Wild converse with some phantom of the brain;
Now the Atridae, and Odysseus now,
He mocked with peals of laughter, vaunting loud
The vengeance he had wreaked on them. Anon
He rushed indoors again; and then in time
With painful struggles was himself again.
And as he scanned the havoc all around,
He smote his head and wailed and sank to earth,

A wreck among the wreck of slaughtered sheep,
Digging into his hair his clenched nails.
At first—a long, long while—he spake no word,
Then against me he uttered those dire threats,
If I declared not all that had befallen,
Bidding me tell him in what plight he stood.
And I a-tremble told him what had chanced,
So far as I had knowledge. Whereat he
Broke into lamentations, piercing, shrill,
Such as I ne'er had heard from him before.
For 'twas his creed that wailings and lament
Are for the craven and faint-hearts; no shrill
Complaint escaped him ever; his low moan
Was like the muffled bellowing of a bull.
But now, confounded in his abject woe,
Refusing food or drink, he sits there still,
Just where he fell amid the carcasses
Of the slain sheep and cattle. And 'tis plain
He meditates some mischief, so I read
His muttered exclamations and laments.
Come, friends, and help me, if so be ye can—
This was my errand—men in case like his
Are won to reason by the words of friends.

CHORUS Tecmessa, daughter of Teleutas, dread
Thy tidings of our master thus distraught.

AJAX Woe, woe is me!

TECMESSA Worse is to come, I fear me. Heard ye not
The voice of Ajax—that heartrending cry?

AJAX Woe, woe is me!

CHORUS 'Tis a fresh fit, methinks, or else he groans
At sight of all the ills his frenzy wrought.

AJAX My son, my son!

TECMESSA Ah me! Eurysaces, 'tis for thee he calls.
What would he? Where art thou, my son? ah me!

AJAX Ho Teucer! where is Teucer? Will his raid
End never? And the while I am undone!

CHORUS He seems himself again. Quick, ope the door.
Perchance the sight of us his humble friends
May bring him to a soberer mood.

TECMESSA I open,
And thou mayst view his works and his own plight.

AJAX *(Strophe 1)*
Mariners, ever leal and true,
Alas my friends have left me, all but you,
See how disasters whelmed me like a flood,
And now I welter in a surge of blood.

CHORUS Ah, lady, thy report was all too true,
Too clear the tokens of an unhinged brain.

AJAX *(Antistrophe 1)*
Sailors brave, whose flashing oar
Swift and sure the good ship bore,
To you I look for comfort, none but you;
Come slay me too.

CHORUS O hush, essay not ill by ill to cure,
Nor aggravate the burden of thy doom.

AJAX *(Strophe 2)*
See'st thou the bold, stout-hearted knight
Who never quailed to face the fight,
Now on tame beasts that fear no harm
He proves the puissance of his arm.
Ah me! the mockery, the scorn, the shame!

TECMESSA Ajax, my dearest master, speak not so.

AJAX Out with thee, woman; hence, avaunt, begone!
Ah me! ah me!

CHORUS O listen, I adjure thee, and be ruled.

AJAX Wretch to let those fiends, my foes,
Slip, while on the flock my blows
And the goodly cattle rained,
Till with their dark blood all the house was stained.

CHORUS Why vex thyself for what is past recall?
What's done is done and naught can alter it.

AJAX *(Antistrophe 2)*
Spy of the time, apt tool for any guile,
Of all the host the subtlest knave, most vile,
Son of Laertes, loud and long, I trow,
Thou laughest in malignant triumph now.

CHORUS Laughter or mourning comes as God ordains.

AJAX Would I could see him, shattered though I be!
Ah me!

CHORUS No boastful words; see'st not thy piteous case?

AJAX O Zeus, my grand sire, would that I
Might slay that knave, my bane,
That arch-dissembler and the generals twain.
Then let me die!

TECMESSA When thus thou prayest, pray that I with thee
May die; why should I live when thou art dead?

AJAX *(Strophe 3)*
O woe is me!
Darkness, my light!
O nether gloom to me more bright
Than midday, take, O take me to your care!
I am too vile to share
The kindly aid of mortals, and the gods
Have left me. Nay, the Warrior Maid, Zeus-born,
Laughs me to scorn;
I quail beneath her rods.
Whither to fly? What hope of rest is left,

If of my ancient fame bereft,
Dead as these slaughtered sheep around me slain,
A madman's crown I gain,
While all the host at my devoted head
Would strike, and smite me dead?

TECMESSA Ah me that one so good should utter words
That hitherto he ne'er had deigned to breathe!

AJAX Paths of the roaring waves,
Ye salt sea caves
And pastures by the shore,
Where long, too long I roam
In Troy-land, far from home;
Me shall ye see no more—
No more in life. Give ear
All who can hear.
Streams of Scamander, rills
That flow from Ida's hills,
Streams to the Greeks so dear,
Ne'er shall ye look on Ajax more;
A paladin whose peer
(For I will utter a proud boast)
In all the Grecian host
That sailed from Hellas' shore
Troy ne'er beheld. But now
Low in the dust, o'erthrown, his head doth bow.

CHORUS How to restrain or how to let thee speak
I cannot tell, beset by endless woes.

AJAX Ay me! Whoe'er had thought how well my name
Would fit my misery? Ay me! Ay me!²
Yea, twice and thrice may I repeat the wail
That syllables my woe-begone estate.
My sire, a peerless warrior, home returned
Back from the land of Ida, crowned with fame,
Proclaimed as champion bravest of the brave.
And I, his son, in might not less than he,
Sailed after him to this same land of Troy,

And served the host by deeds of no less worth,
And for reward I perish by the Greeks
Dishonoured. Yet one thing I know full well:
If to Achilles living it had fallen
His arms as meed of valour to award,
No man had grasped the prize, preferred to me.
But now the Atridae, scouting my just claim,
Have yielded to a miscreant's base intrigue.
Had not mine eyes been dazed, my mind distraught
And wrested from its purpose, they had never
Procured false sentence 'gainst a second man.
Alas! the grim-eyed goddess, unsubdued
Daughter of Zeus—as I was at their heels,
Almost at grips with them, in act to strike—
Foiled me, abused me by a frenzy fit,
Imbrued my hands with blood of these poor beasts.
And thus my foes exult in their escape,
Albeit I willed it not, and mock at me.
But if some god or goddess intervene,
Even a knave may worst the better man.
And now what's left me? By the gods, 'tis clear,
I am detested, hated by the host
Of Greeks, abhorred by Troy and all the camp.
Shall I sail homeward o'er the Aegean, leave
The sons of Atreus to fight on alone,
This roadstead undefended? Then how face
My father Telamon? How will he endure
To look on me returning empty-handed
Without the meed of valour that he held
Himself, a crown of everlasting fame?
That were intolerable. Am I then
Alone to storm the Trojan battlements,
And facing single-handed a whole host,
Do some high deed of prowess—and so die?
Nay, that methinks would give the Atridae joy.
It may not be; some emprise must be found
That shall convince my aged sire his son
Is not degenerate from his father's breed.
Base were it that a man should want long life
When all he gets is long unchanging trouble.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow—
What pleasure comes of that? 'Tis but a move
Forward or backward and the end—is death!
I would not count that mortal worth a doigt
Who lives on, fed by visionary hopes.
Nobly to live—that is the true knight's choice,
Or nobly end his life. I have said my say.

CHORUS No man will charge thee, Ajax, with feigned words.
'Twas thy heart spoke; yet pause and put aside
These dark thoughts; let thyself be ruled by friends.

TECMESSA Ah, my lord Ajax, heavier lot is none
Than to lie helpless in the coils of fate.
I was the daughter of a high-born sire
Of Phrygians unsurpassed in wealth and might.
And now, I am a slave; 'twas so ordained
By Heaven, methinks, and by thy might of arm.
Since fate has willed, then, I should share thy bed,
Thy good is mine; and O by the god of the hearth,
O by the wedded bond that made us one,
Let me not fall into a stranger's hand,
A laughing-stock! For, surely, if thou die
And leave me widowed, on that very day
I shall be seized and haled away by force,
I and thy son, prey to the Argive host,
Our portion slavery. Then shall I hear
The flouts and gibes that my new lords let fly.
“Look on her,” one will say, “the leman once
Of Ajax, mightiest of the Argive chiefs,
How has she fallen from her place of pride!”
Thus will they prate, and hard will be my lot,
But on thy race and thee how foul a slur.
Take pity and bethink thee of the sire
Thou leavest, an old man, disconsolate;
Bethink thee of thy mother bowed with years,
Think of her prayers and vows for thy return.
And, O my lord, take pity on thy son,
Orphaned, without a father's fostering care,
The ward of loveless guardians; if thou die,

What heritage of woe is his and mine!
For I have naught to look to anywhere
Save thee. By thee my country was laid waste,
My mother and my father too were snatched
To dwell with Hades by another fate.
What home is left me then, if thou art ta'en?
What weal? my welfare is bound up in thee.
Think of me also: gratitude is due
From man for favours that a woman gives.
Kindness return of kindness e'er begets.
Who lets the memory of service pass
Him will I ne'er with noble spirits rank.

CHORUS Ajax, I would that thou wert moved as I
To pity; then wouldst thou approve her rede.

AJAX Yea, and my full approval she shall win,
If only she take heart to do my hest.

TECMESSA Aye, my dear lord, I will obey in all.

AJAX Bring hither then my son, that I may see him.

TECMESSA Oh, in alarm I sent him from my charge.

AJAX When I was stricken? Or what meanest thou?

TECMESSA Yea, lest the poor child meeting thee should die.

AJAX That fate indeed had matched my fortunes well.

TECMESSA Well, I averted that calamity.

AJAX Thy forethought and the action I commend.

TECMESSA As the case stands, how can I do thy hest?

AJAX Let me speak to him—see him face to face.

TECMESSA Good; he is in our servants' charge close by.

AJAX Then wherefore is his coming thus delayed?

TECMESSA My child, thy father calls thee. (*To the Servants.*) Bring him hither,
Whoever of you guides his infant steps.

AJAX Comes he, or has he failed to hear thy call?

TECMESSA I see one just approaching with the boy.

(*Eurysaces is led forward.*)

AJAX Lift him, O lift him to my arms; no dread,
If he be mine, his father's true-born son,
He'll feel in gazing on this fresh spilt blood.
He must be early trained and broken in
To the stern rule of life his father held,
And moulded to the likeness of his sire.
My boy, mayst thou prove happier than thy sire,
But like him in all else, and thou wilt prove
No weakling; nay, e'en now, in this at least
I envy thee: of woes thou wottest naught,
For ignorance is life's extremest bliss—
The years when joy and sorrow are both unknown.
But when thou reachest manhood, then's the time
To prove the inbred virtue of thy race,
And show thy father's foes whose son thou art.
Meanwhile let light airs feed thee; cherish thou
Thy tender years to glad thy mother's heart.
Thou need'st not fear that any of the Greeks
Will tease or vex thee, e'en when I am gone.
So stout a guardian will I leave in charge,
Whose watchful eye will slumber not, though now
A foray 'gainst his enemies keeps him hence.
And ye, my seamen, comrades in the fight,
(On you no less than him I lay this charge
Of love) to him convey my last behest.
Bid him from me take home this son of mine
To Eriboea and to Telamon,
That he may comfort their old age till death.
And for my arms, let no Greek arbiter
Of games (so bid him) nor my venomous foe

Set them as prize for the Achaean host.
But this, the shield from which thou took'st thy name,³
Take this, my son, this sevenfold, spear-proof targe,
Take it and wield it by the close-stitched thongs.
My other arms shall lie with me interred.
Quick, take the child, delay not; close the doors,
Nor at the tent side moan and make lament.
In sooth a woman is a tearful thing.
Quick, make all fast: 'tis not a skilful leech
Who mumbles charms o'er ills that need the knife.

CHORUS I tremble as I mark this eager haste:
Thy words are sharp as swords and like me not.

TECMESSA O my lord Ajax, what is in thy heart?

AJAX Question not, ask not; be discreet and wise.

TECMESSA Ah me, I quail, I faint. O by thy child,
By heaven I implore thee, fail us not.

AJAX Thou art importunate; know'st not that I
Henceforward owe no duty to the gods?

TECMESSA Oh hush, blaspheme not!

AJAX Speak to ears that hear.

TECMESSA Wilt thou not heed?

AJAX I have heard from thee too much.

TECMESSA Fear, my lord, makes me speak.

AJAX Quick, close the doors.

TECMESSA Yield, I implore thee.

AJAX Fond simplicity
If at this hour thou think'st to mould my mood. (*Exit*
AJAX.)

CHORUS

(Strophe 1)

Ah Salamis, blest isle,
Secure, serene,
Above the waves that lash thy shore,
As ocean's queen,
Thou sittest evermore.
But I in exile drear,
Month after month, year after year,
On Ida's meads must bivouac, all forlorn
By time outworn;
And ever nearer, ever darker loom
The night of Hades and eternal gloom.

(Antistrophe 1)

And now to crown my grief
Comes a new woe,
My leader Ajax, mad beyond relief,
By heaven laid low;
How fallen from that impetuous chief,
Who sailed to meet the foe.

Now, to his friends' distress,
He sits and broods in sullen loneliness;
Those doughty deeds his right hand wrought
Now count for naught,
And from that loveless pair, those men of sin,
No love but despite win.

(Strophe 2)

Ah, when his mother, blanched with age and frail
Hears of his shattered reason, what wild wail
Will she upraise, a dirge of shrill despair,
(No plaintive ditty of the nightingale)
With beating of the breast and rending of white hair.

(Antistrophe 2)

Better be buried with the dead
Who lives with brain bewildered.
Of all the Greeks toil-worn
Behold the noblest born,

Now from his native temper warped and strange,
Whose thoughts in alien paths distracted range.
O wretched father, what a curse 'tis thine
Upon thy son to hear—curse that on none
E'er fell of all the Aeacidae's great line
Save him alone.

(Enter AJAX.)

AJAX Time in its slow, illimitable course
Brings all to light and buries all again;
Strange things it brings to pass, the dreadest oath
Is broken and the stubbornest will is bent.
E'en I whose will aforetime was as iron
Steeled in the dipping, now have lost the edge
Of resolution, by this woman's words
Unmanned, to pity melted at the thought
Of her a widow and my orphan son
Left amidst foemen. But I go my way
To the sea baths and meadows by the beach,
That I may there assoil me and assuage
The wrathful goddess, having purged my sin.
Then will I seek some solitary spot
And hide this sword, of weapons most accursed,
Deep under earth, consigned to Night and Hell,
Where never eye of man may see it more;
For since the day I hanelled it, a gift
From Hector, my arch-enemy, to this hour,
No favour from Achaeans have I won.
So true the word familiar in men's mouths,
A foe's gifts are no gifts and profit not.
Henceforward I shall know to yield to Heaven,
And school myself the Atridae to respect.
They are our rulers and obey we must;
How otherwise? Dread potencies and powers
Submit to law. Thus winter snow-bestrown
Gives place to opulent summer. Night's dim orb
Is put to flight when Dawn with her white steeds
Kindles the day-beams; and the wind's fierce breath
Can lay the storm and lull the moaning deep.

E'en thus all-conquering sleep holds not for ever
Whom he has bound, and must relax his grasp.
And we, shall we not likewise learn to yield?
I most of all; for I have learnt, though late,
This rule, to hate an enemy as one
Who may become a friend, and serve a friend
As knowing that his friendship may not last.
An unsafe anchorage to most men proves
The bond of friendship. As for present needs
All shall be well. Woman, go thou within
And pray the gods that all my heart's desires
May find their consummation to the full.
And ye, my comrades, see that ye respect,
No less than she, my wishes; and enjoin
On Teucer, when he comes, to care for me,
And show good will to you, my friends, withal.
For I am going whither I am bound.
Do ye my bidding, and perchance, though now
I suffer, ye may hear of my release. (*Exit AJAX.*)

CHORUS

(*Strophe*)

I thrill with rapture, all my heart upsprings!
Pan, Pan, O Pan, appear.
Come to us o'er the sea, sea-rover, leaving
The ridges of Cyllenè's driven snow,
Come to us, hand in hand blithe dances weaving,
Thou leader of the dance in heaven; show
Of Nysa and of Cnosos measures rare,
For in my rapture I the dance would share.
Come, and upon his footsteps swiftly follow,
Winging thy way across the Icarian main,
Show thy bright presence, Delos' own Apollo,
God of my life, thou healer of all pain!

(*Antistrophe*)

Grim Ares from mine eyes the cloud of sadness
Has lifted; now the radiant Dawn anew,
Angel of light, and harbinger of gladness,
Visits our ships that swiftly cleave the blue.
O joy, when Ajax has forgot once more

His woe, and turns the godhead to adore!
Due rites he pays with contrite heart and lowly.
O all-devouring time, what miracles
Thou workest! lo, his feud forgotten wholly,
Ajax at peace with the Atridae dwells.

(Enter MESSENGER.)

MESSENGER Teucer is here—that, friends, is my first news—
Back from the Mysian highlands newly come.
But as he neared headquarters in mid camp,
He was beset with universal shouts
Of obloquy; they spied him from afar,
And crowding round him as he nearer came,
Rained on him taunts from this side and from that,
Railed at the kinsman of the crazy wretch,
Plotter of mischief 'gainst the host—"To die
By stoning, mauled and mangled, is thy doom;
Think not to 'scape it, villain," so they cried.
It came to such a pass that swords were drawn
And brandished; then the riot, having run
To the very verge of bloodshed, was allayed
By intervention of the elder men.
But where is Ajax? Him I fain would tell;
'Tis meet your lords should know whate'er befell.

CHORUS He is not within; but now he went abroad,
Yoking some new resolve to his new mood.

MESSENGER Alack, alack!
Too late then on this errand was I sent,
Or I, a laggard, have arrived too late.

CHORUS What pressing business has been slackly done?

MESSENGER Teucer enjoined his brother should not forth,
Or quit his tent till he himself should come.

CHORUS Well, he is gone, and with the best resolve
To make his peace with heaven.

MESSENGER Folly sheer,
If there be sense in Calchas' prophecy.

CHORUS What prophecy? what knowest thou thereof?

MESSENGER Thus much I know, for I was there. The seer
Leaving the council of assembled chiefs,
From the Atridae drew aside and laid
His right hand lovingly in Teucer's hand,
And spake and charged him straitly by all means,
For this one day whose light yet shines, to keep
Ajax within his tent nor let him forth,
If he would see him still a living man.
"Only to-day," said Calchas, "will the wrath
Of dread Athena vex him, and no more.
O'erweening mortals waxing fat with pride
Fall in their folly, smitten by the gods
With dire disaster" (so the prophet spake),
"Whene'er a mortal born to man's estate
Exalts himself in thoughts too high for man.
Thus Ajax, e'en when first he left his home,
In folly spurned his father's monishments—
'Seek victory, my son' (so warned the sire),
'But seek it ever with the help of heaven.'
He in his wilful arrogance, replied,
'Father, with gods to aid, a man of naught
Might well prevail, but I without their help.'
Such was his haughty boast. A second time,
To Queen Athena, as she spurred him on
To turn his reeking hand upon his foes,
He spake a blasphemous, outrageous word,
'Queen, stand beside the other Greeks; where I
Am posted, fear not that our ranks will break.'
Such vaunting words drew on him the dire wrath
Of the goddess—pride too high for mortal man.
But if he can survive this day, perchance
With God's good aid we may avail to save him."
So spake the seer, and Teucer straightway rose
And sent me with these mandates. Have I failed,
Ajax is doomed, or Calchas is no seer.

CHORUS Ill-starred Tecmessa, born to woe, come forth,
And hearken to this messenger, whose words
That touch us to the quick brook no delay.

(Enter TECMESSA.)

TECMESSA Why break my rest and trouble me again,
Relieved awhile from woes that have no end?

CHORUS List to this man—the tidings he has brought
Of Ajax' fortunes, filling me with grief.

TECMESSA What is thy news, man? Say, are we undone?

MESSENGER I know not of thy fortunes, only this—
If Ajax is abroad, I augur ill.

TECMESSA Alas! he is. How thy words chill my soul!

MESSENGER Teucer's injunction is to keep him close
Indoors, nor let him go abroad alone.

TECMESSA And where is Teucer? Wherefore speaks he thus?

MESSENGER He hath returned but lately and forbodes
Grave jeopardy, if Ajax goes abroad.

TECMESSA Ah woe is me! Who warned him of this peril?

MESSENGER The prophet, son of Thestor, but to-day,
When in the scales for him hang life and death.

TECMESSA Help, friends, protect me from the impending doom!
Speed, some to hasten Teucer on his way,
Some to the western creeks and some to those
That front the morn; pursue his ill-starred track.
I see too well my lord hath cheated me,
Withdrawn the favour that long time was mine.
Ah me! What shall I do, my child? No time
To sit with folded hands; I too will go,
So far as this weak frame allows, in search.

Up, quick, to work! no moment must be lost,
If we would save a man who hastes to death.

CHORUS Ready am I; not words alone shall prove,
But speed of act and foot, my readiness. (*Exeunt AJAX
alone on the sea-shore, planting his sword in the
ground.*)

AJAX The slayer standeth where his stroke is sure—
If I have time to muse thus curiously—
The gift of Hector erst my foeman-friend,
The man most hateful to my soul and sight,
Now fixed in foemen's land, the land of Troy;
Fresh edged upon the iron-fretting stone,
Here have I planted it and set it fast,
A friend to help me to a speedy death.
My part is done; for what remains, O Zeus,
First I invoke thine aid; and claim my due;
'Tis no excessive boon I shall demand.
I pray thee send some messenger to bear
To Teucer the sad tale, that he may come
To lift me where I lie a bleeding corpse,
Fallen on this gory sword, lest I be first
Discovered by some enemy and cast forth,
A prey to dogs and birds. Thus much, O Zeus,
I crave of thee; and Hermes I invoke,
Born guide of spirits to the nether world,
To lay me soft to rest at one swift gasp,
Without a struggle, when into my side
I plunge this sword. Ye too I call to aid,
Maidens immortal, with immortal eyes
Beholding all the many woes of man,
Swift-footed hounds of vengeance, mark ye well
How by the Atridae I am all undone.
Swoop on them, Furies, blight and blast them both
In utter ruin, as they see me now!
On, ye Avengers, glut your maw, spare not,
Let ruin seize the whole Achaean host!
And thou whose chariot climbs the steep of heaven,
When in thy course thou see'st my father-land,

Draw in thy gold-bedizened rein and tell
My aged sire and mother of their son,
His sorrows and his end. Poor mother! when
She hears the tale, her piercing wail will ring
Through all the city. But how profitless
These idle lamentations and delay!
With such despatch as may be let's to work.
O Death, Death, Death, draw nigh and look on me—
Yet there below I shall have time enow
To converse face to face with Death. But thee,
O bright effulgence of this radiant day,
On thee, the Sun-god charioteer, I call
For the last time and never more again.
O light! O sacred soil of mine own land,
My Salamis! my home, my ancestral hearth!
O far-famed Athens, race akin to mine,
Ye Trojan springs and streams, ye plains of Troy,
Farewell, ye nurses of my fame, farewell!
This is the last word Ajax speaks to you.
Henceforth he talks in Hades with the dead. (*He falls
upon his sword.*)

(*Re-enter* CHORUS.)

- SEMI-CHORUS Toil, toil, and toil on toil!
1 Where have my steps not roamed, and yet,
No place that hath a secret for my ear.⁴
Hist! hist! what sound was that?
- SEMI-CHORUS 'Tis we, thy mates.
2
- SEMI-CHORUS What cheer, mates?
1
- SEMI-CHORUS All westward of the fleet we've ranged and found
2
- SEMI-CHORUS Found, say you!
1

SEMI-CHORUS Of moil enow, of what we sought no trace.
2

SEMI-CHORUS No better luck to the eastward; on the road
1 That fronts the sunrise not a trace of him.

CHORUS (*Strophe*)

O that some toiling fisher by the bay,
 Dragging his nets all night,
 Some Oread from Olympus' height,
Or nymph who haunts the tides of Bosporus,
Might spy the wanderer on his wayward way
 And bring the tale to us.
Hard lot is ours who tack
To east, to west, and find no track,
Ne'er in our luckless course descry
The derelict nor come anigh.

(They hear a cry in the covert.)

TECMESSA Woe, woe is me!

CHORUS Whose was that cry from out the covert's fringe?

TECMESSA Me miserable:

CHORUS My hapless mistress, Ajax' spear-won bride,
Teemessa, whelmed in anguish I behold.

TECMESSA I'm lost, undone, of all bereft, my friends.

CHORUS What aileth thee?

TECMESSA Here lies our Ajax, newly slain, impaled
Upon his sword, new planted in the ground.

CHORUS O for my hope of return!
O my chief, thou hast slain
Me thy shipmate! my heart
Bleeds for thee, lady forlorn.

TECMESSA Thus lies he overthrown; 'tis ours to wail.

CHORUS By whose hand did he thus procure his death?

TECMESSA By his own hand, 'tis manifest; the sword
Set in the ground, on which he fell, is proof.

CHORUS Out on my blindness! All alone
Unwatched of friends he bled to death!
And I saw naught, heard naught, recked naught of thee!
Where lies he, Ajax, the self-willed,
The unbending, luckless as his name?

TECMESSA No eye shall look on him; this robe around
Shall lap him and enshroud from head to foot.
For none who knew him, not his dearest friend,
Could bear to see him, as the dark blood spurts
Up through his nostrils from the self-wrought wound.
What shall I do? What friend shall lift him up?
Where, where is Teucer? Timely would he come,
If come he might, to raise him and lay out
His brother's corse. Ah me! How high thou stood'st,
My Ajax, and how low thou liest here!
A sight to melt to tears e'en foemen's eyes!

CHORUS (*Antistrophe*)
Ah woeful hero, 'twas thy fate,
 With that unyielding soul of thine,
 In endless misery to decline,
And reach the goal of ruin, soon or late.
I knew it as I heard thee eve and morn
 Against the Atridae vent
 Thy passionate complaint,
A bitter cry of proud disdain and scorn.
 Aye, then began my woes
 When first arose
The contest who those arms could claim
As guerdon for the first in warlike fame.

TECMESSA Woe, woe is me!

CHORUS The anguish, well I know it,

Pierces to thy true heart.

TECMESSA Woe, woe is me!

CHORUS No marvel thou shouldst wail and wail again
Bereft so lately and of one so loved.

TECMESSA The woe I feel thou canst in part conceive.

CHORUS 'Tis true.

TECMESSA Alas, my child, to what hard yoke
Of bondage must we come, so merciless
The taskmasters set over thee and me!

CHORUS The Atridae, ruthless pair,
And their grim deeds ineffable
Thy boding soul prefigures. God avert it!

TECMESSA Save by God's will we were not in this case.

CHORUS They have laid on us a load too hard to bear.

TECMESSA Yet such the plague wherewith the daughter dire
Of Zeus afflicts us for Odysseus' sake.

CHORUS Yea, how the patient hero must exult
In his dark soul and mock
With fiendish laughter at our frenzied grief;
And the two chiefs withal,
The Atridae, when they learn his fate.

TECMESSA Well, let them laugh and mock at Ajax fall'n.
It may be, though they missed him not in life,
When comes the stress of war they'll mourn him dead.
Men of mean judgment know not the good thing
They have and hold till they have squandered it.
He by his death more sorrow gave to me
Than joy to them; to himself 'twas pure content,
For all he yearned to attain he won himself—
Death that he chose. Then wherefore scoff at him?

The gods were authors of his death, not they.
So let Odysseus, if it please him, vent
Vain taunts; for them there is no Ajax more,
And dying he has left me naught but woe.

TEUCER Woe, woe is me!

CHORUS Hist, hist! methinks 'tis Teucer's voice I hear,
That woeful strain of mourning at our loss.

(Enter TEUCER.)

TEUCER Beloved Ajax, dearest of my kin,
Did fame not lie then? hast thou fared thus ill?

CHORUS He hath perished, Teucer, and report spake true.

TEUCER Then woe is me for my most grievous loss.

CHORUS And since 'tis thus—

TEUCER Alas for me, alas!

CHORUS The hour for mourning—

TEUCER O sharp pang of pain!

CHORUS Is come, O Teucer, as thou say'st.

TEUCER Ay me!
But his son—where in Troy-land bides he now?

CHORUS Alone beside the tent.

TEUCER Then bring him quickly,
Lest of our foemen one should snatch him up,
As from a lioness forlorn her cub.
Go quick, bestir thyself. 'Tis the world's way
To flout and triumph o'er the prostrate dead. *(Exit*
TECMESSA.)

CHORUS Yea, while he yet lived Ajax left to thee,

Teucer, this child, to tend him, as thou dost.

TEUCER O saddest sight of all I ever saw,
O bitterest of all paths I ever trod,
The path that led me hither, Ajax loved,
My best-loved Ajax! when I learnt thy fate,
B'en as I tracked in desperate haste thy steps;
For a swift rumour, like a voice from heaven,
Ran through the host that thou wert dead and gone.
I heard it and I moaned in spirit afar,
But now the sight strikes death into my soul.
O woe!
Come, lift the searchcloth; let me see the worst.
O bleeding form, O agonising sight!
How brave, how rash, how cruel in thy death;
Thy death, what seed of misery for me!
Where can I turn, what race of men will house me,
The wretch who failed to help thee in thy woes?
How Telamon, thy sire and mine withal,
Will beam upon me (can'st not picture him?)
When I return without thee! Telamon
Who in his hours of fortune never smiles!
Will he refrain? Will he not curse and ban
The bastard of his spear-won concubine,
The wretch who like a coward and poltroon
Forsook thee, dearest Ajax, or conspired
To hold thy realm and halls when thou wert dead?
Thus will he rave, the choleric, soured old man,
Ready to pick a quarrel for a straw.
And in the end I shall be banned, defamed,
Rejected, branded—*No free man, a slave.*
Such cheer at home awaits me, and at Troy
My foes are many and my friends to seek.
Thus by thy death I've profited! Ah me!
How tear thee from this cruel glittering blade,
That stands arraigned thine executioner?
See'st thou how Hector dead and turned to dust
Was fated in the end to be thy death?
Look on the fortunes of the two, I pray ye:
Hector, who by the very belt he wore,

A gift from Ajax, lashed to the car-rail
Was dragged and mangled till his ghost expired;⁵
And this the sword whose murderous edge transfixed
The side of Ajax—this was Hector's gift.
Say, was it not some Fury forged this blade,
Was not that hellish girdle wove by Death?
I hold, for my part, these and all things else
The gods contrive for mortals. But may be
Some disapprove my creed; let such an one
Cling to his own belief, as I to mine.

CHORUS Abridge thy large discourse; think how to lay
The dead man in his grave and what thy plea
Shall be anon; I see a foe approach.
Perchance he comes with mocking of our grief,
As miscreants use.

TEUCER What captain dost thou see?

CHORUS Menelaus, he at whose behest we sailed.

TEUCER 'Tis he, not hard to recognise thus near.

(Enter MENELAUS.)

MENELAUS Stop, sirrah, bear no hand in raising up
The corse, I charge thee; leave it where it lies.

TEUCER Wherefore dost waste thy breath in these proud words?

MENELAUS Such is my will and the great general's will.

TEUCER On what pretence? wilt please to tell us that?

MENELAUS Hear then. We thought to bring from Salamis
For Greeks a friend and firm ally, but found him
On trial worse than any Phrygian foe;
Who plotted death and sallied forth by night
'Gainst the whole host, to slay us with the spear;
And had some god not intervened to foil
This enterprise, his fate had now been ours,

To perish by an ignominious death,
While he had now been living. But a god
Turned his blind malice on the flocks and herds.
Thus hath he done, and no man shall prevail
By might to lay his body in the tomb.
He shall be cast forth on the yellow sands
To feed the carrion birds that haunt the beach.
Rage not nor bluster as thou hear'st, for we,
E'en if we could not master him alive,
In any case will lord it o'er him dead,
Rule him and discipline, in thy despite,
By force—my words he ne'er would heed, alive.
Yet 'tis a mark of villainy when one
Of the common deigns not to obey his lords.
For in a State that hath no dread of law
The laws can never prosper and prevail,
Nor could an armed force be disciplined
Lacking the guard of awe and reverence.
Nay, though a man should tower in thews and might,
A giant o'er his fellows, let him think
Some petty stroke of fate may work his ruin.
Where dread prevails and reverence withal,
Believe me, there is safety; but the State,
Where arrogance hath licence and self-will,
Though for a while she run before the gale,
Will in the end make shipwreck and be sunk.
Dread in its proper season and degree
Must be maintained; let us not fondly dream
That we can act at will to please ourselves,
Nor pay the price of pleasure by our pains.
'Tis turn and turn; now this man lorded it
In insolence; 'tis now my hour of pride.
So I forewarn thee bury him not, lest thou
In burying shouldst dig thyself a grave.

CHORUS Sage precepts these, my lord, and do not thou
Thyself become a scoffer of the dead.

TEUCER Friends, I shall never marvel after this
If any baseborn fellow gives offence,

When men who pride them on their lineage
By their perverted utterance thus offend.
Repeat thy tale: thou claimest to have brought
My brother hither as a Greek ally,
Secured by thee forsooth. Sailed he not forth
As his own master, of his own free will?
Who made thee lord of him? What right hast thou
To rule the clansmen whom he brought from home?
Thou cam'st as Sparta's king, no lord of ours.
Thou hast no more prerogative or right
To govern him than he to govern thee;
Thou sailedst under orders, not as chief,
And captain unto Ajax ne'er couldst be.
Go, lord it o'er thy henchmen, chasten them
With lordly pride; but this man, whether thou,
Aye, or thy brother-general forbid,
I with due rites and offices will bury
Despite thy threatenings. 'Twas not to bring back
Thy wife that Ajax joined in the campaign,
Like thy serf drudges, but to keep the oath
Whereto he had bound himself, no whit for thee;
Of underlings like thee he took no heed.
Go then and bring more heralds back with thee
And the commander; for thy noisy rant,
Whilst thou art what thou art, I care no straw.

CHORUS This speech again mislikes me in the midst
 Of woes; hard words, how just soever, wound.

MENELAUS Methinks this archer⁶ hath a captain's pride.

TEUCER Aye, as the master of no vulgar art.

MENELAUS How wouldst thou strut, promoted to a shield!

TEUCER Without a shield I were a match for thee
 In panoply.

MENELAUS How valorous with thy tongue!

TEUCER He can be bold who hath his quarrel just.

MENELAUS Justice quotha, to exalt my murderer?

TEUCER Murdered, and yet thou livest! that is strange!

MENELAUS Heaven saved me; in intention I was slain.

TEUCER If the gods saved thee, sin not 'gainst the gods.

MENELAUS I! could I e'er abuse the laws of Heaven?

TEUCER Yea, if thou com'st to stop the burial.

MENELAUS Of mine own foes; to bury them were sin.

TEUCER Was Ajax e'en thine enemy in the field?

MENELAUS He loathed me, as I him, thou knowest well.

TEUCER Aye, thou hadst robbed him by suborning votes.

MENELAUS 'Twas by the judges he was cast, not me.

TEUCER A fair face thou canst put on foulest frauds.

MENELAUS Someone I know will suffer for that word.

TEUCER He who provoked is like to suffer more.

MENELAUS One word more; he shall not be buried.

TEUCER One word in answer; buried he shall be.

MENELAUS Once did I see a braggart, bold of tongue,
Who had pressed his crew to sail in time of storm,
But when the storm was on him he was mum—
Lay like a dead log muffled in his cloak,
And let the sailors trample him at will.
E'en so with thee and thy unbridled tongue.
Perchance a mighty hurricane may rise,
Sprung from a cloud no bigger than a hand,
Swoop down on thee and quench thy blustering.

TEUCER Once too I knew a fool, a silly fool,
Who triumphed at his neighbour's woes and mocked;
And then it chanced that one, a man like me
In looks and character, addressed him thus:
*Man, do not evil to the dead, for if
Thou doest evil, thou wilt surely rue it.*
So to his face he chid that silly fool.
I see that wight before me, and methinks
“’Tis none but thou. Can'st read my riddle plain?

MENELAUS I go, for 'twould disgrace me, were it known
That I, with power to act, chastised with words.

TEUCER Begone then! 'twere for me a worse disgrace
To listen to a bragster's idle prate. (*Exit MENELAUS.*)

CHORUS Soon a mortal strife will come.
Seek a hollow grave, and haste,
Teucer, with what speed thou may'st,
To prepare the mouldering tomb,
Where the warrior shall lie,
Deathless in men's memory.

(Enter TECMESSA and Child.)

TEUCER Lo! in good time I see his child and wife
Draw near to tend the hero's obsequies.
Come hither, child, and take thy place beside him
And lay, in suppliant guise, thy hand in his,
And kneel as one who hath taken sanctuary,
With locks of hair as offering in thine hand—
Mine, hers, and thine—all-potent means of grace.
Then if by violence any of the host
Should drag thee from the dead man, be his lot
To perish banned, cast forth without a grave,
Cut off with kith and kindred, root and branch,
Even as I cut this lock from off my head.
Take it and keep it, child; let no man move thee.
Kneel thou, and clasp in close embrace the dead.
And ye, his comrades, stand not idly by
As women mourners; quit yourselves as men

In his defence, till I have made a grave
To bury him, though all the world forbid. (*Exit TEUCER.*)

CHORUS

(*Strophe 1*)

When shall the score be told, the sum of the endless
years?
Weary am I of camps and tramps and the hurtling of
spears.
Hither and thither I roam o'er the windswept Trojan
plain,
Shame and reproach for Greece, for Grecians trouble and
pain.

(*Antistrophe 1*)

Would he had sunk to hell, or vanished in ether afar,
Who first admonished the Greeks to league themselves
for the war—
War, the father of toils, whence mortal sorrows began;
Yea, it was he who begat the plague and ruin of man.

(*Strophe 2*)

Wretch! for me no garlands fine,
Cups o'erbrimming with red wine;
No shrill flutes didst thou assign.

Wretch! a foe to all delight.
F'en the slumbers soft of night
Thy alarms have banished quite.

And my loves, ah well-a-day!
Thou hast driven them all away;
Here I lie on the cold clay:

All alone, with none to care,
While the dank dews wet my hair.
Such, accursèd Troy, thy fare!

(*Antistrophe 2*)

Erewhile Ajax, stalwart knight,
Was my buckler in the fight,
Shield against the alarm of might.

Now by Fate a victim led
To the altar, he hath bled;
And for me all joy hath fled.

O that from this barren strand
Wafted to Athena's land
I on Sunium's brow might stand;

Hear the waves that round it beat
Wash the wooded headland's feet,
Sacred Athens thence to greet!

(Enter TEUCER.)

TEUCER Lo I return in haste; I saw approach
Great Agamemnon, captain of the host;
'Tis plain he means to vent on us his spleen.

(Enter AGAMEMNON.)

AGAMEMNON So, Sirrah, it is thou (for thus I learn)
Hast dared to rant and curse and threaten us,
Thus far unpunished; thou the bondmaid's son.
Ha! had thy mother been a high-born dame,
How grand thy speech, how proud had been thy gait,
When now, a nobody, thou championest
That thing of naught, maintaining that we kings
Had no commission, or on sea or land,
To rule the Greeks or thee, and (such thy claim)
That Ajax sailed, an independent chief.
Is this not rank presumption in a slave?
And what is he whose might thou vauntest thus?
Where did he hold his ground or lead the assault
Where I was not? Have Greeks no *man* but him?
'Twas in an evil hour we made proclaim
Of open contest for Achilles' arms,
If Teucer must denounce us as corrupt,
Whate'er the issue, and if ye reject
The adverse judgment of the major part,
But must for ever gird at us and rail,
Or plot to stab us, when ye lose your suit.

Never with tempers such as yours could law
Be firmly based, if we are called to oust
The rightful victors and promote the worse.
This must be stopped. 'Tis not the brawny, big,
Broad-shouldered men who prove the best at need;
The wise and prudent everywhere prevail.
The broad-ribbed ox is guided on his path
Down the straight furrow by a little goad.
A like corrective is in store for thee,
If thou acquire not some small sense full soon.
The man is dead, a shadow, and yet thou
Let'st thy tongue wag and waxest insolent.
Come to a sober mind; recall thy birth,
Bring hither someone else, a free-born man,
To plead thy cause before us in thy stead;
For when thou speak'st thy words convey no sense;
I understand not a barbarian tongue.

CHORUS I would ye twain might learn sobriety;
'Tis the best counsel I can give you both.

TEUCER Out on man's gratitude! how soon it fades,
Or proves a traitor when a friend is dead!
What memory, what tittle of regard
Hath he for thee, my Ajax, thou who oft
At peril of thy life didst toil for him?
Lost labour, cast away and all forgot!
Vain, windy orator, canst not recall
The day when ye were cooped within your lines,
Scattered, half routed and as good as lost,
How single-handed he stood forth and saved you,
Though at your ships the poop decks were ablaze,
And Hector o'er the fosse came bounding, prompt
To board them? Who averted then the rout?
The very man of whom thou sayest now,
"He did no deed I have not done myself."
Was that no loyal service? Judge yourselves;
Or once again when he in single fight
Confronted Hector, under no constraint,
But by the lot he drew—no skulking lot,⁷

No lump of loam, but one that well he knew
Would first leap lightly from the crested helm?
Such deeds were his, and at his side was I,
This slave, of a barbarian mother born.
How canst thou prate thus idly? Look at home.
Hast thou forgotten that thine own sire's sire
Was Phrygian Pelops, a barbarian?
That Atreus who begat thee, wretch, did set
Before his brother a most impious feast,
His brother's children's flesh? That thou thyself
Com'st of a Cretan mother whom her sire
Caught with an alien slave, her paramour,
And sent to feed dumb fishes of the deep?
Thus basely born thou twit'st me with my birth!
My sire was Telamon who won the prize
As champion of the host, a peerless bride,
A princess, daughter of Laomedon,
The meed assigned him by Alemena's son.
She was my mother. And am I, thus born
Nobly of parents both of noblest birth,
Am I to shame my kindred overthrown,
Now helpless, whelmed in utter misery,
Whom thou wouldst spurn and rob of burial rites,
Nor art ashamed to promulgate this ban?
Know this full well, where'er ye cast this man,
We three, three corpses, ye will cast beside.
For me 'twere nobler before all men's eyes
To fall in his behalf than for a wife
Of thine—or of thy brother, should I say?
Therefore bethink thee—'tis thine interest
No less than mine—if on me thou dar'st lay
A finger, thou wilt surely wish full soon
Rather to bear the brand of cowardice
Than prove thy reckless bravery on me.

(Enter ODYSSEUS.)

CHORUS My lord Odysseus, thou art come in time,
If thou art here to mediate, not embroil.

ODYSSEUS What is it, sirs? Far off I heard loud words
Of the Atridae o'er the hero's corpse.

AGAMEMNON True, lord Odysseus; were we not provoked
By the most shameful taunts from yonder man?

ODYSSEUS What taunts? For my part I can pardon one
Who when reviled retorts in angry words.

AGAMEMNON I did abuse him as his acts deserved.

ODYSSEUS Say by what action gave he just offence?

AGAMEMNON He vows he will not leave unseparated
The corpse, but bury it in my despite.

ODYSSEUS May I be candid with thee as a friend
Without suspicion of my loyalty?

AGAMEMNON Surely. I am not senseless, and I count
Thee among all the Greeks my chiefest friend.

ODYSSEUS Then hear me. O for pity's sake forbear,
Repent, and let not violence and hate
Blind thee to trample justice under foot.
I also counted him my deadliest foe
In all the army, ever since the day
When by award I won Achilles' arms;
Yet for all that, foe as he was to me,
I would not so requite his wrong with wrong
As not to own that, save Achilles, he
In all the host of Argives had no peer.
Unjustly thou wouldst thus dishonour him;
For not to him, but to the laws of heaven
Wouldst thou do wrong; and wrong it is to insult
A brave man dead, e'en if he be thy foe.

AGAMEMNON Wilt thou, Odysseus, take his part against me?

ODYSSEUS Yea, yet I hated him so long as hate
Was honourable.

AGAMEMNON Why not hate him still,
 And set thy heel on his dead body too?

ODYSSEUS Delight not, son of Atreus, in ill gains.

AGAMEMNON 'Tis hard for monarchs to show piety.

ODYSSEUS But not respect for friends who counsel well.

AGAMEMNON A true man ever heeds authority.

ODYSSEUS Forbear: thou conquerest, yielding unto friends.

AGAMEMNON Think to what kind of man thou showest grace.

ODYSSEUS My foe he was, but still a noble foe.

AGAMEMNON What wouldst thou? Honour a dead foeman's corpse?

ODYSSEUS With me his worth outweighs his enmity.

AGAMEMNON Such sudden change of mind we call caprice.

ODYSSEUS Common enough the change from friend to foe.

AGAMEMNON Dost thou commend such fickle friends as these?

ODYSSEUS A stubborn temper I would ne'er commend.

AGAMEMNON Thou mind'st this day to make us seem as cowards.

ODYSSEUS Nay, as just rulers in the eyes of Greece.

AGAMEMNON Thou bidst me then permit the burial?

ODYSSEUS Yes, for I too shall come to need the same.

AGAMEMNON How true the saw, each labours for himself.

ODYSSEUS And who deserves my labour more than I?

AGAMEMNON Well, let it seem thy doing, friend, not mine.

ODYSSEUS Howe'er 'tis done, 'twill prove thee good and kind.

AGAMEMNON To thee, my friend, of this be well assured,
I'd grant a favour greater e'en than this.
But that man, as in living so in death,
Shall have my hate. So do as pleaseth thee. (*Exit*
AGAMEMNON.)

CHORUS Whoe'er, Odysseus, having proof like this,
Denies thy wisdom is himself a fool.

ODYSSEUS And now to Teucer, once my foe, henceforth
I proffer friendship staunch and true as was
Mine enmity; and I would ask to share
With you in obsequies and ritual
To grace his grave; no service would I stint
That man can render to the mighty dead.

TEUCER Noblest Odysseus, I have naught but praise
For thy good words that all belie my fears.
Of all the Greeks thou wast his deadliest foe,
Yet thou alone didst dare espouse his cause,
And hadst no heart to insult this dumb cold clay,
Like yonder crack-brained chief of the host who came,
He and his brother general, with intent
To cast him forth defamed without a grave.
For that may he who rules in heaven supreme,
And the Erinys who forgetteth not,
And Justice who accomplisheth the end,
Curse those accursed sinners and confound them,
E'en as they would have wronged the innocent dead.
But for thine aid in these our funeral rites,
Son of Laertes, old and honoured chief,
I must reject the service, though full loath,
Lest I should do displeasure to the dead.
In all the rest be one of us, and if
Thou wouldst invite some comrade from the camp
To join the mourning, we shall welcome him
All else I will provide. Rest well assured,
We reckon thee a true great-hearted friend.

ODYSSEUS Well I was fain to assist, but if your will
 Consents not, I will acquiesce and go.

TEUCER Enough: too long have we delayed.
 Go some with mattock armed and spade,
 Dig the grave pit speedily;
 Lustral waters to supply,
 Others set the cauldron high,
 Piling around it faggots dry,
 Let another band be sent
 To fetch his harness from his tent.
 Thou too, child, draw near and lay
 Thy little hands on this cold clay;
 Though thy help may not be much,
 Thy sire shall feel thy loving touch.
 Help to raise this prostrate form.
 These limbs are cold, yet still the warm
 Veins from the heart and wounded side
 Jet forth their dark ensanguined tide.
 Haste, each who claims the name of friend,
 Haste one and all the dead to tend
 With service due. Since time began
 There lived on earth no nobler man.

CHORUS Wisdom still by seeing grows,
 But no man the unseen knows.
 Shall he fare or ill or well
 Who of mortals can foretell?

ENDNOTES

1. Odysseus, reputed son of Sisyphus, not Laertes. ↩
2. Like Shakespeare's "Gaunt" (*Richard II*, II i) he plays on his name *Aias*. ↩
3. Eurysaces means "broad shield." ↩
4. Or,

"No spot can tell me of his presence there."

↩
5. Homer knows nothing of the belt and it is the *dead* Hector who is dragged round the tomb of Patroclus. ↩
6. "Archer" like "ranker" by itself is a term of reproach. In the *Iliad* Teucer is the best bowman in the Achaean host, but also a good man-at-arms. ↩
7. An allusion to the story of Cresphontes who after the Dorian Conquest agreed to cast lots for his share of the Peloponnese and in order to secure the last lot, which he coveted, put a lump of clay into the urn instead of a potsherd. ↩



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