

SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE Odysseus enters, searching for tracks outside the tent of Ajax. **Athena**, watches him, then speaks. Odysseus explains that he is trying to find out who has attacked the army's sheep and cattle during the night. Athena confirms that it was Ajax, aiming to kill the Greek generals, for awarding the arms of Achilles to Odysseus. She diverted his rage against the sheep and cattle by driving him temporarily insane. He is now inside his tent, torturing the helpless animals he still thinks to be the Greek commanders. Athena calls **Ajax** out for Odysseus to see, in his madness and disgrace. Far from gloating at this sight of his enemy brought low, Odysseus is moved to sombre reflection on human frailty.

PARODOS The **Chorus** - men of Salamis, from the crew of Ajax's own ship - now enter. They have heard rumours, and are anxious: are these slanders put about by Ajax's enemies, or the truth?

ACT I Ajax's concubine **Tecmessa** emerges from the tent, to confirm the rumours. She saw Ajax leave the tent during the night, and return, maddened and bloodstained, with the sheep and cattle. Since then, he has come to his senses again, and is overcome with grief and shame.

Ajax stumbles out of his tent, to vent his despair. Death can now be his only escape from such disgrace. Here at Troy, he has attracted the enmity of his fellow Greeks and the gods alike; the thought of returning home to face his old father Telamon is unbearable.

Tecmessa begs him to think of her and of their son Eurysaces, who will be left without protection from the revenge of the Greeks. Ajax summons Eurysaces to say farewell, instructing him to live up to his father's reputation. He entrusts him to the care of his brother Teucer, who is at present away on a raid.

CHORUS Ajax re-enters his tent; the crew reflect on their isolation, far from home, and on Ajax's lonely disgrace.

ACT II Ajax re-emerges, with Hector's sword in his hand. Time, he declares, can change all things, and he will not stand out against time's power. He is on his way to some spot by the shore, where he can bury the sword, and rid himself of the gods' anger. The next news they hear will be the news of his deliverance.

CHORUS Ajax departs and his crew, thinking that he has given up his plans of suicide, sing a joyful hymn of praise to Pan for their narrow escape.

ACT III A messenger arrives with news of Teucer. He has been accused of complicity in Ajax's treachery; the seer Calchas has warned him that Ajax's arrogance, in refusing Athena's assistance in battle, has put his life at risk - unless he remains indoors that day. Tecmessa and the crew scatter in search of Ajax.

The scene now changes to the shore outside the camp. Ajax enters, still with Hector's sword. With a prayer to Zeus and the other gods, he says farewell to the Trojan plain and his homeland, and kills himself.

INTERVAL

CHORUS Tecmessa and the chorus enter from different directions, searching. Tecmessa discovers Ajax's body, and all join in a lament, for the dead hero, and for themselves.

ACT IV Teucer enters, to be greeted with the sight of Ajax's corpse. The chorus urge him to give his brother an honourable burial. Before Teucer can react, **Menelaus** enters from the Greek camp. He forbids the burial, saying that Ajax is a traitor. Teucer retorts that Menelaus is not entitled to give such orders: Ajax was his own master in life, and the army has no authority over him in death. Menelaus threatens Teucer, but is unable to make him yield. Menelaus withdraws, and Teucer orders Tecmessa, Eurysaces and the chorus to take up suppliants' positions round the corpse.

CHORUS The chorus again lament the loss of their leader and defender. Will they ever return safely home from Troy to Salamis?

ACT V **Agamemnon** enters, to try again where Menelaus had failed. He abuses Teucer as the son of a slave and a potential traitor. Teucer attacks Agamemnon's cowardice, and failure to acknowledge Ajax's bravery in the Greek cause. He should be honouring Ajax, not trying to disgrace him. The deadlock between Teucer and Agamemnon is only broken by the arrival of **Odysseus**. Paying tribute to his dead rival, he warns Agamemnon to beware of denying Ajax honourable burial. Out of deference to Odysseus, whom he knows to be a loyal Greek, Agamemnon relents.

As Agamemnon departs, the preparations begin for Ajax's funeral. Odysseus asks if he can take part, but respects Teucer's request to leave it to them. The ghost of Ajax must rest in peace.

AJAX: DEATH OF A HERO

Sophocles' *Ajax*, like its hero, has been accused of failings that make it unworthy to be recognized as a great play. According to its critics, the dramatic structure is flawed, in that the 'hero' dies at line 865, with 550 verses still remaining, with the result that the audience is obliged to sit through an artificially extended debate over whether he should or should not be buried. It has been contended that the character of Ajax does not deserve the title of the play; not only does he depart from the action too early, he lacks complexity and depth, losing out to Odysseus (again) as a dramatic personality, since the Ithacan possesses much greater subtlety and dignity. It has even been argued by none other than H.D.F. Kitto that Odysseus is the real hero of the play, because he is the only one with the wit and wisdom to resolve the conflict in the Greek camp, and so bring the drama to a conclusion. The *Ajax*, like its hero, deserves to be defended from these unjust claims, so that it may take its rightful place of honour as one of the greatest heroic tragedies, rivalling even *Agamemnon*.

It would not be unfair to assume that Sophocles had good reason for starting immediately with the madness of Ajax, rather than explaining in detail the events that preceded it. The contest for the arms of Achilles is referred to only occasionally and obliquely in the play; it is likely that Sophocles was all too aware of Aeschylus' dramatisation of this episode in his lost play *The Judgement of Arms* (an episode retold brilliantly by Ovid in Book 11 of the *Metamorphoses*), and was anxious to avoid overt imitation. Sophocles chooses instead to focus on the suicide of Ajax as the narrative centre of the play; we discover why Ajax is doomed to die before he kills himself, and afterwards, why he deserves to be buried.

This is a play imbued with the spirit of the *Iliad*; its characters ironically recall or refer to the events of the epic. Ajax with his son Eurysaces replays the scene from *Iliad* 6 between Hector, Andromache and Astyanax; Teucer in his argument with Agamemnon reminds him of Ajax's defence of the Greek ships, narrated in *Iliad* 15. The second half of the *Ajax*, in particular, has many parallels with the final book of the *Iliad*. The *Iliad* does not end with the death of Hector, but with the burial of Hector; in the same way the *Ajax* ends with the hero's funeral. Just as Priam goes alone to beg Achilles to release the body of his son to be buried, Teucer stands alone defending his brother from the vicious and vengeful Atreidae, determined that he should have his due rites of burial. The unexpected intervention of Odysseus parallels Achilles' remarkable display of mercy to Priam.

However, it is important to remember that this intertextuality reflects a wider historical reality too. Ajax's body, like Hector's, could

not be allowed to remain unburied, if his spirit was to pass into Hades. Teucer may not have been able to protect him while he was alive, but he is determined to protect his body in death, and secure him his status as one of the honoured dead. The alternative is not only dishonour for Ajax and his family, but a disastrous loss of physical security too: the dependants of a shamed hero are at the mercy of all and sundry. The Atreidae insist that Ajax does not deserve the honour of a funeral, but Teucer knows that his shade will never have peace until his body has been consigned to the Underworld with the proper rites of burial. Although Odysseus persuades Agamemnon to consent to the burial, Teucer cannot permit him to take part in the funeral, for fear of offending his brother's ghost.

The dramatic tension of the second half of the play is thus generated by the question of whether Ajax's last prayer to the gods to guide him to Hades will be fulfilled. Although Teucer has to take the responsibility of saving his brother's body (just as Ajax did for Achilles after his death on the battlefield), and could therefore be seen as the chief agent of the play in its second half, Ajax's dramatic status in practice does not diminish with his death. It is easy to see the agon over his dead body between Teucer and the Atreidae as a post-mortem over formalities. (Certainly, that is how Agamemnon and Menelaus see it. If Ajax was not present on stage, it would be difficult to argue otherwise. But he continues to dominate the play in death as he did when alive. He grows in heroic stature, as his past deeds are loyally recounted by Teucer, while the Atreidae demean their royal rank, discrediting themselves in their attempt to discredit him. Even Odysseus, who was awarded the prize of the arms of Achilles over Ajax, pays tribute to his rival's bravery. Ajax is a giant who towers over all in this play; his tragic fault was to believe that he was equal to the gods of Olympus, because he was a god among men, and Athena punishes him for his pride. He cannot bear the agony of his humiliation and the shame he suffers. But his shadow continues to loom over the play after he has destroyed himself; only when he receives the respect he deserves does he leave the stage. Ajax dominates the *Ajax*, living and dead; the play rests on his shoulders.

Tamlin Walkem