



AJAX

SOPHOCLES

Global Grey ebooks

AJAX

**BY
SOPHOCLES**

ORIGINALLY WRITTEN 440 B.C.E

Ajax By Sophocles.

This edition was created and published by Global Grey

©GlobalGrey 2018



globalgreyebooks.com

CONTENTS

Dramatis Personae

Ajax

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.

MENELAUS: 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. (MENELAUS 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 accurst 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 stablished 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
