



# The Complete Plays of Sophocles

Sophocles

THE  
COMPLETE PLAYS  
OF SOPHOCLES

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*Translated by Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb*

Edited and with an Introduction by Moses Hadas



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# CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[AJAX](#)

[PERSONS](#)

[ELECTRA](#)

[PERSONS](#)

[OEDIPUS THE KING](#)

[PERSONS](#)

[ANTIGONE](#)

[PERSONS](#)

[TRACHINIAN WOMEN](#)

[PERSONS](#)

[PHILOCTETES](#)

[PERSONS](#)

[OEDIPUS AT COLONUS](#)

[PERSONS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[ABOUT THE EDITOR](#)

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# INTRODUCTION

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by Moses Hadas

A LIFE MORE satisfactory than Sophocles' is difficult to imagine. Its timing, first of all, could not be more propitious, for his lifespan coincided precisely with the Golden Age of Athenian intellectual, artistic, and political glory. He was born in 496 B.C., and so was reaching maturity at the time of the great victory over the Persians at Salamis (480 B.C.) which initiated the era of Athenian preeminence, and he died in 406, two years before Athens fell to the Spartans. On his youth we are informed by a single but revealing passage in Athenaeus (1.20 e f):

Sophocles, besides being handsome in his youth, became proficient in dancing and music, while still a lad, under the instruction of Lampus. After the battle of Salamis, at any rate, he danced to accompaniment of his lyre around the trophy, naked and anointed with oil. Others say he danced with his cloak on. And when he brought out the *Thamyris* he played the lyre himself. He also played ball with great skill when he produced the *Nausicaa*.

To perform in the chorus celebrating the victory he must have been wealthy and of good family as well as handsome and a good singer. In his maturity his circle included the greatest galaxy of thinkers and artists the world has known. He appears to have been an intimate of Herodotus, to whom he addressed a poem and from whom he borrowed motifs in *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. He was a popular favorite; in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (completed after Sophocles' death) it is said of him that "he was amiable on earth and he is amiable here." The respect and affection which he enjoyed brought him election to high office, which he bore with modesty. Plutarch (*Life of Nicias* 15) has this story:

Once when his fellow commanders were deliberating on some matter of general moment, Nicias bade Sophocles the poet state his opinion first, as being the senior general on the board. Hereupon Sophocles said: "I am the oldest man but you are the senior general."

He wrote more plays than his rivals and won far more prizes. He retained his intellectual and physical vigor to the end of his very long life; the superb *Philoctetes* and no less superb *Oedipus at Colonus* were written when he was approaching or had reached ninety. The story is told (in Cicero's treatise *On Old Age* and elsewhere) that when his family instituted a friendly suit to declare him senile in order to relieve him of business cares, he was asked by the judge to show what he was occupying himself with, and read the famous ode in praise of White Colonus; the family naturally lost the suit. Not long before this he is said to have fallen in love with a woman called Theoris, though at the beginning of Plato's *Republic* he is quoted as expressing great relief at being freed at last from the tyranny of love.

And a final satisfaction, especially for a Greek, was that he left behind a son who followed his own profession with success. We can only agree with the lines of the comic poet Phrynichus: "Blessed Sophocles who died after a long life, a man fortunate and successful, who made many fine tragedies. And finely did he die, having had no evil to endure." The concluding phrase seems to allude to a recurrent thought in Sophocles expressed as follows at the end of the *Oedipus*: "While our eyes wait to see the destined final day, we must call no one happy who is of mortal race, until he has crossed life's border, free from pain." His own good fortune did not blind Sophocles to the precariousness of human existence and the tragedy implicit in human life. He saw life steadily (in Matthew Arnold's phrase) and he saw it whole.

Sophocles composed more than 120 plays, thus outdoing his older contemporary Aeschylus and his younger Euripides. His tetralogies were twenty-four "firsts," which means that ninety-six of his plays were

victorious. Of the whole number only the seven in this volume have survived intact—because they were selected for school use in late antiquity. Of the others we have some snippets, either in quotations by later Greek authors or on scraps of papyrus recovered in Egypt. The most extensive papyrus fragment contains some 400 lines of the *Ichneutae* or *Trackers*, a satyr play dealing with the prodigious infancy of Hermes; but these lines are too broken to yield a readable translation. We can only hope that the ancient scholars who chose the plays that survived have given us a fair representation of Sophocles' work.

Ancient criticism agreed with the judges of Sophocles' own day in regarding him as the greatest master of tragedy. The *Poetics* of Aristotle, our indispensable (though not flawless) guide to Greek tragedy, shows a preference for Sophocles over his rivals. But the Academy as well as the Lyceum preferred Sophocles. Polemo (314–276), who was head of the Academy, says that Homer is the Sophocles of epic and Sophocles the Homer of tragedy. Ancient criticism generally agrees with this view. It agrees too with Aristotle's preference for *Oedipus the King* as the best play. "Would anyone in his senses," writes the author of *On the Sublimity*, "give the single tragedy of Oedipus for all the works of Ion in a row?" Traditional criticism has tended to follow the ancient view of Sophocles as the model, with Aeschylus marking the preparation and Euripides the decline; we now recognize that categorization of this kind is meaningless, for each poet had his own objectives and his own methods for reaching them.

Superficially the plays of all three surviving Greek tragedians are similar: they quarry the same cycles of myths, and often use the same story and the same *dramatis personae*, they show the same structure of "spoken" portions interlarded with choral lyrics, and they are all concerned with questions of man's fate. The lives of the three overlapped and they learned from one another, Aeschylus from Sophocles, Sophocles from Aeschylus and Euripides, Euripides from Aeschylus and Sophocles. Even

slight variations in outlook and technique are therefore conscious and meaningful. The easiest approach to the special qualities of each playwright and thinker, and especially of Sophocles who is our present concern, is to compare his techniques with those of the other two.

According to Aristotle, innovations introduced by Sophocles included enlargement of the chorus from twelve to fifteen members, introduction of painted scenery, and the addition of a third actor. This last was far the most important, and was adopted in the later plays of Aeschylus. The availability of a third actor multiplied opportunities for dramatic intrigue with consequent enrichment of plot, and made fuller and more subtle characterization possible. Even if the third actor has little to add to dialogue his very presence on the stage sharpens the significance of others' speeches and reactions. All of these contributions are in keeping with Sophocles' highly developed and sophisticated sense of theater, in which he surpasses both Aeschylus and Euripides. A character may go on some errand, like Chrysothemis in *Electra*, or be summoned for some information, like the shepherd in *Oedipus the King*, be virtually forgotten and then dramatically arrive on the scene to a situation drastically changed. Or, just before the catastrophe, the chorus will sing an exultant song of joyous anticipation to give the disaster that comes upon its heels greater impact.

The two actors in Aeschylus' early plays tend to illustrate clashes of large principles, in which Aeschylus was more interested than in individuals, and serve almost as impersonal symbols. Sophocles is content to accept the principles as fixed data, as if they were laws of gravity or electricity, part of the world order, and instead concerns himself with the individual's reaction to them. This explains another peculiarity of Sophocles (in which he was followed by Euripides) as contrasted with Aeschylus. Aeschylus composed trilogies on interconnected subjects, so that they are in effect triptychs, almost three acts of one large play. For working out the history of crime and countercrime and their eventual

solution, as in the *Oresteia* (which is the only complete trilogy we have such spaciousness is required. But if it is the reaction of the individual as person, not as an abstract figure in the history of a principle, that is paramount, then a single play is sufficient. Sophocles, too, composed trilogies, as the usage of the Greek theater required, but the three plays were not connected in subject and might derive from different cycles of myth.

Sophocles' concern with individual character and the maturity of his dramatic structure suggest a move in the direction of the theater as we know it; but Sophocles did not travel so far in this direction as did Euripides. Euripides, too, used the familiar myths, but in Euripides the figures who bear the great names of the heroic past are essentially contemporary types oppressed by contemporary problems. His descent from the heroic is a perceptible move in the direction of Menander and the comedy of manners. Sophocles maintains the high dignity of the heroic level; his major figures are indeed as grandiose as Homer's. Not that he was ignorant of what men are actually like: he himself said that Euripides showed men as they are while he portrayed men as they should be. It is even possible that plays like Sophocles' *Electra* or his *Trachinian Women* are in part intended as "corrections" of Euripides' vulgarity in handling similar themes. Euripides' *Electra* is slatternly, self-pitying, sex-ridden, and because she and the other characters in his *Electra*, victims as well as slayers, are recognizable as commonplace types, the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are as unjustifiable as they are shocking. Euripides does not keep within the heroic code but is criticizing it from without. We do not apply contemporary criteria to Sophocles' *Electra* because the traditional level of heroic remoteness is maintained and raises the problem above the contemporary. Euripides' *Medea* is a wildly passionate woman who knowingly uses a poisoned garment to destroy her rival; in Sophocles' *Trachinian Women* Deianeira also uses a poisoned garment but with the thought that the drug is beneficent, not lethal. She is a mature and gentle creature who wanted only to ensure domestic felicity. An



while her mistake causes her suicide and Heracles' painful death, the death was the fated instrument of his transfiguration.

The Heracles of the *Trachinian Women* may serve as the type of the Sophoclean hero, the large and intense and tormented character who is by no means faultless but who nevertheless achieves the status of hero. A hero, in the Greek sense, is a man who by his extraordinary career has pushed back the horizons of what is possible for humanity and is therefore deemed worthy of commemoration after his death. He is not a flawless man, above the nature of ordinary humanity, but his flaws are inherent and inseparable from the virtues which enable him to become a hero. Achilles himself was self-centered and ruthless, but without these traits he would not have been Achilles, and his status as hero is unquestioned. Some of Sophocles' heroes may be questionable, and his plays then amount to a weighing of merits and demerits and an eventual demonstration that the hero is in fact worthy of heroization.

The clearest example is in the oldest Sophoclean play, *Ajax*. Ajax is an unqualified brute, arrogant, obsessed with self, savage, unfeeling to his wife and his crew who are dependent upon him. His flaws are serious indeed, but he is the only Greek who could stem the rush of the Trojan army to burn the Greek fleet—not a service a nambypamby could render. Did such a man deserve heroization? The *Ajax* is a demonstration that he did. More popular plays like *Oedipus the King* and the *Antigone* receive fuller illumination from this viewpoint. It is always tempting to readers to look upon the *Oedipus* as a tableau of horrible crimes and their just requital: Oedipus had done lawless things and in the end received deserved punishment. So conceived, the requital seems monstrously unfair, for Oedipus had done his best to avoid the crimes and had committed them unwittingly. Actually the play is rather a glorification than a condemnation of Oedipus. Only an uncommonly good man would persist in his investigation so unflinchingly even after it had become manifest that it might be disastrous. He did indeed have flaws: he was self-righteous and

hasty and suspicious of his well-wishers; but if he had not been these things he could never have gone on with his inquiry. Though he is destroyed in the end, in a true sense he is the victor, and the conclusion is satisfying rather than disturbing to the perceptive reader. According to human standards (what Greek could know what divine standards might be?) Oedipus had behaved not only well, but extraordinarily well and had asserted the dignity of manhood. If there is a villain in the piece it is not Oedipus but Apollo; however, Apollo cannot be a villain for he is a god and the moral arithmetic of the gods is different from men's and inscrutable to men. When a man behaving well as man is nevertheless tripped up by powers he cannot control or even understand, then we have tragedy. And the "big" man who has the mind and the energy to pioneer is most exposed. That is why tragedy, and the tragedy of Sophocles in particular, is concerned with the fate of "big" men.

The Sophoclean heroine whom modern readers are most tempted to consider flawless is Antigone, who suffered martyrdom for loyalty to her dead brother. But martyrdom is not necessarily a virtue among the Greeks and to look upon her as a saint and her persecutor Creon as a villain is to make of the play a black-and-white melodrama, which Greek tragedy never is. To the original audience Creon's position must have seemed sounder than Antigone's. Could a conscientious ruler honor a traitor who had come to destroy the city equally with the patriot who had saved it? And should not Antigone have accepted the authoritative decree, as Ismene says it was proper for a woman and a subject to do? In the end Creon suffers more than Antigone, who got the martyrdom she seems to crave, and we might almost expect the play to be called *Creon* instead of *Antigone*. But the title is right, for Antigone is the one who enlarges ordinary human limitations by being willing to sacrifice love and life for principle. She too may be obsessed and twisted, but unless she were these things she could never have carried her enlargement of humanity through. As always in Sophocles the chorus and lesser characters counsel the moderation appropriate to ordinary humanity, but it is an enrichment for

ordinary humanity to see one self-willed woman, flawed though she be, step out of ordinary limitations. Just as Oedipus though blinded is the victor in his play, so Antigone though dead is victor in hers.

Involved in both *Ajax* and *Antigone* is the question of the proper balance between the claims of the individual and the claims of the society of which he is a part. How far must a man suppress his own will in the interests of his society? What if society's demands are unreasonable or wrong? How far may an individual disregard society in order to do what he himself is convinced is right? To some degree the theme is touched upon in all the plays; it is central in the *Philoctetes*. Philoctetes was a respected member of the original Greek expedition against Troy and possessor of the wonderful bow which Heracles had used in his labors. En route to Troy he had offered to guide his fellow-chieftains to a particular shrine, and had there been bitten by a serpent. Because of the stench of his wound and his loud cries of pain his shipmates marooned him on a desert island. (The island in question was in fact inhabited, as everyone in the audience would know and as Aeschylus and Euripides represented it in their plays on *Philoctetes*; the fact that Sophocles makes it deserted demonstrates that his theme is isolation vs. participation.) On this island the helpless cripple, thanks to his bow, eked out a living for ten years, when the Greeks admonished that Troy could not be taken without Philoctetes and his bow sent Odysseus and Achilles's son Neoptolemus to fetch Philoctetes back to the army. Philoctetes refuses to go, though he is promised recovery and fame, and would actually use the bow, which Neoptolemus voluntarily restores to him after robbing him of it, to kill Odysseus. His desire is to live in isolation with Neoptolemus who, in his view, is being corrupted by Odysseus and the Greek host. Heracles, who had used the bow for the benefit of mankind, appears as *deus ex machina* and persuades Philoctetes to rejoin the society he has abjured.

The problem of Neoptolemus echoes and underscores the problem of Philoctetes. He too was a member of society in good standing, was utterly

disillusioned by society's apparent immorality, and then made to realize that duty and interest alike dictated rational subservience to the claims of society. Neoptolemus had come to Troy after the death of his father Achilles in the tenth year of the war. But instead of the noble warrior's career he had envisioned he finds his first assignment is to trick a helpless man of his only means of subsistence. He is sickened; but in the end he rejoins society as a mature and responsible member. Odysseus is not the villainous corrupter of youth he is sometimes represented to be but the conscientious and realistic agent of the state. At another time, as Odysseus himself says, he could enjoy being honest as much as any man, but it was a luxury he could not afford when the interests of all demanded chicanery.

Sophocles was reputed to be a pious man, and indeed his plays are filled with the power of the gods and the unfailing fulfillment of their oracles. But what are we to think of gods who are the ultimate cause of the heroes' catastrophes? How could a god cause a serpent to ruin Philoctetes when he was on a religious mission, or why should a god trap Oedipus in a hopeless snare? Aeschylus had labored to justify the ways of the gods to men according to human notions of justice, and Euripides went so far as to say that gods who do evil are no gods. Sophocles acknowledges the power of the gods but does not assume that their standards of justice are the same as man's. Protagoras, a philosopher contemporary with Sophocles, said "Man is the measure of all things," and also said, "Of the gods I cannot speak because I do not know." The sphere of the gods and the sphere of men are disparate. The gods behave as it becomes gods to behave, and men must behave as it becomes men to behave, not necessarily as the gods behave. Actually man has a greater responsibility for moral choice than if he were bidden to follow a prescribed code. When he does transgress, even unwittingly as Oedipus did, he is tainted; and in *Oedipus the King* Oedipus acknowledges that he is "vile." In *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, we detect a new note. Oedipus does not deny that he is tainted, for he has in fact killed his father and married his mother, but he insists that he is not in a moral sense a guilty man: "In *nature* how was I evil?" This is not

rebelliousness but a clarification and an enhancement of the notion of moral responsibility. And the justice of the argument is approved, for at his death Oedipus receives divine recognition and his tomb becomes a seat of beneficent power.

In its conception of tragedy as in its art, *Oedipus at Colonus* is the culmination of Sophocles' career. The play is something of a valedictory like Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and something of an apocalypse. The scene is the parish of Sophocles' boyhood and the description of the landscape and religious ritual suggest cherished memories of long ago. The dramatic personae, Oedipus, Antigone, and the rest, are those associated with his greatest successes. And as Athens is sinking to its fall, Sophocles recalls in the person of its ideal king of legend, its nobility, integrity, and hospitality and its mission of championship of the weak, and ends with a note of hope and benediction. Oedipus enters as a blind old man who has walked a long way, but has retained his pride and his integrity, and when the moment of his departure comes, he walks on and out, this time with clearer vision than his guides, to the destined secret spot where, amidst peals of thunder, he is translated to a new and eternal existence.

Such observations on Sophocles' dramaturgy as the foregoing, whether of similar or widely different tenor, are accessible to the Greekless reader who looks at the plays attentively. But the refinements of Sophocles' literary techniques most of us must take on faith. For a helpful analogy we might turn to architecture, which uses stones instead of foreign words, and specifically to the Parthenon, which was built while Sophocles was writing. What makes the Parthenon so rhythmically satisfying is not its apparent regularity but its subtly calculated irregularities. The columns are not straight-sided, perpendicular, and evenly spaced, as they appear, and the base line is not level but curved. The result is a seemingly natural and powerful whole, so rhythmical and harmonious that its power is never obtrusive. The analogous art of Sophocles serves similarly to regularize the extremes of passionate intensity into serene and natural entities of classical

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What is wanted and possible in a translation of Sophocles is not reproduction of his art but the sense that the art is there. Admirable as certain poetic versions of Sophocles are, their excellence is not (and should not be) identical with the excellence of their originals. A reader who attends to Sophocles as a monument in the history of the human spirit may find transparent prose a truer reflection than verse. But the prose must not be commonplace, as it may be for Euripides; it must communicate the stately remoteness of the original. The most carefully wrought prose version of Sophocles in English is that of Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb (1841–1905), which has the merit not only of extreme accuracy but also of maintaining a high formalism and dignity appropriate to Sophocles. Jebb's device for lending dignity to a prose version of stately poetry was to use archaism in vocabulary, wordforms, word order—in a word, to emulate the English of the King James Bible. But to readers not brought up on the King James Bible the extremes of the “forsoothly” mode are sometimes unintelligible and may sometimes seem ludicrous. The object of the present edition has been to substitute moderate for extreme archaism in vocabulary, syntax, and word order in cases where the modern reader might be puzzled, but without distorting the emphasis or vitiating the sense of stately remoteness which is Jebb's special merit. The choral portions have been left untouched or very slightly edited; their difference from the “spoken” portions should be perceptible, and the use of italic type as well as the retention of archaisms is intended to make them so.

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## AJAX

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THE CHARACTER OF AJAX, AS FIXED IN THE *ILIAD* and therefore familiar to the audience, was of an extraordinarily powerful man, next to Achilles the best of the Greek warriors at Troy, but also of a man extraordinarily headstrong and self-centered. After Achilles' death according to legend, the divine armor made for him by Hephaestus was to be given to the worthiest of his survivors, and Ajax naturally expected the prize. Instead the chieftains voted to award it to Odysseus. Ajax's consequent hatred of Odysseus is mentioned in the *Odyssey*: when the two meet in Hades, Ajax refuses to speak to Odysseus but turns his back on him.

The opening of the play informs us that in chagrin at his disappointment Ajax was on the point of murdering the Greek generals; to save them Athena darkened Ajax's senses so that he mistook the army's livestock for the generals and slaughtered them instead. When Ajax recovers and realizes, not that his intention was wrong, but that its miscarriage would make him ridiculous, he determines on suicide. He ignores the pleas of Tecmessa and the chorus, bids his child farewell, and departs. Soon he returns, ostensibly reconciled to life; he says he will go and bury his unlucky sword by the seaside and then have peace forevermore. After Ajax has gone and the chorus has sung its premature joy, a messenger from Teucer brings Calchas' warning that Ajax must be kept indoors that day. The chorus and Tecmessa leave to find him. The scene changes to seaside sedge (the only change of scene in the extant plays of Sophocles) and there Ajax makes a farewell speech, with a curse for the Atreidae, buries his sword point up, and falls upon it. The searchers enter and the body of Ajax is found, fittingly by Tecmessa. Teucer comes to bury the body but is forbidden to do so, first by Menelaus, whom he outfaces, and then by

Agamemnon, who presents a reasonable argument for denying burial to Odysseus, despite Ajax' animosity toward him, persuades Agamemnon to allow the burial.

Modern readers sometimes find the dispute about the burial anticlimactic and irrelevant; but the last third of the *Ajax* is not a *Hamlet* without Hamlet. It is not an episode in Ajax' life which is the theme but the totality of his career. To assess his career justly the arguments for and against burial are relevant, and the final decision puts the seal on Ajax' claim to heroization.



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# PERSONS

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ATHENA

ODYSSEUS

AJAX

CHORUS OF SALAMINIAN  
SAILORS

EURYSACES, ATTENDANTS,  
HERALDS (*mute characters*)

TECMESSA

TEUCER

MENELAUS

AGAMEMNON

SCENE: *Before the tent of Ajax at Troy.*

(*ODYSSEUS is seen scanning footprints, ATHENA aloft.*)

ATHENA. Always I have seen you, son of Laertes, seeking to snatch some occasion against your enemies; and now at the tent of Ajax by the ships, where he is posted at the very edge of the camp, see you pausing long on his trail and scanning his fresh tracks, to find whether he is within or without the camp, or abroad. Your course keen-scenting as a Laconian hound's leads you well to your goal. Even now that the man is gone within, sweat streaming from his face and from hands that have slain with the sword, there is no further need for you to peer within these doors. But what is your aim in this eager quest? Speak, so that you may learn from her who can give you light.

ODYSSEUS. Voice of Athena, dearest to me of the Immortals, how clearly, though you are unseen, do I hear your call and seize it in my soul, as when a Tyrrhenian clarion speaks from mouth of bronze. You have rightly discerned that I am hunting to and fro on the trail of a foeman, Ajax of the mighty shield. It is he and no other that I have been tracking so long.

This night he has done to us a thing unthinkable—if he is indeed the doer. We know nothing certain but drift in doubt, and I took upon me the burden of this search. We have lately found the cattle, our spoil, dead, slaughtered by human hand, and dead beside them the guardians of the flock.

All men lay this crime to him. A scout who had descried him bounding alone over the plain with reeking sword brought me tidings and declared the matter. Then straightway I rushed upon his track; sometimes I recognize the footprints as his, but sometimes I am bewildered and cannot reach whose they are. Your help is timely; yours is the hand that always guides my course, as in the past so for the days to come.

ATHENA. I know it, Odysseus, and came early on the path, a watcher friendly to your chase.

ODYSSEUS. Dear mistress, is my toil to some purpose?

ATHENA. Know that yonder man is the doer of these deeds.

ODYSSEUS. Why was his insensate hand so fierce?

ATHENA. In bitter wrath touching the arms of Achilles.

ODYSSEUS. Why then this furious onslaught upon the flocks?

ATHENA. It was in your blood, as he thought, that he was dyeing his hand.

ODYSSEUS. What? Was this design aimed against the Greeks?

ATHENA. He would have accomplished it too if I had been careless.

ODYSSEUS. How had he laid these bold plans? What could inspire such hardihood?

ATHENA. He went forth against you in the night, by stealth and alone.

ODYSSEUS. And did he come near us? Did he reach his goal?

ATHENA. He was already at the doors of the two chiefs.

ODYSSEUS. What cause stayed his eager hand from murder?

ATHENA. I, even I, withheld him, for I cast upon his eyes the tyrannous fancies of his baneful joy. He turned his fury aside on the flocks of sheep and the confused droves guarded by herdsmen, the spoil which you had not yet divided. He fell upon the horned throng dealing death and hewing them to the earth around him. Now he thought that the two Atreidae were the prisoners whom he slew with his hand, now it was this chief and now that, at each new onset. And while the man raved in the throes of frenzy I still urged him and hurled him into the toils of doom. Presently, when he rested from this work, he bound together the living oxen and the sheep and brought them home, as though his captives were men and not good cattle. And now he is tormenting them, bound together, in the house.

But I will show you this madness openly, so that when you have seen it you may proclaim it

all the Greeks. Be steadfast and of good courage, nor look for evil from the man, for I will turn the vision of his eyes away and keep them from seeing your face.

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Ho, you who are binding the back-bent arms of your captives with cords, you I call; come here, Ajax, what ho! come forth from the house!

ODYSSEUS. What are you doing, Athena? Never call him out.

ATHENA. Hold your peace! Do not earn the name of coward!

ODYSSEUS. Forbear, I pray you; be content that he stay inside.

ATHENA. What is the danger? Was he not a man before?

ODYSSEUS. Yes, an enemy to your servant, and still is.

ATHENA. And to mock at enemies—is that not the sweetest mockery?

ODYSSEUS. Enough for me that he remain within his doors.

ATHENA. You are afraid of seeing a madman in full view?

ODYSSEUS. No fear could make me shun him if he were sane.

ATHENA. But even now he shall not see you, though you are near.

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

ATHENA. I will darken them though they are open.

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

ATHENA. Stand silent, then, and stay where you are.

ODYSSEUS. I must stay. I wish that I were far from here!

ATHENA. What ho, Ajax, once again I call you! Is this your scanty regard for your ally?

AJAX (*enters, holding a bloodstained scourge*). Hail, Athena! Hail, Zeus-born maid! How well you have stood by me! Yes, I will crown your shrine with trophies of pure gold for this prize!

ATHENA. Fairly spoken. But tell me this—have you dyed your sword well in the Greek camp?

AJAX. That is my boast; I do not disclaim it.

ATHENA. And perhaps turned your armed hand on the Atreidae?

AJAX. So that they will never again dishonor Ajax.

ATHENA. The men are dead, as I take your meaning?

AJAX. ~~Dead. Now let them rob me of my arms!~~

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ATHENA. Good. And then the son of Laertes—in what plight have you left him? Has he escaped you?

AJAX. What, you ask me about that accursed fox?

ATHENA. Yes, about Odysseus, your adversary.

AJAX. No guest so welcome, lady. He is sitting in the house—in bonds. I do not mean him to die just yet.

ATHENA. What would you do first? What larger advantage would you win?

AJAX. First he shall be bound to a pillar beneath my roof—

ATHENA. The unlucky man; what will you do to him?

AJAX.—and have his back crimsoned with the scourge before he dies.

ATHENA. Do not torture the wretch so cruelly.

AJAX. In all else, Athena, have your will, I say; but *his* doom shall be no other than this.

ATHENA. Since it pleases you to do this, then, do not hold your hand, do not abate one jot of your intention.

AJAX. I go to my work. Always stand at my side, I charge you, as you have stood today! (*Exit.*)

ATHENA. Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the strength of the gods? Whom could you have found more prudent than this man or more valiant for the service of the time?

ODYSSEUS. I know none. I pity him in his misery for all that he is my foe, because he is bound fast to dread doom. I think of my own lot no less than his. For I see that we are but phantoms, all we who live, or fleeting shadows.

ATHENA. Marking such things, therefore, see that your own lips never speak a haughty word against the gods, and assume no proud posture if you prevail above another in prowess or by store of ample wealth. For a day can humble all human things and a day can lift them up, but the wise of heart are loved of the gods, and the evil are abhorred.

CHORUS (*enters*). *Son of Telamon, you whose wave-girt Salamis is firmly throned upon the sea, when your fortunes are fair I rejoice, but when the stroke of Zeus comes upon you, or the angry rumor of the Danaï with noise of evil tongues, then I tremble and am in great fear, like a winged dove with troubled eye.*

*And so, telling of the night now spent, loud murmurs beset us for our shame; telling how you visited the meadow wild with steeds and destroyed the cattle of the Greeks, their spoil, prizes of the*

spear which had not yet been shared, slaying them with flashing sword.

~~—Such are the whispered slanders that Odysseus breathes into all ears, and he wins large belie~~  
For now the tale that he tells of you is specious; and each hearer rejoices more than he who told  
despitefully exulting in your woes.

Yes, point your arrow at a noble spirit and you shall not miss; but should a man speak such  
things against me he would win no faith. 'Tis on the powerful that envy creeps. Yet the small without  
the great can ill be trusted to guard the walls; lowly leagued with great will prosper best, great  
served by less.

But foolish men cannot be led to learn these truths. Even such are the men who rail against  
you, and we are helpless to repel these charges without you, O King. Verily, when they have escaped  
your eye they chatter like flocking birds; but terrified by the mighty vulture, suddenly, if you should  
perchance appear, they will cower still and dumb.

Was it the Tauric Artemis, child of Zeus, that drove you—O dread rumor, parent of my shame  
—against the herds of all our host, in revenge, I suppose, for a victory that had paid no tribute  
whether it was that she had been disappointed of glorious spoil, or because a stag had been slain  
without a thank-offering? Or can it have been the mail-clad Lord of War that was wroth for  
dishonor to his aiding spear and took vengeance by nightly wiles?

Never of your own heart, son of Telamon, would you have gone so far astray as to fall upon the  
flocks. Verily, when the gods send madness it must come; but may Zeus and Phoebus avert the evil  
rumor of the Greeks!

And if the great chiefs charge you falsely in the rumors which they spread, or sons of the  
wicked line of Sisyphus, forbear, O my king, forbear to win me an evil name by still keeping your  
face thus hidden in the tent by the sea.

Nay, up from your seat, wheresoever you are brooding in this pause of many days from battle  
making the flame of mischief blaze up to heaven! But the insolence of your foes goes abroad without  
fear in the breezy glens, while all men mock with taunts most grievous; and my sorrow passes me  
away.

TECMESSA (enters). Mariners of Ajax, of the race that springs from the Erechtheidae, sons of the soil—  
mourning is the portion of us who care for the house of Telamon far away. Ajax, our dread lord of  
rugged might, now lies stricken with a storm that darkens the soul.

CHORUS. What is the heavy change from yesterday's fortune which this night has produced? Daughter  
of the Phrygian Teleutas, speak; for to you, his spear-won bride, bold Ajax has borne a constant  
love. You may therefore hint the answer with knowledge.

TECMESSA. Oh, how shall I tell a tale too dire for words? Terrible as death is the fate which you must  
hear. Seized with madness in the night, our glorious Ajax has been utterly undone. For evidence you  
may see within his dwelling the butchered victims weltering in their blood, sacrifices of no hand but  
his.

CHORUS. What tidings of the fiery warrior have you told, not to be borne nor yet escaped, tidings which  
the mighty Danaï noise abroad, which their strong rumor spreads! Woe is me, I dread the doom that  
come. Shamed before all eyes, the man will die, if his frenzied hand has slain with dark sword the  
herds and the horse-guiding herdsmen.

TECMESSA. *Alas! It was from those pastures that he came to me with his captive flock! Of part he cut the throats on the floor within; some he rent asunder, hewing their sides. Then he caught up two white-footed rams. Of one he sheared off the head and the tongue-tip and flung them away; the other he bound upright to a pillar, and seized a heavy thong of harness, and flogged with shriek and doubled lash, while he uttered revilings which a god, and no mortal had taught.*

CHORUS. *The time has come for each of us to veil his head and betake him to stealthy speed of foot, and to sit on the bench at the quick oar and give her way to the seafaring ship. Such angry threats are hurled against us by the brother-kings, the sons of Atreus, that I fear to share a death by stoning, smitten at the side of this man who is swayed by a fate to which none may draw near.*

TECMESSA. *It sways him no longer. The lightnings flash no more. Like a southern gale, fierce in its first onset, his rage is abating; and now, in his right mind, he has new pain. To look on self-wrought woes, when no other has had a hand in them—this lays sharp pangs to the soul.*

CHORUS. But if his frenzy has ceased I have good hope that all may yet be well. The trouble is of less account when once it is past.

TECMESSA. Which would you choose, if the choice were given you: to pain your friends and have delights yourself, or to share the grief of friends who grieve?

CHORUS. Twofold sorrow is the greater ill, lady.

TECMESSA. Then we are now losers, though the plague is past.

CHORUS. What is your meaning? I do not understand.

TECMESSA. While he was frenzied that man found his own joy in the dire fantasies which held him, though his presence was grievous to us who were sane; but now since he has had pause and respite from the plague, *he* is utterly afflicted with deep grief and we likewise, no less than before. Have we not here two sorrows instead of one?

CHORUS. We have indeed; and I fear lest the stroke of a god has fallen. How else, if his spirit is now lighter now that the malady is past than when it vexed him?

TECMESSA. That is how the matter stands, be sure.

CHORUS. How did the plague first swoop upon him? Tell us, who share your pain, how it came about.

TECMESSA. You shall hear all that happened, for you have a share in it. At dead of night, when the evening lamps were out, he seized a two-edged sword and was eager to go forth on an aimless path. I chided him and said, "What are you about, Ajax? Why will you make this sally unsummoned? No messenger has called you, no trumpet has sounded; the whole army is asleep."

He answered me in curt phrase and trite: "Woman, silence graces women." Thus taught, I desisted, and he rushed out alone. What happened abroad I cannot tell. He came in with his captives bound together—bulls, shepherd dogs, and fleecy prisoners. Some he beheaded; of some he cut the

back-bent throat or cleft the chine; others he tormented in their bonds as though they were men with onslaughts on the cattle.

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At last he darted forward through the door and began ranting to some creature of his brain, now against the Atreidae, now about Odysseus, with many a mocking boast of all the hurt he had wreaked on them in his raid. Presently he rushed back into the house once more; and then by slow painful steps regained his reason.

As his gaze ranged over the room full of his wild work, he struck his head and uttered a great cry; he fell down, a wreck amid the wrecks of the slaughtered sheep, and there he sat, with clenched nails tightly clutching his hair. At first, and for a long while, he sat dumb; then he threatened men with those dreadful threats if I did not describe all that had happened, and he asked in what straits his plight he stood. I told him all that had happened, friends, so far as I surely knew it. He straightway broke into bitter lamentations, such as I had never heard from him before, for he had always asserted that such wailing was for craven and lowhearted men. No cry of shrill complaint would pass his lips, only a deep sound, as of a moaning bull.

Prostrate now in his utter woe, tasting no food or drink, the man sits quiet where he has fallen amidst the sword-slain cattle. Plainly he yearns to do some dreadful deed; there is some such meaning in his words and his laments. Ah, my friends—indeed, this was my errand—come in and help if in any way you can. Men in his case can be won by the words of friends.

CHORUS. Tecmessa, daughter of Teleutas, dreadful are your tidings that our lord has been frenzied by his sorrows.

AJAX (*within*). Woe, woe is me!

TECMESSA. Soon, it seems, there will be worse. Did you not hear Ajax, did you not hear that resounding cry?

AJAX. Woe, woe is me!

CHORUS. The man seems to be distempered, or else to be grieving for the distempers which lately vexed him, when he sees their work.

AJAX. O my son, my son!

TECMESSA. Ah me! Eurysaces, it's for you he is calling! What can his purpose be? Where are you? Unhappy me!

AJAX. Ho, Teucer! Where is Teucer? Will his foray last forever? And I am perishing!

CHORUS. He seems to be sane. Come, open there, open! Perhaps even at the sight of us he may come to a more sober mood.

TECMESSA. Look, I open. You can see the man's deeds and his own plight.

(AJAX is discovered sitting amidst the slaughtered cattle.)

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AJAX. *Alas, good sailors, alone of my friends, alone still constant to your loyalty, see what a wave has just now surged around me and hemmed me in, under stress of a deadly storm!*

CHORUS. Ah, lady, how sadly true your report shows! The fact proves that no sane mind is here.

AJAX. *Alas, mates staunch in seacraft, you who manned the ship and made the oar-blade flash upon the brine—in you alone I see a defense against misery: come, slaughter me too!*

CHORUS. Hush your wild lips. Do not cure ill by ill, do not increase the anguish of the doom.

AJAX. *Do you see the bold, the strong of heart, the dauntless in battles with the foe—do you see how I have shown my prowess on creatures that feared no harm? Alas, the mockery! How I have been shamed!*

TECMESSA. Ajax my lord, I implore you, do not speak so!

AJAX. Out with you, begone!—Woe is me! Woe is me!

CHORUS. For the gods' love, yield to counsel and learn wisdom!

AJAX. *Wretch that I am, who suffered the accursed men to slip through my hands but fell on horned cattle and fine flocks and made their dark blood flow!*

CHORUS. Why grieve when the deed is past recall? These things can never be other than they are.

AJAX. *Ah, you who watch everything, you ready tool of every crime, ah, son of Laertes, you foul knave in all the host, I warrant you are laughing loud and long for joy!*

CHORUS. As the god gives, so every man laughs or mourns.

AJAX. *Yet would that I could see him, shattered though I am! Ah me, ah me!*

CHORUS. Speak no proud word. Do you not see to what a plight you have come?

AJAX. *O Zeus, father of my sires, would that I might slay that deep dissembler, that hateful knave, and the two brother-chiefs, and lastly die myself also!*

TECMESSA. When you make that prayer pray also that I too die. Why should I live when you are dead?

AJAX. *Alas, you darkness, my sole light! O you nether gloom, fairer for me than any sunshine! take me to dwell with you, yes take me. I am no longer worthy to look for help to the race of the gods, or for any good from men, the children of a day.*



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