

SOPHOCLES' AJAX

a modern translation by Dennis Daly



Wilderness House Press

CHORUS

Son of Telamon, lord
Of the island Salamis
Where the swelling sea-waves are held
In check. With some apprehension
We greet you. Not always as such:
When all is right with you, we are
Filled with gladness, rejoicing
At fortune's benevolent nod.
But when the fury of Zeus
Or the Argives' petulant tongues
Assail you, we tremble in fear,
Our dove-eyes lost in terror.
Even now, out of last night's
Fading blackness come rumors
Of dread and loathsome detail.
They say that you, lurking about
The grasslands where the horses feed
And run free, fell on the captive herds
And flocks, striking at them with your
Flashing sword, slaughtering them all.
This tale comes from Odysseus
Who presently is spreading
Scandal throughout the campground
By whispers and insinuations.
Any story he tells finds
Gullible listeners, and with each
Listener the exultation
And the gaiety grow. They, not
Surprisingly, revel in this
Distress of yours. For the higher
One aims, the surer his shaft
Will hit home. Yet if these same barbs
Were aimed at a lesser man, they
Would fall on deaf ears, not believed.

The strong are always the objects
Of envy. But without them
The weaker have little chance
Of protecting their possessions.
Only an alliance will do:
The weak supporting the strong,
And the strong, in turn, defending
The weak. These things the ignorant
Will not be taught. Instead, like fools,
They clamour against you. O master
We are powerless to defend you
Without your help. But show yourself
To them and they will cower
In silence like a flock of birds
Frozen to the hawk's dive.

Strophe

The tale they tell has mothered a terrible shame
On us all. Was it the high god's daughter,
Artemis, the bull rider, who coerced
Our master into this mad killing of cattle?
Was her anger fueled by a victory
Offering withheld: war-spoil or hunter's gift?
Or was it the bronze-clad war god,
Jealous of our master's success in battle,
Who revenged himself by sowing the havoc,
The strange occurrences of last night?

Antistrophe

Certainly the Son of Telamon would never
Of his own will take part in this heinous
Slaughtering of beasts. Can a man be blame-
Worthy if the gods tamper with his wits. We
think
Not. May Apollo and Zeus protect us

From these baneful rumors. But if the brother-
Kings have crafted a false story
(along with that bastard Son of Sisypnos),
You must not hide any longer in your tent.
Join us now and defend your good name.

Epode

Arise, why do you hesitate?
There is fighting to be done; your cause
Stalls without you. With each moment
Lost, the flames of hatred and ruin
Rise higher. Malice walks freely
On the open plain: your enemies continue
To slander you. And our hearts are filled
With grief, much grief.

(TECMESSA enters from the tent.)

TECMESSA

Shipmates of Ajax, descendants
Of the soil-sprung Erechthid line,
There is no joy for those who long
For the distant house of Telamon.
Our grim and absolute leader,
Ajax, is bewildered and storm-
Tossed by frightening tides.

CHORUS

What further misery has the night
Brought that was not evident
Yesterday. How did he come to this?
Answer us, daughter of Phrygian
Teleutas. Since you are his spear-won
Bride, and since he loves you and keeps

Nothing from you, let us know
What you know.

TECMESSA

Words fail me. How can I speak
The unspeakable? That which has
Happened is terrible, worse than death.
Ajax is mad. During the night
He was seized by evil obsessions;
The bloody results—his unholy
Sacrifices—lie within.

CHORUS

Strophe

That confirms it. There is no disputing
The powerful rumors which we have heard.
We seek escape where there is no escape.
We must wait for the inevitable,
The dread terminus that is our lot.
If, as it seems, he did slaughter
The herds and their guards, his death is
At hand. Ajax will die in dishonor.

TECMESSA

So, it was from the commons that he
Came, leading his bound, captive herd
To our tent. And here, mercilessly,
He cut them to pieces with his
Hewing sword. One white-footed
Ram he seized, cutting out
Its tongue and severing its head,
Throwing both to the ground.
Another of the same, tied
Upright to a post, he whipped

Fearfully with a double
Horse-harness, each blow whistling
As it fell. And all the while he
Shook with joy, uttering inhuman
Cries, ridiculing his victim.

CHORUS

Antistrophe

There is nothing left to do but cover
Our heads and quietly creep away over
The plains. Or meet on board ship at the oar-
Benches and plot a course for the open
Sea and safety. The Atridae's
Threats must not be taken lightly:
They'll stone him for certain, and us
If we stay to share our master's fate.

TECMESSA

Yet there is hope; like the aftermath
Of a lightening storm, a tumultuous
Southern gale, his rage abates. He
Becomes himself. But now there is
Other grief to torment him. He sees
Too clearly his handiwork, and bears
Alone a guilt-ridden anguish.

CHORUS

Though, if his madness has ended
Everything may yet be alright:
Trouble often becomes of less
Importance once it is past.

TECMESSA

Which would you choose then: to give
Pain to your friends and yourself
Experience nothing but joy,
Or share with them their misery?

CHORUS

Two griefs are a heavier
Burden than one, my lady.

TECMESSA

So, our sickness has ended
But our bodies do not recover.

CHORUS

What are you saying, Tecmessa?
We cannot understand you.

TECMESSA

While Ajax was out of his mind
He at least felt happiness,
No matter how evil his actions.
We, on the other hand, were horrified.
But now that he is well, he falls
Under the weight of bitter sorrow
And we are no less troubled
Than before. Is this not two
Griefs rather than just the one?

CHORUS

Yes, you are right, my lady.
Surely the anger of Zeus
Must be upon him. What else
Could explain his tormented state
Since his return to sanity?

TECMESSA

And so things stand now.

CHORUS

But how did his madness start?
Tell us, we are as deeply
Upset as you. Will you tell us?

TECMESSA

Have patience and I'll tell you as much
As I know.
Ajax in the dead of night
Left our bed, took up his two-edged sword
Intent upon some mischievous foray
Into the lampless camp. Hearing him
I asked, "Where are you going Ajax?
There's been no call to arms or message
Summoning you. The army still sleeps."
"Woman," he answered sharply, "keep to your-
self,
It's none of your business." I said nothing more.
Then he left, alone.
What happened next
I'm not certain. But at last he came back
With his captives: oxen, sheep, and shepherd
dogs
Roped together like defeated warriors.
After driving them inside, he, O god
Pity him, turned our tent into a house
Of slaughter: slitting their throats, beheading
Them—nothing seemed to quench his blood-rage.
Some of them held by bonds he abused
With words and blows as if they were human.
After a time he darted out the door
Conversing wildly with a phantom

Listener; and, thrashing the morning air
With a horrid laugh, he declared his vengeance
Now on the Atridae, now on Odysseus.
At length he stumbled in again with trembling
Body and eyes blank; he sat in the midst
Of his carnage groaning, and with angry fists
Pummeled his own face. He reached over to
touch the torn
Carcasses of his dying victims, then lurched
Back, clutching at his hair. There he sat,
Blood-soaked and silent, for a long time.
When at last he returned to his senses
He questioned me, demanding to know all
That had taken place. I hesitated,
But finally, out of fear for my life,
Told him everything I knew. Then he startled
Me with a cry so shrill and anguish-filled
That I could not believe it came from my hus-
band.
He had always taught us that shrill cries
Were for cowards and slaves. In distress
His own lament was like a bull's deep moan.
Yet even now he sits uttering loud cries,
As motionless as any of his slaughtered
Beasts. He surely means to harm himself.
Please, if you are truly his friends, come in,
Remind him of his nobility, speak
Of his virtues. In short, repay him
The friendship he has so often lent to you.

CHORUS

These are fearful tidings,
Tecmessa, our leader reduced by
His sorrows to a raging madness.

AJAX (from within)

Ai, Aiiii....

TECMESSA

Hear him, hear him, there is
Worse to come. He cries so pitifully!

AJAX

Aiiiiii....

CHORUS

What are we to think?
Is he still distempered and determined
In his bloody feud, or a suffering
Penitent shrieking for an end to pain?

AJAX

My son! Bring me my son!

TECMESSA

He calls for Eurysaces. But why?
O my son where are you? What should I do?

AJAX

Teucer! Teucer won't you come, return
From your petty raids and give comfort
To your brother, your perishing brother.

CHORUS

He seems quieter now. Open the door.
Perhaps old friends can quell his fever.

TECMESSA

See for yourself. (*She opens the door.*)

AJAX

Loyal friends
See what has become
Of a man who stood
Firm against a tide of blood.
I've drowned.
What are you gawking at?

CHORUS

Tecmessa, most unfortunate woman
Your report was too true. His wits are gone.

AJAX

Brave hearts, shipmates
Who rode with me
The sea-canyons, our oar-blades
Flashing upon the froth.
There is none left but you
In this red-stained world.
Kill me! Kill me now.

CHORUS

No, my lord, be reasonable. Another
Crime cannot cure you. You must bear your
pain.
Speak no more of this evil. You must live.

AJAX

I, mighty Ajax,
Scourge of the Trojans,
Conqueror of cattle,
A clown provoking
Laughter. Better dead.

CHORUS

Please my lord, don't talk like this. It's unseemly.

AJAX

Fools! wretches! out of my sight.

CHORUS

Calm yourself, in heavens name, we want only to help.

AJAX

I had them in my hands, my enemies here,
Caught in my clutches, but let them escape,
Instead spilling the dark blood of these
Innocent beasts. How could it happen?

CHORUS

Forget the past, Ajax, what's done is done.
Nothing you can do will change that.

AJAX

Odysseus,
Most counterfeit of all
Argives. Will you point me
Out to your friends
And have a good laugh?
Scum! Vile enemy!

CHORUS

Only the gods send laughter or tears,
We are not responsible for these gifts.

AJAX

If I could just get my hands on him,
Even in my wretched state I'd ...

CHORUS

My lord, you must quit this boasting; you are
In no condition to harm anyone.

AJAX

Zeus, father of my fathers,
How can I kill
That fiendish Odysseus
And his two partners
The brother-kings?
Let me kill them;
Then let me die.

TECMESSA

If you pray for your own death, you pray
For mine also, I am nothing without
Your protection; think of me, my lord.

AJAX Strophe

O night, take me
To your dwelling of darkness
Receive as friend one scoffed at
By the gods, unfit even for the world
Of men. Alas! One who feels
Your shadows even now
Fingering his mortal heart.
Take me as I am, stripped
Of nobility, like these
Contaminated beasts.
Take me, O friend; the army, with swords up-
Lifted, is bent on my destruction.

TECMESSA

Must a woman accept this? Her husband
Brought to such a fate, such despair.

AJAX

Antistrophe

Paths of churning
Seas, beach caves, and salt-pastures,
Too long have you held me
To this land of Troy; I'll not be kept
Living any longer. The
River Scamander, whose
Chill waters have cooled the hot
Blood of the Argives, shall
Never see this man again,
This Ajax who—listen well—
Had no peer in all the host from Hellas'
Land; but now forever dishonored.

CHORUS

We would restrain you, yet we pull away.
Is there nothing to be done? Is there no help?

AJAX

Ai, Aiii...
My name once, twice, and again thrice,
A harmony which mocks at misfortune.
And yet how fortunate: my name, its
Mortal cry, all in a sound so singular,
So final, a heart pierced. Aiii, how could
This happen? My father arrived here, fought
And returned bearing an honored name.
But I, his son, stronger, braver, fighting
On the same cursed soil, have lost my name,
My honor, have been reduced to a cry,

A wretched cry—but were Achilles
Living and were he to select among
The Argives a true champion to receive
His weapons, the just price for valiant deeds,
No rival would have stolen them from me.
But they have been stolen. The Atridae
Have conspired against me, ignoring
My every triumph, giving the prize
To a knave. And be assured, they never
Would have lived—those scoundrel brothers —to
fix

Another contest if I had not been blinded
At the last moment by that demon-eyed
Daughter of Zeus who, just as I was to
Strike the death-blow, sent a madness upon
Me. My hands now dipped in the gore and blood
Of these poor beasts—even to the elbows.
And they have escaped to laugh at my undoing.
A man can avenge nothing if the gods
Aid his enemies.

Now what should I do?

I am hated by the gods, the Trojans,
And even the Argives. Shall I sail for home
Across the Aegean Sea, deserting
The Atridae? What explanation would
I give to Telamon, my father? Would
His welcome be contempt for a son
Who after all these years returns with nothing,
Having lost even his father's battle-won fame?
No, I will not do it. Shall I then
Assault the walls of Troy demanding
Combat, and at least die bravely, fighting
Them all. No, that would only add honor
To the Atridae. That I won't do!
I must devise some act which will convince

My father his son is no coward.
For only a coward would accept a long
Endless life filled with misery, one day
Nearing death, the next snatched from its grasp—
Every hope becoming an illusion, a pretense
Concealing the ultimate end. One must
Live nobly. Or die nobly. There is nothing more.

CHORUS

None can deny your eloquence, Ajax,
Nor question your honesty; you have
Bared your soul to us. Therefore, let bitter
Thoughts cease, let misplaced passions die.
Ajax, please, listen to your friends.

TECMESSA

My husband, my dear husband,
Of all the evils which infect us
In this strange life, surely the hand of fate
Is cruelest. I was free born, a daughter
Of Phrygian wealth. My father a power
To be reckoned with among that people.
But he, a mere man, could not save me.
Now I am your consort, your bedmate. Was it
Your act, or heaven's will? Who can say? I
Am here and you are my husband. In the name
Of that bed which we still share and Zeus,
Protector of the hearth-fire, I beg you
Not to abandon me to the taunts and jeers
Of your enemies, nor leave me defenseless,
Prey to their lust-filled hearts. On the day you
die
They will seize us—myself and your son —
Abuse us, and drag us off into captivity
To our new duties as bond-slaves. Then someone,

One of your old rivals, will say mockingly,
"Look here, Ajax's wench. When he was
The mightiest of warriors her life
Was easy enough; how times have changed!"
Can't you hear them now? These words will
 sound

Harsh enough to me and add to my burdens,
But, even worse, they will be an affront
To your blood, a shame on your family.

O Ajax, think of your father, left
To face old age alone. And your mother,
Heartbroken after years of praying to the gods
For your safe return. Think of our son,
Bereft of a father's guiding example,
Left to the care of unkind, loveless guardians.
Will you consign him to that sorrow? Or me?
You are the only one left to me.

Your spear has ravaged my homeland. My father
And mother by another stroke of fate
Were death-afflicted and dwell now in Hades.
With you gone, where is my home, my happiness,
Where is my wealth? Can't you see,
Without you there is no hope for me. O husband
Remember our nights together. Will you forsake
Me now, after all I've given to you.
A man who accepts kindness but refuses
To return it can never call himself noble.

CHORUS

Ajax, will you not agree with her as we
Do, or at least feel compassion for her plight?

AJAX

She'll have my compassion when she obeys me.

TECMESSA

Whatever you want, Ajax, I'll do.

AJAX

Bring me my son, I wish to see him.

TECMESSA

I ... I sent him away while you were

AJAX

While I was ... ill. Is that what you mean?

TECMESSA

Yes, I thought you might ... harm him.

AJAX

Oh, that would have been a fitting touch,
A deed worthy of my recent fortune.

TECMESSA

Well, I averted that, didn't I?

AJAX

You did, and I am most grateful for your prudence.

TECMESSA

My husband, as things now stand, can I
Do anything for you?

AJAX

Bring him to me.
I want to talk with him face to face.

TECMESSA

He is close by, in the care of attendants.

AJAX

Send for him at once.

TECMESSA

Eurysaces, your father wants you. Bring Him here, whichever one of you holds his hand.

AJAX

Is he coming? Hasn't he heard you call?

Servant enters bringing Eurysaces.

TECMESSA

Here he is. One of the servants escorts him.

AJAX

Lift him up, lift him up so that I may
Hold him. He won't be frightened by this
Newly spilt blood if indeed he is
My son. He must be broken in to a
Soldier's rugged ways, growing like-natured
With his father.
My son, may you be
More fortunate than your father, but
In every other way like him, then will
You live well. Even now I envy
Your ignorance of these matters.
Life is best when one is oblivious
To evil. But someday, when you come
To know the meaning of evil, its pains
And even its pleasures, you'll show your true

Mettle, and soon enough men will speak of you
As Ajax's son.

Meanwhile feed off the feather-
Winds, living as a child should, a comfort
To your mother. And do not fear the Argives;
Even though I am gone, they will not
Bother you. I'll leave Teucer, whom more than
Anyone else I trust, to guard over you,
To care for you. That is, when he returns
From his raids.

And you, my seafaring warriors,
My friends, will you do this favor for me.
Tell Teucer to take the child to my home
And show him to Telamon and my mother,
Eriboea, that, until they enter the dark places
Of the nether god, he may bring some
Happiness to their old age. Will you
Also tell Teucer that my weapons
Must not be given away as prizes
By any arbiters of games, nor by the man
Who destroyed me. Here, my son, take this,
My greatest protection, my seven-fold shield—
You were named after it. Hold it firmly
And fearlessly by its leather thong;
May it serve you well as it has served me.
The rest of my weapons are to be
Buried in the safety of my grave.

(To *TECMESSA*)

Come quickly; take the child, seal the entrance.
For heavens sake, no crying or hand-wringing
Before the tent: women, it seems to me,
Are especially prone to hysteria.

Now hurry! Prayers and whining are of no
Use when sickness craves the corrective knife.

CHORUS

Why the haste Ajax?
That and the sharpness of your speech frightens
us.

TECMESSA

My lord, what are you planning to do?

AJAX

Stop questioning me. I won't answer.

TECMESSA

My heart bursts! By your son, by the gods
Don't abandon ... !

AJAX

Enough. Do you believe that I owe
Anything, anything at all to the gods?

TECMESSA

What's this, blasphemy?

AJAX

Speak to those who hear.

TECMESSA

Listen to me, my lord.

AJAX

I've listened to you for too long already.

TECMESSA

But I'm afraid

AJAX (*to the Attendants*)

Shut the doors. Shut them!

TECMESSA

Please, Ajax

AJAX

Foolish woman! Let me be.

(AJAX is sealed within the tent)

CHORUS

Strophe 1

Salamis, blessed sanctuary,
High above the lashing surf.
You reign in peacefulness, a jewel
Cherished above all others.
But we linger here, exiles
Camped on the fields of Ida,
A timeless vigil. We look
Forward only to that dreadful
Day when we enter the darkened
World of eternal fading.

Antistrophe 1

And now we are stricken by a new
Grief: Ajax, your loyal son
And our brave leader, has lost his wits.
Heaven has sent a frenzy
Upon him which has reduced
This warrior without peer
To a man of solitude

Who sits, companion to dire thoughts
And suspicious of everyone
Whether friend or enemy.

Strophe 2

His mother, poor woman, grey-haired
And burdened with old age, will
Surely collapse in despair
When she hears of her son's ruin.
Unlike a nightingale's plaintive notes,
Her sobs will sound in shriller strains
As she beats her shriveled breasts
And rends her wiry tresses.

Antistrophe 2

Better Hades should hide with darkness
The diseased soul of a man
Estranged from his true nature,
Languishing in an alien
Meter of misconceived illusion.
Wretched father, how will they tell
You of your son's affliction;
He, alone, of all your race, damned.

*(AJAX enters, carrying a sword. He is in control,
calmer.)*

AJAX

In time's illimitable universe
Nothing is kept forever hidden. All things
Are drawn from utter darkness, described
With light, then concealed again. Everything
Is possible – the most fervent oath may
Be broken, the most inflexible will, bent.
Even I, who a short time ago was

So tempered with the best steel, so determined,
Have lost my edge because of this woman
And her soft words. I hesitate to leave
A widow and an orphan son to the mercy
Of my enemies.

But now I will go
To the bathing-places and the meadows
By the beach and wash until I have
Cleansed these stains which soil me that I may
 appease
The anger of the goddess. Then I will find
Some secluded spot and hide this sword,
Most accursed of all weapons, where no one
Will see it, buried in the earth. May death
And darkness keep it there forever. Since
I took this gift from Hector, the greatest
Of my enemies, I have received no good
From the Argives. How true the old proverb:
An enemy's gift is not a gift, it brings
With it only grief.

If anything,
I have learned to obey the commands
Of our gods and to respect the authority
Of the Atridae. They are our leaders,
And we, mere subordinates, should submit.
What other way is there? Neither the dread
Nor the mighty powers are exempt
From this rule. Thus Winter with her snowy feet
Defers to the warmth of Summer's roots, and
 Night,
Tired from his lonely trek, withdraws
Before the white steeds of Day. After the fierce

Storm-winds have ceased, a calm envelops
The groaning sea. Even sleep, who makes
Us all her captives, imprisons only
To set free!

Should we, then, not learn this wisdom?
I, of all men, know that one must hate
One's enemies, remembering all the while
That some day they may be his closest friends,
And aid one's friends as though they soon may
Be numbered among his most treacherous
Enemies. For to most men friendship is
No haven at all. But enough!

Tecmessa,

Go in and pray to the gods to grant
Me my heart's desire. And you, my friends,
Do likewise, honor me with your prayers
That I may find peace; and when Teucer comes
Tell him I have left everything in his hands,
And that he should look after you.
I am going where I must go.
You will hear of me soon: a happiness
Untouched by misery, unburdened of suffering.

(AJAX departs, TECMESSA goes into the tent.)

CHORUS

Strophe

We thrill with pleasure
Soaring like a great bird
To the impossible heights.
O Pan, Pan, come to us
From over the sea,
From the snow-crested hills

Of Cyllene, appear
As a god
Of dance would. Teach us
The measures of Nysa,
Gnosus—let all dance,
Let all fill their hearts
With laughter and dance
To daylight's passing.
And, Apollo, dear Lord
Of Delos, cross over
From the pale, Icarian shore
To be with us always.

Antistrophe

The destroying god
Has lifted from our eyes
The haze of dire anguish.
O Zeus, once more our swift,
Sea-cutting ships will
Bathe in the blithe goodness
Of the sun's soothing
Warmth. Ajax is well
Again; he forgets
His troubles, and would make
Peace with the gods, per-
forming his duties
In solemn worship
And loyal devotions.
The mighty and shrill
Are bleared by the long trudge
Of endless years. Witness here:
Ajax repents his feuds.

(A MESSENGER from the camp enters)

MESSENGER

Friends, I have news. Teucer is back, just returned
From the Mycean heights. He was on his way
To the generals' quarters surrounded by
A great multitude of Argives who had seen
Him coming from afar and recognized him.
They reviled him with curses and taunts,
Calling him "kinsman of the maniac"
And "conspirator against the host."
"Stone him to death," one cried. "Tear him apart,"
Another yelled. It reached such a pitch
That swords were drawn from their sheaths and
held
Menacingly in men's hands. Yet, just when
Things seemed beyond control, the elders
Intervened, and so violence was stayed.
But where is Ajax, I must tell him this.
It is he who this news most concerns.

CHORUS

He is not here. He left a little while ago
With a new purpose and in high spirit.

MESSENGER

God help him then! I was either sent too late
Or I took too long to get here.

CHORUS

Why the urgency? What haven't you told us?

MESSENGER

Teucer said that Ajax must stay confined
To his tent until he himself arrives.

CHORUS

Well, he is gone and for good reason too.
He must appease the wrath of the gods.

MESSENGER

Your words are folly
If Calchas' prophecy can be trusted.

CHORUS

What prophecy is that? What have you heard of
this?

MESSENGER

Too much; I was present when Calchas, who was
With our leaders at the council, left them
And walked over to where Teucer was standing.
He offered his hand to him as a friend would,
Then drew him to one side. They were far
enough
Away that neither Agamemnon
Nor Menelaus could hear. In an earnest
Voice he begged Teucer to restrain his brother
From leaving his tent this whole day long
And to stay with him, or, if he didn't
He would never see Ajax alive again,
Since on this day alone would the anger
Of divine Athena doom him. For whenever,
Said the seer, man forgets his nature
And pretends to be something more than mortal
He is dashed to earth by heaven-sent
Calamities. Ajax, on the day
He left home, showed himself lacking in this
Essential modesty. His father, giving
Good advice to his parting son, said to him,
"Go now and seek your victories, but always

With heaven on your side." Ajax's answer was
Both haughty and foolish. "Anyone can win
Battles with the gods helping him," he said,
"But I intend to win mine on my own."
An impudent boast! And another time
Athena came to him urging that he raise
His deadly hand against his foes. His retort,
Almost too blasphemous to tell, was,
"Goddess, give your help to other Argives
Who need it. Where I stand, no one will break
Through our line." It was appalling words
Such as these—inflated beyond all limit —
Which provoked the anger of Athena.
Still there is hope. If he lives through today
We may yet save him, with heaven's help.
When Calchas had finished speaking these
things
To him, Teucer rose immediately
From his seat and commanded me to come
Here bearing these instructions for you.
But if, as you say, Ajax is gone, then he
Is surely dead, or Calchas is no prophet.

CHORUS

Tecmessa, poor woman, you seem to have
Been born for misery. Come, a messenger
Has arrived. He brings a fearful tale.

(Aside)

This business touches us much too closely.

TECMESSA

Is there no end to my suffering? Why do
You wake me again?

CHORUS

Listen to this man, he has news pertaining
To Ajax. Grim news.

TECMESSA

What is it? What's the matter? Are we
In any danger?

MESSENGER

As far as I know, my lady, you are
In none. However, Ajax, if he has left
His tent, might be in serious danger.

TECMESSA

He—he has left. Tell me what you mean.

MESSENGER

Teucer sends strict orders to keep Ajax
Confined to his tent, and to prevent him—by
force
If necessary—from venturing out alone.

TECMESSA

But where is Teucer?
What purpose can these orders have?

MESSENGER

He has just returned, and has reason
To believe that if Ajax goes forth
From this place but once, it could be fatal.

TECMESSA

God help us! How did he find this out?

MESSENGER

From Thestor's son, the prophet, this day
He learned it—this very day.

TECMESSA

O my friends, protect me
From this threatening doom.
Someone, please, find Teucer
And beg him to hasten here.
The rest of you help me search
For my husband, either toward
The eastern or the western bays.
I see now—only too clearly—I have
Been betrayed by my lord, cast
Aside. O child, what shall I do?
We must not stay here—no!
I'll look for him, as much
As my strength allows. Hurry, we
Must find him before Death does.

CHORUS

In more than word, we'll show
Our speed, my lady.

*(The CHORUS, TECMESSA, and MESSENGER
hurry away in all directions. The scene changes.
Ajax appears alone in a desolate place by the sea-
shore.)*

AJAX

The slayer stands ready; he shall do
His work well. And why not? Now that I think
Of it. Hector, worthiest of my enemies,

Gave me that sword, and I have carefully
Planted it, with its blade sharpened and poised
In the hostile earth of Troy. Death should
Come swiftly, kindly.

Next, as it is
The appropriate thing to do, I call
On you Zeus. It is no great favor
That I petition for. Send a messenger
For me to Teucer that he may be
The first to hear the news of my catastrophe
And come to lift me off this blood-damp sword
Before some enemy finds me slain, and throws
Me as prey to the dogs and carrion birds.
O Zeus, grant me this. I likewise call upon
Hermes, guide to the nether land, to lay
Me asleep easily, after one quick bound
Upon this keen and piercing blade. And you,
Immortal maidens, dread furies who watch
Forever the miseries of mankind, witness
My death and know that the guilt of this deed
Rests with the sons of Atreus. As I will
Die wretchedly, self-slain, let them perish
By kindred hands. Go, catch them with your
 long strides,
Revenge me on their host, hold back nothing.
And sun-god, you whose radiant chariot
Climbs the steep sky-heights, when you see my
 birth-
Land, pull up your golden reins and tell this tale
Of sorrow and doom to my aged father
And my mother, my poor mother. With tears
She will fill the streets of our city,
Her selfless heart breaking. But it does no good
To think these unhappy thoughts. I must

Do this speedily.
O Death, Death come now,
Collect your due. Yes, even you I will
Speak to in that other world of near
Darkness. But, bright daylight, you I will never
See again, or you, sun-god, aloft
In your chariot, I look upon you
For the last time. O light, O Salamis,
Holy soil, site of my father's hearth,
And famous Athens too, whose race is kindred
To mine, farewell. And you, also, the conservers
Of my life, the fields, the streams, the springs
Of Troy, farewell. My speech is ended;
Whatever else Ajax may have to say,
He will say it to the dead in Hades.

(AJAX falls on his sword and dies.)

*(After a short interval, the CHORUS enters, half from
one side of the stage, half from the other.)*

CHORUS 1

Tired feet. Troubling thoughts. We've looked
Everywhere, yet still not found
That place which knows the secret
Of our search.
But listen! I hear
Something. Over there!

CHORUS 2

Friends! It's us, your shipmates.

CHORUS 1

Any luck?

CHORUS 2

We covered the entire coast westward from the
ship.

CHORUS 1

And did you find ...

CHORUS 2

No.

CHORUS 1

Neither did we; there is no sign of him
Where the morning sun gilds the shoreline.

CHORUS (*as one*)

Strophe

What salt-bitten fisherman, weary from toil,
Plying his tasks in a sleepless daze,
Or what nymph of mountain, or stream that
flows

Down to the Bosphorus, has seen this man
Wandering with troubled soul and fierce
Demeanor? How hard it is that we
Who have searched far and wide over this land
Of emptiness, must relent without finding
As much as a trace of our afflicted lord?

*(TECMESSA has found the body of AJAX, and is
heard lamenting.)*

TECMESSA

Oh no! No!

CHORUS

Whose cry is that coming from the wood?

TECMESSA (*sobbing*)
My husband, there was no need—why?

CHORUS

It is Tecmessa,
Our master's spear-won bride, lost in anguish.

TECMESSA

I am alone. Without hope. Desolate.

CHORUS

What is it? What's happened?

TECMESSA

Here is Ajax, newly slain; a sword
Sheathed by this mighty heart.

CHORUS

Gods! Is this the end of all our hopes,
Will we never return to our homeland
Again. Now nothing but death awaits
Us—your comrades—O hapless warrior,
O corpse not yet cold.

(*To Tecmessa*)

And for you, poor woman, we sorrow.

TECMESSA

He is beyond our cries, he is dead;
We can only mourn for him.

CHORUS

With whose help did he accomplish this appalling act?

TECMESSA

No other but his own hand shared in the blame.
The sword on which he fell, fixed firmly
In the ground, stands—his mute accuser.

CHORUS

By his own hand, alone. How gullible
We were to let him out of our sight.
What fools! And he, shedding his own blood
Far from friends—we were blind. Show us
Where he lies—proud Ajax, that fatally named
man.

TECMESSA

No, you shall not see him. With this enfolding
Cloak I'll cover him fully; for no man
Who loved him could endure this ghastly sight—
His dark life-blood runs out through his nostrils
And even yet spouts from his self-dealt wound.
O what shall I do? What friend shall gently
Lift you up? Where is Teucer? It is he
Who should be here to tend his brother's
Corpse. Ah, Ajax, my husband, to have fallen so.
Even your enemies will mourn for you.

CHORUS

Antistrophe

There was nothing to be done, you were fated
To follow this course—your unbending
Soul was destined for blinding misery.
Your dread passion of hate disquieting
The nights and embittering the days
With constant rantings against the Sons

Of Atreus: these were signs of your sorrows
To come. Yes, that was a pregnant day
When those golden arms were made a prize
Of worth in that contest of prowess.

TECMESSA

Aii, Aiii

CHORUS

A heart holding such grief—her loss is profound.

TECMESSA

Ah, my husband!

CHORUS

It's no wonder that you cry, my lady,
Deprived of one who so loved you.

TECMESSA

So you say—but I feel it.

CHORUS

Of course.

TECMESSA

My child, what will become of us, what cruel
Overseers will catapult us into chattel.

CHORUS

The sons of Atreus would indeed
Deal with you as you suspect. They are
Both arrogant and ruthless. Expect
No pity. May the gods deflect this danger.

TECMESSA

Was it not the gods who sent it on its flight.

CHORUS

Too true! Heaven delights in our pain.

TECMESSA

And who engendered this pain
If not Pallas Athena, child
Of Zeus, ally to Odysseus.

CHORUS

Doubtless this much-enduring
Odysseus exults in his,
The darkest of hearts, mocking
At this outrage and our grief.
And the brother-kings, when they hear
This story told, will gloat
At fallen glory and our distress.

TECMESSA

Let them gloat! Damn them!
While he lived they cared nothing
For him, but one day they'll regret
His loss—in the heat of battle
When greatness is needed to turn
The tide, then will they yearn for him.
Fools cannot know the wealth that was
Theirs until they have lost it.
His death is all bitterness
For me, all jubilation for them.
But I care little. Ajax
Himself is content. Whatever
He wished for, he made his own,

Including death; he died this way—
His own place, his own time. Why then
Do they gloat? Where is their triumph?
His death was decreed by the gods,
Not them. So let Odysseus
Mock and revel to his heart's content.
Ajax is gone, and I, his wife,
Left to misery, will mourn him.