

The Second Best at Center Stage:
The Odyssean Framework of Sophocles' *Ajax*

Abstract:

<https://camws.org/sites/default/files/meeting2021/abstracts/2571SophoclesAjaxOdyssey.pdf>

1. Ἄει μὲν, ὦ παῖ Λαρτίου, δέδορκά σε
πεῖρᾶν τιν' ἐχθρῶν ἀρπάσαι θηρώμενον·
Ajax 1-2

Athena: “Always, O child of Laertes, I have seen you clearly, hunting to seize some chance against your enemies.”ⁱ

2. καιρὸν δ' ἐφήκεις· πάντα γὰρ τά τ' οὖν πάρος
τά τ' εἰσέπειτα σῆ κυβερνώμαι χερί.
Ajax 34-35

Odysseus: “You have arrived at the right time; since in all things before, and in all things hereafter, I am steered by your hand.”

3. Αἶ. ἡδιστος, ὦ δέσποινα, δεσμώτης ἔσω
θακεῖ· θανεῖν γὰρ αὐτὸν οὐ τί πω θέλω.
Ἀθ. πρὶν ἂν τί δράσης ἢ τί κερδάνης πλέον;
Αἶ. πρὶν ἂν δεθῆς πρὸς κίον' ἐρκείου στέγης—
Ἀθ. τί δῆτα τὸν δύστηνον ἐργάση κακόν;
Αἶ. μάλιστα πρῶτον νῶτα φοινηχθεὶς θάνη.
Ajax 105-110

Ajax: “The sweetest prisoner, o queen, sits inside: for I do not want [Odysseus] to die yet.”

Athena: “Until you do what or gain what else?”

Ajax: “Not until he has been tied to a pillar under my enclosure's roof—”

Athena: “What evil will you do then to that wretched one?”

Ajax: “And his back has been bloodied by my whip before he dies.”

4. Scholion to Sophocles' *Ajax* 346a

There is an *ekklêma* so that Ajax can appear amidst the sheep. For these things also shock the spectator; spectacle is deeply emotive. He is shown carrying a sword, covered in blood, sitting amongst the sheep.ⁱⁱ

5. αἰ δ' ἄλλαι ψυχαὶ νεκῶν κατατεθνηώτων
ἔστασαν ἀχνύμεναι, εἶροντο δὲ κήδε' ἐκάστη.
οἷη δ' Αἴαντος ψυχὴ Τελαμωνιάδαο
νόσφιν ἀφεστήκει, κεχολωμένη εἵνεκα νίκης,
τὴν μιν ἐγὼ νίκησα δικαζόμενος παρὰ νηυσὶ

[545]

ⁱ The text of *Ajax* is from Finglass 2011. The translations are my own.

ⁱⁱ Translated by Csapo and Slater. See Christodoulou 1977 for the Greek text, currently unavailable to me.

τεύχεσιν ἀμφ' Ἀχιλλῆος· ἔθηκε δὲ πότνια μήτηρ.
 παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.
 ὡς δὴ μὴ ὄφελον νικᾶν τοιῶδ' ἐπ' ἀέθλω·
 τοίην γὰρ κεφαλὴν ἔνεκ' αὐτῶν γαῖα κατέσχευ,
Αἴανθ', ὃς περὶ μὲν εἶδος, περὶ δ' ἔργα τέτυκτο [550]
τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ' ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα.
 τὸν μὲν ἐγὼν ἐπέεσσι προσηύδων μειλιχίοισιν·
 'Αἴαν, παῖ Τελαμῶνος ἀμύμονος, οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλες
 οὐδὲ θανῶν λήσεσθαι ἐμοὶ χόλου εἵνεκα τευχέων
 οὐλομένων; τὰ δὲ πῆμα θεοὶ θέσαν Ἀργείοισι, [555]
 τοῖος γὰρ σφιν πύργος ἀπώλεο· σείο δ' Ἀχαιοὶ
 ἴσον Ἀχιλλῆος κεφαλῇ Πηληϊάδαο
 ἀγνύμεθα φθιμένοιο διαμπερές· οὐδέ τις ἄλλος
 αἴτιος, ἀλλὰ **Ζεὺς Δαναῶν στρατὸν αἰχμητῶν**
ἐκπάγλως ἤχθηρε, τειν δ' ἐπὶ μοῖραν ἔθηκεν. [560]
 ἀλλ' ἄγε δεῦρο, ἄναξ, ἴν' ἔπος καὶ μῦθον ἀκούσης
 ἡμέτερον· δάμασον δὲ μένος καὶ ἀγήνορα θυμόν.'
 ὡς ἐφάμην, **ὁ δέ μ' οὐδὲν ἀμείβετο,** βῆ δὲ μετ' ἄλλας
 ψυχὰς εἰς Ἔρεβος νεκῶν κατατεθνηῶτων.
ἔνθα χ' ὄμως προσέφη κεχολωμένος, ἦ κεν ἐγὼ τόν· [565]
 ἀλλά μοι ἤθελε θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλοισι
 τῶν ἄλλων ψυχὰς ιδέειν κατατεθνηῶτων.

Odyssey 11.541-567

And the other spirits of the dead and departed stood grieving, and each asked about those he cared for. Alone, the spirit of Ajax the son of Telamon stood apart from them, angry because of the victory that I was judged to win over him by the ships for the arms of Achilles; his queenly mother set them up as a prize. The children of the Trojans and Pallas Athena passed judgment. Would that I had not prevailed in such a contest! Because of the arms the earth covered so great a head, **Ajax, who in form and in deeds was above the other Achaeans, after the blameless son of Peleus.** I addressed him with soothing words: “Ajax, child of blameless Telamon, are you not going to forget your anger against me about the accursed arms even though you’re dead? The gods set up that prize as a calamity for the Argives, you died as such a tower of defense for them; we Achaeans mourn your death constantly, as much as we did for the life of Achilles the son of Peleus. No other is responsible, but **Zeus hated the army of the Danaan warriors terribly, and ordained your death.** But come here, lord, so that you can hear my speech and story; subdue your rage and headstrong heart.” Thus I spoke, **but he did not answer me at all,** but went after the other spirits of the dead and departed, to Erebus. **Then he nevertheless might have spoken to me, despite his anger, or I to him;** but the heart in my dear breast wished to see the other departed spirits.ⁱⁱⁱ

6. τοῦθ' ὑμῖν Αἴας τοῦπος ὕστατον θροεῖ,
 τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐν Ἅϊδου τοῖς κάτω μυθήσομαι.
Ajax 864-5

Ajax: “Ajax utters this, his last word, to you, but I will tell other things in Hades to those below.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The text is from Murray 1998. The translation is my own.

7. σὲ δ', ὦ γεραιοῦ σπέρμα Λαέρτου πατρός,
τάφου μὲν ὀκνῶ τοῦδ' ἐπιψαύειν ἔαν,
μὴ τῷ θανόντι τοῦτο δυσχερὲς ποῶ·
Ajax 1393-5

Teucer: "But I shrink from allowing you, O seed of old Laertes, to touch this grave, lest I commit this offense against the dead man."

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