

## From Shield to Sword: Ajax's Struggle for Identity in Sophocles' *Ajax*

The nature of Ajax's tragic decline and suicide in Sophocles' *Ajax*, particularly in his final speech, is widely contested, with critics offering a broad range of interpretations. Bernard Knox argues that Ajax's death is the result of an unwavering pride and hatred which descends into madness. David Cohen's argument that Ajax, overcome by shame, madness, and his fall from greatness, turns to suicide as a last redemption of honor. This essay, like Cohen's and Knox's, aims to understand the fall of Ajax by analyzing his final suicide speech but not without comparing it to Odysseus' speech at the beginning of the play. Odysseus' opening speech provides the necessary context to understand Ajax's final suicide speech as not simply a descent into madness, but a desperate struggle for his identity. Ajax's final speech, I will argue, grapples with his loss of identity as the Iliadic "Αἴαντι τῷ σακεσφόρῳ" (24), or "shield-bearing Ajax," and is an attempt to separate himself from his bloody sword. The repetition of such words as ξίφει and πηδῶντα found in both speeches offers deeper insight into the character of Ajax, which in turn shows that his struggle is over the transformation of a righteous pride into the wanton violence of *hubris*. The repetition of πηδῶντα and the emphasis on Ajax as one who "leaps" (29,833) reveals the innate and characteristic recklessness which precipitates his headlong descent, preventing any recovery. With an understated reference to Ajax's title as "Shield-bearer" in Odysseus' opening speech and the contrasting use of "ξίφει", or "sword," in both passages, Sophocles shows Ajax's fall from the proud "shield" of the Greeks to the violent and hubristic "sword." Then, through the personification of the bloody sword as Ajax's own "σφαγεὺς," or "butcher" (815), he displays the final, desperate struggle of the hero to separate his identity and agency from this violence.

### Works Cited

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