Sophocles’ Ajax – The Suicide Speech

Ajax was one of the greatest Greek warriors who fought in the Trojan War. He was a grandson of Zeus and cousin of Achilles and was known for his huge shield, which he used to protect both men and ships. Ajax was a big man and was known as “the bulwark” or “the shield”. It was Ajax who prevented the Trojans from burning the beached Greek ships when they counter attacked after Achilles withdrew from the war. Sophocles’ play starts the evening after the arms of the recently killed Achilles were awarded to Odysseus. Ajax is furious and felt that as the best warrior at Troy after Achilles and as the man that recovered his body from the field under fire, he should have been awarded the divinely wrought armor. Ajax feels betrayed by his comrades in arms and insulted by the commanders of the Greek forces. He resolves to murder them all in the dead of night. His plan is averted by the goddess Athena, who deludes his sight. Instead of killing the Greek leaders, he falls on cattle and herds of animals, slaughtering them and dragging them back to his hut, believing them to be Odysseus and the other Greek commanders. When Ajax awakes the next day and sees what he has done, he is mortified – not only did his attack fail, but he has been demeaned by the slaughter of the herds and imagines his enemies jeering and laughing at him.

The scene here is when Ajax tells his family that he will make peace with the gods and sets out to a deserted place. He takes the sword of the Trojan hero, Hector, which was given to him as a gift, and places it upright in the earth. He prays to the gods and curses the Greek leaders. He then imagines his elderly father and mother hearing the news of his death. He calls out to the sun and feels the light on his face for the last time and falls on his sword after praying that his death will come quickly.

Ajax’s suicide leaves his captive wife, Tecmessa, and their son at risk, as well as creating confusion and dissent in the Greek army as the commanders refuse to allow him to be buried. Ajax's half-brother, Teucer, demands that the burial take place and the resulting stalemate between the family and the army threatens to undermine the entire campaign. It is Odysseus, Ajax’s most hated enemy, who brokers the peace and persuades the Greeks to let Ajax be buried. Ajax died tragically – his anger and insanity products of the Trojan War. At the end of the play, this extraordinary larger than life hero is finally laid to rest.