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## *A Man Out of Time: Aias 646-692* by Sophocles

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Emily Anhalt  
A Man Out of Time

Sophocles  
Aίας 646–692

Long and uncountable Time makes manifest  
The hidden and obscure and hides the rest.  
No thing is unexpected. All's ensnared,  
The rigid mind and each dread oath declared.  
Thus I who once endured like tempered steel  
Am softened by the force of her appeal.  
With pity for this woman and my child,  
I dread to leave her widowed, him reviled.  
In going to the shore at meadow's end  
To cleanse these stains, I know I will defend  
Myself against the dread Athena's wrath.  
I'll go where human foot has made no path,  
That I may dig a hole and hide this blade,  
Most hateful and despised of weapons made,  
Where none will see but Hades down below.  
This gift received from Hector, my worst foe,  
Has never won me prizes from the Greeks.  
And I perceive the truth the adage speaks:  
Of enemies no gifts are gifts, nor gains.  
Thus I will learn for all that now remains  
To mighty gods and fate perforce to yield,  
Yet worship power mortal monarchs wield.  
It seems one must obey, and this is why:  
As winter storms make way for summer sky  
So all that's dread and strong must yield to worth,  
As snow subsides while fruits bedeck the earth.  
And changing place the circle of drear night  
Gives white-horsed day the space to shine its light.  
The blast of dreadful winds has caused to cease  
The groaning of the sea and brought it peace,  
While always-present, all-controlling Sleep  
Despite his power chooses not to keep  
Us always shackled, fettered, ever-bound.  
Then how will we not know discretion sound?  
For I myself have just now come to learn

An enemy is one whom we must spurn  
Insofar as soon he'll be our friend.  
And he to whom my love I shall extend  
I'll wish to aid and profit and maintain  
Just as the friend he never will remain.  
For friendship offers mortals but defeat,  
And faithless is its harbor and retreat.

Still, things are sure to turn out well today.

And you, my woman, go inside and pray  
That all my heart's desire come to be.  
And you, companions, with her honor me.  
When Teucer comes his tasks must be disclosed:  
To care for me, to you be well-disposed.  
But I am going there where one must go.  
And you, do as I say and soon may know,  
Although by Fate I now have been ill-served,  
That yet, perhaps, I still have been preserved.

Sophocles' *Aias* (or *Ajax*, in most modern translations) re-interprets an ancient tale of a mythical injustice. According to tradition, after Achilles died at Troy, his immortal armor was to be the prize of the best Greek warrior still living. That was Ajax. Everyone knew it. But a tribunal awarded the armor to Odysseus instead. No one, not even Odysseus, ever denies that Ajax deserved Achilles' armor. Sophocles anachronistically likens the tribunal to a 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athenian jury trial, and his portrayal of the mythical injustice reveals a fundamental opposition between archaic values and democratic procedures.

Ajax embodies the inflexible and uncompromising archaic value system. He has always pursued traditional goals familiar to Homer's world and to many places in ours: help friends, harm enemies, earn honor for success in battle. Enraged by the tribunal's failure to acknowledge his supreme martial skill, Ajax tries to murder all of the Greek leaders. Athena distorts his vision so that he attacks sheep and cattle instead of men. After regaining his senses, Ajax makes this speech, which is sometimes called the "deception speech" because it has the effect of misleading listeners (Ajax's spear-won concubine Tecmessa, the Chorus, and perhaps the audience as well) into thinking that Ajax intends to soften and accept the tribunal's decision. Hearers may misunderstand, but Ajax speaks only the truth. He cannot give up his anger and never states that he will. (For self-preservation, he should *revere* the gods and *yield* to the Greek leaders, but Ajax emphasizes the impossibility by reversing the verbs: "To mighty gods and fate perforce to yield, / Yet worship power mortal monarchs wield.") He will indeed bury his sword in the earth. Only later do we learn why.

Unable to change, Ajax cannot adapt to the new realities of his day. This speech expresses his realization that his traditional talents and priorities no longer suit a society that uses group consensus, not fact, to identify and reward the "best" individual. Ajax defended the Greeks against the Trojans, but the tribunal's unfair decision has made the Greeks his enemies. Understanding now that human loyalties alternate like the seasons, Ajax can no longer help his friends and harm his enemies. He wants no part of a world that cannot recognize and justly reward talent, merit, loyalty, and integrity. Ajax would rather die. And he does, falling on the sword whose hilt he has buried in the ground. Ajax kills himself not out of frustration or shame (as readers of English translations of the play tend to conclude) but in absolute rejection of life itself and the changes that time causes in nature and in human relationships. For this understanding of the play, see further B. Knox's interpretation in "The *Ajax* of Sophocles" in *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 125–160.

The tribunal's "democratic" decision thus robs the community of its best defender. Ajax's example suggests, perhaps, that modern efforts to cultivate democratic institutions in traditionally undemocratic societies must somehow recognize and address this incompatibility between an absolute, unchanging conception of loyalties and enmities and the democratic emphasis on flexibility and

group consensus. Sophocles' *Aias* warns against over-confidence in the value of the procedures alone. Unjust democratic decisions can violate individuals' rights and fracture communities. They may produce rather than prevent injustice and conflict.

In Greek, the meter is (non-rhyming) iambic trimeter. In English, heroic couplets in iambic pentameter seemed appropriately anachronistic for a translation of this powerful monologue uttered by a character defined by the *ethos* of an age earlier than his own.