

SUMMARIES OF TROJAN WAR PLAYS BY SOPHOCLES

Ajax (460s BC)

Ajax, son of Telamon, the second-greatest of the Greek heroes fighting at Troy, has claimed the divine arms of Achilles after his death, but they have instead been awarded to Odysseus. Ajax, mad with rage, attempts to kill the other leaders of the Greek army. Athena, however, causes Ajax to go mad and, instead of his enemies, Ajax slaughters the animals of the Greeks. Recovering his senses, he is determined to commit suicide and, making an excuse to leave his followers and his wife Tecmessa, he falls on the sword that Hector had given him at the end of their inconclusive duel. Teucer returns from an expedition, bearing the prophecy that if Ajax lives through the day he



will be safe from Athena's wrath, only to discover that his brother is already dead. Agamemnon decrees that his body shall be left unburied, so depriving him of the right to enter the Underworld and forever staining his memory. Teucer, Ajax's half-brother, defies Agamemnon. The quarrel is settled by Odysseus, who secures an honorable funeral for his would-be murderer and former enemy.

Electra (418-411 BC)

Pylades, Orestes, and Orestes's tutor, arrive at Mycenae to exact revenge for the murder of Agamemnon, Orestes's father, as instructed by an oracle of Apollo. Electra, Orestes brother, is inconsolable, thinking Orestes lost. A nightmare has provoked Clytemnestra to make an offering to the ghost of Agamemnon. Electra persuades her sister Chrysothemis to throw out Clytemnestra's offering and make one of their own. Clytemnestra and Electra argue about the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the murder of Agamemnon. The Old Man enters disguised as a Phocian, bearing a false account of Orestes' death. Chrysothemis returns from Agamemnon's grave, full of joy and sure that Orestes has returned, because at their father's grave she found a fresh offering of flowers and a lock of hair. Electra informs her sister that, to the contrary, Orestes is dead, and that if revenge is to be achieved, the sisters must take matters into their own hands. When Electra discovers that Orestes is alive, her grief is immediately replaced with joy and she hurries Orestes inside to kill Clytemnestra. She listens excitedly to the sounds of Orestes killing Clytemnestra and then Aegisthus.

Philoctetes (409 BC)

When the Greek fleet paused on the island of Lemnos as it approached Troy at the start of the Trojan War, Philoctetes received an offensive and incurable wound from a poisonous snake; His wailing and the smell from his wound so unnerved the Greeks that, following the advice of Odysseus, his comrades abandoned Philoctetes on Lemnos, which was assumed to be a desert island. Having learned through a prophecy that Troy would be taken only by the bow and arrows of Heracles, which are in Philoctetes' possession, Odysseus and Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, are sent to bring Philoctetes and his bow to Troy by any means necessary. Odysseus induces Neoptolemus to help in a plan to get them by deceit; Neoptolemus is reluctant, but contrives to win the confidence of Philoctetes and gain possession of the bow. But Philoctetes' agony when he finds that he has been cheated so touches Neoptolemus that he returns the bow. Philoctetes' reluctance to go to Troy is overcome by the glorified spirit of Heracles, who assures him that he will be cured and win honor at Troy.

