

Art, Words, and War: Ajax and the Arms of Achilles

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The following story of the contest between Ajax and Odysseus over the arms of the fallen Achilles takes place after the events of the *Iliad*. The events and the details of the story, however, were likely circulated through an oral tradition that thrived long before the *Iliad* began to interact with writing. While the earliest sources for the story are lost to us, three written reconstructions remain from antiquity: Ovid's in *Metamorphoses* 13.1-13.398, two speeches from Antisthenes¹, and from Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*.² In writing my own version of the story, I looked to Ovid and Antisthenes for inspiration, and based some of my decisions on the characterization of the Greek heroes in the *Iliad*. I also wanted to make mine differ from those of Ovid and Antisthenes in order to give a sense of the variety of versions, both within the oral tradition and in other written sources that would have existed in antiquity, but are lost to us now.

The advantage Ovid and Antisthenes had over me, however, is that they likely had these written sources from which to construct their version. In order to make up for my lack of

¹ For commentary on Antisthenes' speeches, I used the essay "Odysseus the Athenian: Antisthenes, Thucydides, and an Homeric Hero in an Intellectual Age" (O'Sullivan and Wong).

² For good commentary on Quintus of Smyrna, consult James and Lee's *A Commentary on Quintus of Smyrna Posthomerica V*.

written sources, I decided to incorporate the iconographic tradition, in particular Attic pottery that depicts the events and settings of the story. Throughout my story, I have included footnotes citing the pottery from which I drew inspiration. In some cases, such as Ajax's arranging his weapons before his suicide, and the voting process, I try to describe the scene exactly as it is on the vase. In order to most effectively highlight the ekphrastic nature of these scenes, I transition, almost jarringly at times, between scenes, as if one were going back and forth comparing multiple pieces of art. This story is not meant to be the definitive version of the competition for the arms of Achilles and suicide of Ajax, but how I envision the story drawing from the artistic and literary sources that appeal most to me.

Story

Madness lingered in the mind of Ajax, his own and that of the thankless men who denied him his rightful prize, the divine arms of Achilles. Entranced by the soporific glow of Hermes' wand, he floated over all-encircling Oceanus, above the Great White Rock, through the Gates of the Sun, and past the House of Dreams.³ Finally, he followed him to the Fields of Asphodel, where the souls of the departed wander eternally, swallowed in a sea of the tall, misty-white flowers.⁴ Wading,

³ You can find these landmarks in lines 1-17 of Book XXIV of the *Odyssey*.

⁴ While the *Odyssey* doesn't explain the exact layout of the Underworld, especially regarding what kinds of souls go to what part, a red figure pelike, attributed to the Lykaon painter, depicts Odysseus and Elpenor in a concise,

half-conscious into the asphodel, he was immediately encircled by his Greek comrades who had met their end at Troy. The first to address him was none other than Achilles, his cousin, comrade, and undeniably the greatest of the Achaean warriors who set sail for Troy. Solemn, but clenching his fists, he began, “It kills me to see you here, friend. Please, tell me your death was a glorious one! I refuse to believe the mighty bulwark of the Achaeans was slain like me by a rogue arrow from some flimsy pretty boy, hardly man enough to string his own sandals, let alone a bow. Honestly, I thought you were invincible, the way you could fend off twenty men without a single scratch to show for it! Who could possibly kill a man like you?”

Ajax looked down. “No man killed me, none but myself. I lost my mind... I... When you died, the Greeks had a contest to decide who would get your armor. It was Odysseus against me, making speeches to our fellow soldiers in the pulpit. Suffice to say I lost. I, your dear cousin, who carried your lifeless body from the battlefield, and saved a thousand more with my own shield. Ajax, tossed aside, forgotten. He won the prize, that conniving snake, with pretty words and not a deed to back them up. I can see it now: Odysseus strides into his well-built halls, embraced by wife and son, hoists his prize onto the mantelpiece,

interesting fashion. On the pelike, Elpenor emerges from the Asphodel, stretching out his arms and pushing several reeds of asphodel out of the way. I envision the Lykaon Painter’s Field of Asphodel being similar to the cornfield in *Field of Dreams*, from which the spirits of dead ballplayers emerge as if appearing out of thin air. You can also find Hermes standing behind Odysseus, reprising his role of “psychopompos” with his wand.

and sits down to a feast of hogs and heifers, a man for the little pleasures in life. The shield collects dust while Ajax collects sand, buried under the beaches of Ilium – the Greeks were too busy to build a pyre. What has this world come to? Is there no reward for good and brave deeds but death?”

Achilles sighed, “Friend, there is no one, besides Patroclus, I would rather have inherit my arms than you. But tell me, what led to your undoing? To see a hero, a peerless soldier such as yourself, take his own life because of his comrades’ disrespect pains me to no end. There must be more to the story.”



The shield of Achilles lay pressed against the great wall of Troy, its outermost bronze layer glistening in the rays of the afternoon sun.⁵ Hephaestus had crafted it, five layers thick and solid gold at its core. It had suffered some damage- a single blow from Aeneas’ spear had pierced it to its golden middle layer. A medley of scenes blanketed the surface of the shield, the faces of men and gods dotting the polished gold like constellations. Miraculously, the myriad images all seemed to fit together, as if the curves and lines formed ripples in the tide of a golden Oceanus, flowing motionlessly around the earth, moon, and sun, each shyly overlapping the others in the center of the shield. A

⁵ Most vases either depict the shield of Achilles with the typical gorgon’s head, a hunting dog, or some other common shield embossment, as it would be near impossible to depict the shield as it is described in the *Iliad*.

smooth, silver strap slunk down from the shield and curled up on the warm ground. The shield radiated a godlike aura, utterly bewitching anyone whose gaze fell upon it.

Ajax looked on as Agamemnon and the other council members drew lots to decide who would go first. A day of intense contests had led up to this: Ajax and Odysseus were set to deliver competing speeches for the arms of the slain Achilles, whose memory still stung the minds of the war-weary Achaean soldiers. The fateful lot fell from the urn, and every pair of eyes turned to Ajax. Puffing out his chest, he marched to the front of the crowd and took his place in front of the wall. The crowd fell silent, as his deep voice boomed over the resounding plain:

“I’d hate to delay the rewarding of the arms, so I’m going to keep this brief. There are two men competing for the arms of our slain comrade Achilles. One of them is deserving, and one of them is not. I am the greater warrior and have a reputation for incomparable bravery and skill. It was I who took on Hector twice, and would have killed him without so much as breaking a sweat had the gods not doted on him. And it was I who beat the Trojans back from our ships, the unconquerable last line of defense for the army of the Greeks. And it is only fitting that I take the arms of the man I rescued from the battlefield. I guarded his body, unscarred save for the wound on his heel, rushing back from the battle cries and the rain of javelins.⁶ I am the reason we were able to erect a funeral pyre for the best of the

⁶ Very popular depiction on Attic vases.

Greeks, and give him a proper sendoff. I am the reason we are even having this competition. I am the rightful owner of the arms of Achilles.

“As for Odysseus, I do not hate him, despite his less than optimal reputation. How could I hate one of the men I have fought alongside for all these years? I remember when Odysseus and I, together with old Phoenix, tried to rouse Achilles back into action, but it took the death of a comrade to bring him to his feet. But to give these divine arms to Odysseus? Nonsense! What has he done to deserve them? Sure, he’s a good speaker and a good warrior, too. But let’s not forget that this is also the man who traipsed around his field and sprinkled salt on his own fertile soil, feigning madness to avoid war. This is the man who left Philoctetes for dead on Lemnos, and advised Agamemnon to slaughter his own daughter. Besides, what use would a man like Odysseus have for arms such as these? These are the tools of cold, hard combat, not clever little tricks. I’ll wager he can hardly wield this shield without the help of the gods, who waste their time helping him out in wrestling matches. But nobody wields a shield better than I, and nobody deserves these arms more.

“My father was Telamon, a brave and mighty hero in his own right, who fought side by side with his brother Peleus against the Calydonian Boar and the Amazons, and even here in Troy. As a child, I trained rigorously, dreaming of the day when I would fight alongside my cousin, Achilles. As for the lineage

of Odysseus, how can we trust a man who grew up learning tricks and traps from that good-for-nothing scoundrel Autolycus? I'm sure he'd be very proud of his grandson. And some even claim he's the son of Sisyphus, perhaps the dirtiest conman to walk the earth. Either way, I guess he's carrying on his father's legacy just fine. Would you trust this man with the divine arms of Achilles? What innocent cities will he sack with it? What god-fearing men will he deceive cloaked in this armor? Rest assured, great heroes of the Greeks, that you can trust me. I talk with my spear, and spears tell no lies. I swear, to you my faithful comrades, and to the immortal gods, that these arms are my rightful inheritance. Fate itself binds these arms to me, I who carried Achilles from the battlefield, and wielding these arms, will carry him back in, both in deeds and in spirit."

With that, Ajax strode into the silent crowd, his feet heavy and his eyes firmly fixed on the horizon. A moment passed before another man, of slight but substantive build, emerged from the crowd. Staring downward, Odysseus planted his staff in the rust-colored earth. Warm winds muttered throughout the Trojan plain. Finally, his clear voice took flight over the crowd:

"As I stand in front of you, I cannot help but think this army feels smaller than when we set out for that fateful battle, with Achilles leading the charge. If I had my wish, these arms would never leave the hands of the one for whom they were made. Regardless of who inherits these arms, he will never be

more than a surrogate to the spirit they once clothed. But let us not allow our justified lamentations to cloud our judgment and hinder our resolve. We have a decision to make, and I am standing here in hope of helping you make the right one. Listen closely, for these same things I speak to you now I would have said to Achilles' face when he was alive.

“Ajax would have you believe my ingenious strategies have made me less of a warrior and more of a criminal. I would like to set the record straight. Where was I when Ajax bravely carried the body of Achilles from battle, you might ask? I was there, in the heart of battle, fending off enemies from Ajax's back as he escaped. Every soldier has his role, and so I fulfilled mine and Ajax his. As I have heard even the women among us saying, anyone could lift a man over his shoulders in the rush of battle. And for Achilles, any Greek soldier would. But Ajax was near at hand, a champion of circumstance, and yet a champion nonetheless. And for that, we thank him.

“But, in arguing his case, Ajax has overstepped his bounds. He spreads lies about my parentage, while he extols his own. Wouldn't he love to believe that Sisyphus is my father, and decry my faithful mother and her great-hearted father! Before you condemn Autolycus for his thievery, let me ask you, where would we be if we did not steal? Hungry and hopeless in a faraway land. Your parentage, Ajax, is hardly pristine. Your father slew his own brother and was exiled. As for my father, he was just as noble as yours or any other parent of the Greek

captains, and hunted the Calydonian Boar and set sail for Chalcis with the other Argonauts. Now if we were to award the arms based on parentage alone we would be stuck here another ten years, all the Greek captains boasting the exploits of their illustrious fathers. And if you want to fault me for trying to avoid this whole expedition, then why not apply the same logic to Achilles? It was I that saw through his disguise at Skyros, laying out a sword and shield among the jewelry and perfumes. Were it not for my little trick, we might all be dead, with Achilles stuck hiding on some foreign island, deprived of his destiny. You see, weapons and strategy go hand in hand.

“And I am no slouch with a weapon in my hand, either. I slew many men in battle, and in the hushed warfare of the night as well. How could you forget Dolon, the wretched creature who snooped around our camp on all fours, carelessly unaware that I would use his own tricks against him!⁷ And you even reproach me for the cities that have fallen by my own hand, with which we have fed the army and maintained its morale! But whatever you accuse me of lacking in brute force—might I remind you I stood toe-to-toe with you in our wrestling match—I make up for it and more with my other skills. I have been the chief diplomat of this army since before this war started, when I went with Menelaus to reason with the Trojan chiefs. Theano and the Trojan elders were persuaded by my reasoning. But of course,

⁷ I am describing a portrayal of Dolon found on a red figure vase at the Louvre. On the vase, he crawls around on all fours with a wolfskin on his back.

the insolence of Paris won out in the end.⁸ See what happens when you eschew logic for the vain promises of passion!

“Looking back on all the times I employed the full extent of my wits, never once was it not for the benefit of the Argive army. Remember our predicament in Mysia, battle-weary, lost on our way to Troy? I saw through the Oracle’s utterance and healed Telephus, our guide, with the shards of Achilles’ spear. My counsel you can trust, not that of a man who charges headfirst into battle like a bull seeing red. Furthermore, what does Ajax know of the gods, who guide our victory and lay, twice immortal in life and art, engraved on the shield of Achilles? No man knows the gods better than I, who sacrifice the choicest animals with undaunted piety.

“I think your current shield fits you better, Ajax: strong and sturdy and lined with cowhide. It looks to me like your shield might be in even better condition than Achilles’! You, the so-called ‘Shield of the Greeks,’ might as well start a collection of many-layered shields. I ask you, judicious captains of the Achaeans, should we give our shield another shield? Should we equip the sun with another sun, just to make it a bit brighter? Or should we give the shield to the versatile man, who uses all his weapons well? Now more than ever, when—I sense it—this war is coming to a close, we must be firm and decisive, not hasty and careless. Keep this in mind as you cast your votes. I have guided

⁸ On the Corinthian “Astarita Krater,” Theano stands in front of several women talking to the Greek embassy to Troy.

you through hopeless situations time and again, and I promise my strength, my wit, and my might will save us many more times. Ajax is a fierce warrior; that I do not dispute. But consider this: when you fight with your fists, what part of your body do you guard with unfailing vigilance? Your head. And that is what I am to this army, I who have fought and thought so hard for us to this point. And that's without a proper shield.

“Now, I let you decide. Which of these two men will you have lead you to victory? When Agamemnon saw it fit to test us, everyone crestfallen after Achilles stormed off from the fighting, I urged my men to stand their ground. Where was Ajax? Among the rest of the men, splashing on the shore and flailing their arms after their black-prowed ships. This is –”

Roaring with indignation, Ajax brandished his sword at Odysseus: “Odysseus! You defile my reputation! Not once have I looked back at my ships, licking my wounds and calling it quits. I always finish what I start! Captains of the Achaeans, don't listen to him! He feeds you lies!” Odysseus bent back in defense, as Teucer restrained his rage-stricken brother.⁹ Rising, Agamemnon boomed, “Shame, Ajax! Each man will have his turn, and cooler heads will prevail. The contest is over. Now we will vote. He who places his pebble on the left side of the

⁹ This description recalls the red figure “Douris Cup,” on one side of which Ajax has his sword drawn, with several other men getting between Ajax and Odysseus. While the vase is damaged, it appears Odysseus is bent away, as if defending himself.

podium votes for Odysseus, while he who places his pebble on the right votes for Ajax.”

The Argives stared in amazement as Athena appeared, towering over the podium and standing watch over the voting procedure.¹⁰ Slowly, the captains of the Greeks rose and shuffled nervously to the podium. It swiftly became clear who would inherit the arms of Achilles. Ajax turned away, shielding his face with his cloak. Odysseus lifted his arms with childlike elation. It was a landslide victory. Agamemnon strode nobly to the front of the crowd. “It appears the votes won’t require any counting. Odysseus shall inherit the arms of Achilles!” A cheer rose up among the captains of the Greeks, as Ajax darted off toward the camps, tightly gripping his sword.



Achilles’ heart was filled with pity. “And you say you lost your mind after that? I couldn’t blame you, in the face of such dishonor.” Ajax sighed, “Everything after that was a blur. I flew into a rage. Just like Odysseus quipped, I was a bull seeing red. The urge to kill overcame me. When I came to my senses, my sword was covered in blood. Fat corpses of sheep strewn in front of me. Broken pottery. Tents slashed into smithereens.”

¹⁰ Athena and the podium with the pebbles on it are both depicted on the other side of the Douris Cup.

Ajax felt a lump in his throat. “I couldn’t believe what I had done. I couldn’t live with myself after the mess I had made.”



The warm wind howled as the skies began to sprinkle hot raindrops on the Trojan shore. Ajax swept together a small mound of thick, wet sand, burying his sword up to its hilt.¹¹ A single willow tree loomed over him, dangling slim ribbons of shadow over his back. Ajax neatly aligned his armor for whoever would find it, leaning his long spear over his seven-layered shield, which he had planted upright in the sand. Raindrops streaked the gorgon’s head that had been carved into the bronze, menacing over him as he kneeled in front of his sword. The shield was thick enough for him to lay his helmet flat on top of it, the hairs of its crest bristling in the wind. Gingerly, he straightened out the blade, placing it perfectly upright. Glancing up at the sky, he mumbled a short prayer. He collapsed, expressionless, on the sword.



It had sunk in. Ajax took in the sea of asphodel before him, coming to terms with his fate. “It’s strange,” he remarked. “I felt almost serene, dying on the beach at Troy, but I lack the words to describe it.”

¹¹ This paragraph describes the suicide of Ajax on the famous black figure Exekias amphora.

“Serene?” laughed Achilles. “There’s a word I haven’t heard you use.”

“It’s an odd feeling, but I felt, almost, complete. There were no more battles for me to fight. I had died, undefeated by anyone except myself. I doubt I’ll ever forgive Odysseus, but I hope to Zeus that he’s within the walls of Troy right now, ending this war for good.”



As soon as she had caught sight of him, Tecmessa wept, wrapping the rain-drenched body in her cloak.¹² She stumbled tearfully back to the Argive camps to report the news. Sorrow gripped the heart of the Greeks, lamenting the noble soul that they had lost. Casting his eyes out at the sea, and then back at the great walls of Troy, Odysseus approached young Neoptolemus with the arms of Achilles.¹³ “Here, boy, I think these arms will look better on you than on me. I’d hate to cause any more infighting, and I won’t bear to see any more Greek heroes lose their lives. We have a war to win, and I have a family to return to back home. Somewhere in his skyscraping citadel, Priam is looking down on us, shuddering. I’ve hatched a plan for a bigger shield, one which will hide many men and allow us to infiltrate the great walls of Troy. We will avenge your father, and all the

¹² On the tondo of a red figure cup, Tecmessa covers the body of Ajax, the sword still piercing it, with some sort of shroud or cloak.

¹³ On the inside tondo of the Douris cup, Odysseus hands over the arms of Achilles to a boyish-looking Neoptolemus

noble Greeks who've met their end before their time on this windy plain. Troy will fall soon.”



Years passed, and many other heroes found their way to the Underworld, passing away in the final skirmishes or on their journeys home. Their spirits brought news of the Greek victory, the endless treasures reaped, the sheer terror on the faces of the Trojan women, and the noble Trojan warriors, either dead or fled. One day, a familiar sound echoed through the Underworld. Lambs bleated in the distance. Ajax's ears pricked up. Faintly, he heard the roaring of the ocean, all its stillness and volatility packed into one sound. He turned away.

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