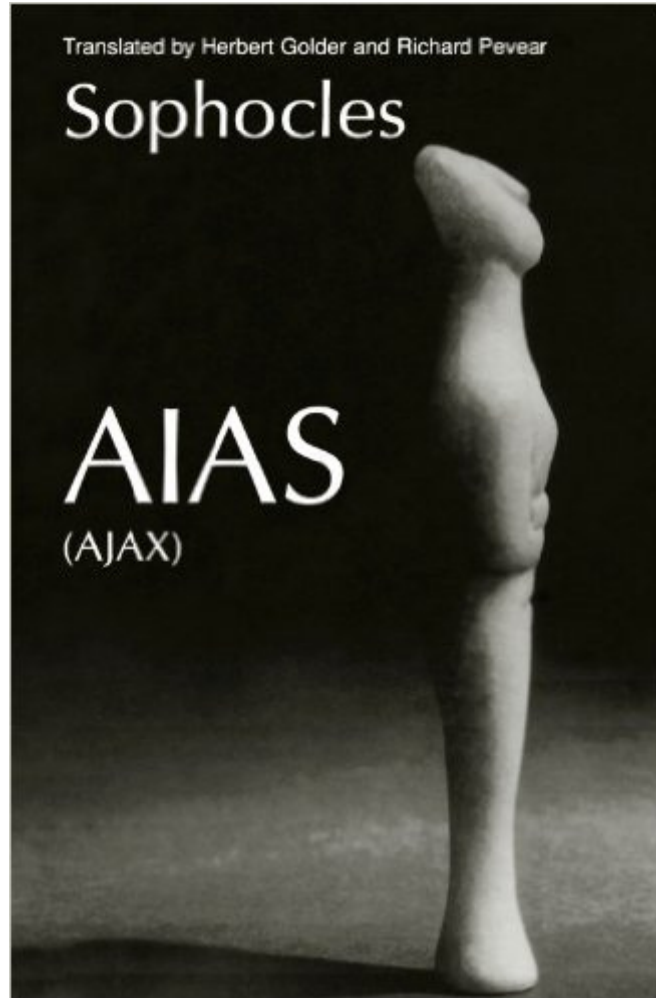


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Aias (Greek Tragedy In New Translations)



Synopsis

Based on the conviction that only translators who write poetry themselves can properly recreate the celebrated Greek tragedies, the Greek Tragedy in New Translation series offers new translations that go beyond the literal meaning of the Greek in order to evoke the poetry of the originals. Under the general editorship of Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro, each volume includes a critical introduction, commentary on the text, full stage directions, and a glossary of the mythical and geographical references in the plays. Brought boldly to life by Herbert Golder and Richard Pevear's translation and contextualized by Herbert Golder's eloquent introduction, this early Sophoclean tragedy tells the story of the Homeric hero better known as Ajax, who was second only to Achilles among the Greek warriors. In Greek tradition, Aias figures as the archaic warrior who dies in shame after his betrayal by the Greeks. Sophocles turns tradition inside out, portraying Aias' suicide not as a disgrace but as heroism. He endows Aias suicide with a meaning radically different from previous versions of the Aias myth--Aias is not the hero whom time has passed by, but rather the man who steps beyond time. Most previous versions and interpretations have equivocated over Sophocles' bold vision. This edition of Aias translates precisely that transformation of the hero from the bygone figure to the man who transcends time.

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Customer Reviews

I have always thought of the character of Ajax from the Trojan War to be the prototype of the "dumb

jock" stereotype. Next to Achilles he was the best of the Achean warriors, but Ajax was deeply flawed in that he was stubborn and egotistical. I think his intelligence is further called into question by the myth regarding his death, which is the subject of this play by Sophocles. After the death of Achilles it is decided his glorious armor, forged by Hephaestus, will be given to the worthiest of the chieftains. Ajax expects the prize to come to him, but instead the other chieftains vote to give it to "wily" Odysseus. The inference to be drawn is that craftiness and intelligence are to be prize more than brute strength, which is why I tend to identify Odysseus and Ajax with that distinction between brains and brawn. Enraged by this slight, Ajax decides to kill Odysseus and the other chieftains who have slighted him, but Athena clouds his sight and he thinks the camp's livestock are his intended victims. When he comes to his senses, butchering a sheep he thought was Odysseus, Ajax is humiliated to the point he chooses to kill himself. The climax of this play, the oldest of the seven surviving plays written by Sophocles, is not the suicide of Ajax but rather a debate amongst the Achean leaders as to whether or not Ajax should be buried. The issue central to the play "Ajax" is whether the title character should or should not be considered a true hero by the Greek audience attending the play. Homer, of course, has nothing to say regarding Ajax's fate in the "Iliad," although in the "Odyssey" when Odysseus encounters the shade of Ajax, the dead hero refuses to speak and turns away. However, in his telling of the tale Sophocles adds an important element to the suicide of Ajax. In his first scene when he is discovered amongst the slaughtered livestock, Ajax realizes that his intentions were wrong and that what he has done will make him look ridiculous; he decides to kill himself, ignores the pleas of the chorus, says his farewells to his son and departs. However, in the next episode Ajax returns, apparently reconciled to life; instead of killing himself he will bury his unlucky sword and live a peaceful life. Then a messenger brings the warning of Calchas that Ajax must be kept out of the battle that day. The next thing we know Ajax is cursing the Atreidae and falling on his sword. The change is significant because it makes Ajax's suicide a more rational act. Instead of taking his life in the heat of his embarrassment over what he has done, Sophocles has the character changing his mind twice and ending his life in the grips of a cold hatred against the chieftains. This sets the stage for the debate amongst the chieftains regarding the burial of Ajax. When Teucer wants to bury the body he is forbidden to do so by Menelaus, who calls Ajax his murderer, focusing on the intentions behind his rampage. Agamemnon also forbids the burial, making an impassioned argument for the rule of law and warning against the reliance of the army upon the strength of a single man, whether he be Ajax or Achilles. Ironically (and we surely expect no less from Sophocles), it is Odysseus who makes the argument in favor of burial. For Odysseus the good outweighs the bad and it is not right to do a man injury when he is dead. This argument

certainly echoes the moral at the end of the "Iliad" with regards to way Achilles treats the corpse of Hector. Certainly Ajax was a arrogant brute, obsessed with self-glorification and unfeeling towards his family and people. But when the Trojan army almost succeeded in burning the Achean ships, it was Ajax who stemmed their attack. For Odysseus, and for Sophocles, it is clear that such a man deserves to be considered a hero and demands an appropriate burial. "Ajax" is a minor play by Sophocles, relative to what little has survived of his work, but it does speak to one of the playwright central themes, which is to find that which is heroic in a tragic situation. Having found that spark in the life of Ajax, Sophocles seeks to redeem the tragic figure in this play.

"A brilliant addition to a distinguished series". That's what Bernard Knox said, and I couldn't agree more. I think most of us who love the classics will agree that if Knox says it is good, he can be taken at his word! This translation is by a somewhat unlikely team. I knew Richard Pevear for his stunning, that is the only word for it, translations of great Russian masterworks such as *The Idiot*, *The Demons*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Anna Karenina* and *the Master Margarita*. These superb translations were undertaken with his wife, Larissa Volkonsky, and I urge you to grab one. They are somewhat controversial, particularly for a generation of readers who grew up with Victorian and Edwardian translations of the Russian masters. They are very close to the Russian and have an almost breathless immediacy to them. But the ARE different. ...P>So why all this talk about the Russians? Because Pevear (with an able assist from Herbert Golder) has done for the Greeks what he did for the Russians.... but this translations fiery. I have ALWAYS loved Ajax. I recently read a version of the Iliad to my three young nephews. And they each had their favourite. Achilles, Diomedes and Hector. But they each knew, that in a pinch? when the chips were down? when things get ugly? Who do you want beside you in the phalanx? That's right. That big brute Ajax. Bulwark of the Greeks. A killing machine. Taciturn. Implacable. "Even in death", writes Golder in his introduction, "in his sublime Homeric moment, Aias is famous for what Longinus called his 'eloquent silence': the refusal of his shade to speak to Odysseus in Hades." Now you HAVE to love that. And who doesn't secretly admire him for the incident involving Athena. She took her position alongside him in the Greek line and when he saw her, he blasphemously urged her to move on saying, "Go, stand by the rest of the Greeks. The line won't break where I hold it." Yo! Sophocles story deals with his death. And it is in his confrontation with his death that his greatness emerges. And he is given one of the greatest speeches of antiquity -- and Pevear's translation is breathtaking: "Great, unfathomable time brings dark things into the light and buries the bright in darkness. Nothing is too strange, time seizes the most dread oath, the most hardened mind. Even I, whose will was tempered

like iron, unbending in action, for a woman's sake am become a woman in my speech." And, later in the same speech, "For even the most awesome powers submit to authority: snow-tracked winter yields to the rich growth of summer, dark-vaulted night gives way to the shining, white-horsed brightness of day, a blast of appalling winds stills the sea's rage, even all-overwhelming sleep binds only to let go. Then how shall we not learn wise restraint." Oh...my...god. Here's the skinny on this. Trust me. This is a GREAT story. It is a GREAT play. It is a GREAT translation. And it is about a GREAT hero. Golder writes, "...for the values of endurance, tragic solitude, and heroic hubris -- the basis of the permanent values of the democratic city -- Aias is the paradigm."...

I do book groups and someone in the group recommended that we do this play by Sophocles. I am not well-versed in the play and this book is superb. The introduction is excellent, providing useful background and context; the notes on the text and the glossary are everything that an intelligent reader could desire.

"Ajax" is a tragedy in which the Gods intervene directly and permanently, altering the course of events. Its main subject is envy. After Achilles dies in the Trojan war, a jury is convened to decide who should receive his weapons and armor as heritage. After deliberating, the jury decides Ulysses is the warrior who deserves the most to be Achilles's heir. Then, Ajax, another brave and distinguished warrior, is totally enraged and mad with fury. As he decides to kill Ulysses and his followers, the goddess Athena "blinds" him and makes him take horses and sheep for Ulysses and his men. And so he kills all the animals. But when he discovers what he has done, he commits suicide. We can see the other side of envy, magnanimity, when Agamemnon and Menelaus reject Ajax's burial (the standard punishment for traitors), but the noble Ulysses allows it. Throughout the play, you'll feel the bad feeling of envy poisoning the tale.

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