The Trojan Women

Also known as: Greek/Latin: Troiades

415 BCE

Work Author: Euripides

Produced shortly after the Athenian attack on and capture of the island of Melos, Euripides’ verse play explores the dehumanizing effect of war on the conquerors and elucidates the misery to which war’s aftermath regularly subjects the conquered. In real life, the inhabitants of Melos had merely wished to maintain their neutrality in Athenian disagreements with other polities. In punishment, the Athenians slaughtered all the men of the island and sold the women and children into slavery. This outrage seemingly shattered Euripides' earlier faith in the justice and fairness of Athens and its democratic institutions, and the playwright’s disillusionment reflects itself in the play. (See below for a critical commentary on the play.)

It would have been too dangerous politically for Euripides to present the Melosian situation directly, as the policy makers who perpetrated the Melosian debacle remained in power. The playwright therefore displaces his grief at the suffering of the islanders and his disillusionment with the democratic institutions of his native land by setting his play four centuries earlier and at a geographical distance. The audience finds itself surveying the battlefield before the ruined walls of Troy. The flower of Trojan manhood already lies dead. The women of Troy who are destined to become the concubines of the Greek conquerors are housed in a series of shacks around the battlefield, and an older woman, the Trojan queen Hecuba, lies sleeping on stage.

One of Troy’s tutelary deities, the god of the sea and earthquake, Poseidon, speaks first. He reviews the cause of the desolation and identifies Hecuba and others, including her daughter, the priestess Cassandra, among the women awaiting deportation to the beds of their conquerors. Poseidon also mourns some of the fallen Trojans and bids farewell to a city he has especially favored.

The goddess Pallas Athena enters and speaks next. Poseidon has credited her with the Trojan defeat, but she surprises him by announcing that she wishes “a bitter homecoming” for the Grecian fleet. Poseidon finds that, although Pallas Athena supported the Greeks, she has been offended by the outrages offered her priestess Cassandra by one of the Grecian warriors, and the divinities join forces to punish the
Greeks. Poseidon then pronounces judgment on those who initiate warfare: “How are ye blind, / Ye treaders down of cities, ye that cast / Temples to desolation, and lay waste / Tombs, the un trodden sanctuaries where lie / The ancient dead; yourselves so soon to die!” [Translation by Gilbert Murray.]

Hecuba awakens and mourns the multiple losses she has sustained: children, city, husband, and king, and calls forth the other women to help her grieve. They appear from the doors of the huts, bewail their circumstances, and utter their deepest fears about their futures. The arrival of a Greek herald, Talthybius, interrupts their keening. He has come to announce which Greek has won each woman for his prize. Questioned, he reports that King Agamemnon himself has chosen the priestess Cassandra.

When Hecuba asks about another daughter, Polyxena, Talthybius temporizes, saying that she watches Achilles’ tomb. He does not say that she has been murdered there. Hecuba continues asking about women of her family. Her daughter-in-law Andromache has fallen to the lot of Pyrrhus the son of Achilles. Hecuba herself is intended for Odysseus, the king of Ithaca.

Cassandra enters; out of her mind with grief, she takes joy in the prospect of becoming Agamemnon’s thrall as it will give her the chance to kill him, which she swears to do. She continues darkly to predict the future until the herald leads her away to Agamemnon, and Hecuba collapses.

A chorus of watchers comments on the action, and some of the women go to Hecuba’s assistance. She, however, refuses it and distractedly continues to examine her fate and remember her past. As she weeps for Troy’s fate, a chariot comes. It is loaded with booty, and in it too are a weeping woman and a child. The woman is Prince Hector’s widow, Andromache, and the child, Astyanax, is Hecuba’s grandson by that union. Andromache and Hecuba share remembrances, their grief, and their fears of the future while the leader of the chorus interjects observations on the action of the play and on the history that led up to it.

The Greek herald, Talthybius, reenters and with great difficulty and sorrow informs Andromache that Odysseus has persuaded the Greek council that allowing Astyanax to live will be too dangerous because, when he grows up, he may seek vengeance against the Greeks. The child is to be flung from a tower and his broken body allowed no burial. This last detail is particularly heartless. The Greeks traditionally thought that the soul of an unburied person would wander forever, unable to cross over the river Styx into the underworld. Moreover, such a sentence amounted to sacrilege since the dead were no longer the enemies of any living person and belonged to the gods. A soldier seizes the child to perform his commission, and Andromache is borne away on the chariot. The chorus sings a lengthy lament on the action. They conclude that the events they have witnessed have destroyed their love of the gods.

Now King Menelaus enters and, after justifying the war on the grounds that Paris seduced and abducted Helen, commands that his faithless wife be dragged before him. Hecuba warns him that he must kill Helen at once lest her wiles once more ensnare him. Hecuba even promises to bless Troy’s destroyer if he will do the deed.
Helen asks leave to speak, and, after declaring his intention to kill Helen, Menelaus yields to Hecuba’s request that Helen be allowed to talk. Helen reviews the story of the way in which three goddesses, Pallas Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, contended for first prize in the world’s archetypal beauty contest. Each goddess sought to rig the contest, offering respectively (in this version) military success, royal power, and the love of the world’s most beautiful woman—Helen herself—to Paris, who was foolish enough to agree to be judge. Compounding his folly, Paris chose beauty. Thus, Helen argues, she was not at fault when she deserted Menelaus for Paris. She was merely the pawn of Aphrodite.

The chorus is both unmoved and unconvinced by Helen’s disclaimer of responsibility for deserting Menelaus. So is Hecuba, who criticizes Helen’s performance and calls on Menelaus to pronounce judgment and kill her. Menelaus resolves to do so, but Helen embraces his knees and asks him to “remember all.” Despite Hecuba’s encouragement, Menelaus weakens and instructs the soldiers to take Helen to the ships.

The chorus now takes the part of citizens, and its verse songs convey the feelings of citizens about to be enslaved and transported across the sea to uncertain fates.

Talthybius and soldiers enter bearing the corpse of Astyanax, which the chorus recognizes and bemoans. Only one ship remains, Talthybius reports, to carry off his detachment, Hecuba, and the remaining women. He cannot, however, bring himself to observe the sacrilege of his instructions by leaving Astyanax unburied. Instead he announces the respectful funeral arrangements that he has decided on, and he blames Helen for all the Trojan women’s troubles. Hecuba pantomimes the funeral rites over the child’s dead body, and the chorus mourns the boy’s death.

Hecuba behaves as if she is in a trance and announces her vision: She has, she says, seen God’s open hand, and there is nothing in it. She pronounces a nihilistic view of the purposes of the universe—a view that has perhaps become Euripides’ as well.

The Greek soldiers set fire to the ruins of Troy. Hecuba attempts to immolate herself, but the Greeks restrain her. Then she and the chorus in turn lament the passing of Troy, and after a final farewell to her past, her fallen kin, and her city, she sets her face toward the future and the fate that awaits her. A trumpet sounds, and she and the other Trojan women march to the waiting Greek ship—just as, presumably, the women of Melos had been constrained to do.

**Commentary**

Euripides’ *Trojan Women* represents the ruin of a city. The atmosphere of hopelessness and loss is total, and there is almost no plot in the ordinary sense of the word. Critics of the play have noted its lack of articulated structure and development, but this seems to be the point: There is no more story to be told. The story of Troy is finished, and all that remains is lamentation and exploration of the effects of the defeat of the city on those who survive.
Such exploration is indeed the substance of Euripides' play. One significant action takes place, but the decision that brings about the action is made offstage, and we see only its lamentable outcome. Otherwise, the play consists of a series of dialogues and long speeches that elaborate the main characters' sense of despair and loss. The figure who endows this series of lamenting voices with a certain unity is the enslaved queen of Troy, Hecuba. Exceptionally, she remains on stage throughout the entire tragedy and absorbs each new shock of misfortune in its turn. When Poseidon begins the play with his speech, Hecuba is lying down, weeping continuously. As queen, and mother of so many children—now mostly dead—she stands as an emblem of Troy's endless suffering. She is widowed, deprived of her children, reduced in status, and enslaved all at once. She encapsulates Troy's suffering. Like other Euripidean characters, she is a figure who, once grand, has been brought low, a slave in rags rather than Priam's royal consort.

Not surprisingly in a play that focuses on the sufferings of newly enslaved women, and that features a chorus of captive Trojan women, slavery is a major theme. The main characters now have the opportunity to meditate on what it means to lose all control over one's fate, what it means to become another person's property. At the end of the play, the herald Talithybius gives an order to prevent Hecuba from killing herself. She is not allowed even this freedom, since she is now the property of Odysseus. Andromache cannot stay in Troy long enough to bury her own son, Astyanax, since Neoptolemus is in a hurry to return to Phthia to help his grandfather Peleus. She is simply cargo, and so has no choice about her departure. The destructive effect of subjugation on human relations is a theme Euripides explores in his other post–Trojan War plays as well: Hecuba and Andromache, which take their titles from two of the main characters of this play, are deeply concerned with the condition of slavery.

Andromache, in particular, considers the question of whether or not a life of servitude is worth living. She compares her own condition unfavorably with that of Polyxena, who was fortunate enough to die. A dead person, she points out, cannot experience pain and cannot compare previous happiness with a present state of grief. Andromache further reflects on the unexpected result of her own virtue and modesty. She restrained herself from going outside her house, practiced modest behavior, and subordinated herself to her husband. Now, by a cruel irony, her reward for this voluntary obedience is to be specially singled out for slavery as another man's bedmate. Because of her excellent reputation for virtue, Neoptolemus chose her as his slave. Andromache's thinking on this point is both subtle and pointed. She knows that her life as a woman was hardly "free" in the fullest sense of the term, yet crucially, she chose to be obedient, silent, modest. Now, as her reward, she can no longer even choose her habitual self-restraint: Subservience is forced on her. Worst of all, from her perspective, she must accept another man as lover. Andromache is a paragon of loyalty, and she is being forced to betray Hector after his death. Euripides has already explored these themes to a certain extent in Andromache, where we see the outcome of her life as slave and reluctant bedmate of Neoptolemus.

Cassandra's case is at once typical and exceptional. Like other Trojan women, she must accept a master and lover she despises: Agamemnon. She no longer has control over her own life and fate. Cassandra's manner of perceiving and describing her situation, however, is very different and points toward events well beyond the
ending of the play. As priestess of Apollo, who receives prophecies from the god, yet is doomed never to be believed by others, Cassandra speaks an ominous idiom, full of hints and suggestions that we, the audience, can understand from our broader knowledge of the myths, but that the other characters within the frame of the play cannot fully comprehend. In particular, she bids Hecuba rejoice at her servitude to Agamemnon, since it will do harm to their enemy. She understands, in other words, that her status as Agamemnon’s bedmate will function as catalyst of his murder at the hands of Clytaemnestra and thus will contribute to the implosion of the house of Atreus. In a significant allusion to Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, Cassandra declares that the house of Atreus will be destroyed in compensation for the destruction of Priam’s house.

Cassandra further offers a condensed account of the wanderings of Odysseus. His homecoming, in the Homeric view, was ultimately successful, by comparison with the negative example of Agamemnon: He wandered for 10 years but came home laden with treasures and *kleos* (fame), and successfully drove out the suitors with the help of his son. Yet, Cassandra here emphasizes the misfortunes and sufferings of Odysseus, which, in the present context, seem merited. He does not appear on stage in the present play, but in the *Palamedes*, a lost play that preceded the *Trojan Women* in Euripides’ sequence of four plays, Odysseus would have certainly played the part of villain. The present play singles out Odysseus as author of Astyanax’s death. Moreover, in what might appear to be a sophistic performance, Cassandra argues that the Trojans enjoy a happier fate than the Greeks. They died defending their city and were buried in the earth of the homeland; the Greeks have died far from home, and their families have suffered terribly in their absence. The argument, while apparently counterintuitive, has some justification. At the opening of the play, the dialogue of Poseidon and Athena shows the gods turning against the victorious Greeks, plaguing their return voyage with a catastrophic storm. The punishment of the Greeks is only just beginning.

Cassandra, whose words seem barely comprehensible to her immediate auditors within the play, speaks over their heads to the audience, just as Poseidon and Athena spoke (literally) over the head of the weeping Hecuba. Beyond the immediacy of suffering, there is the deeper question of justice, and yet, to all but a very few, the gods’ justice is incomprehensible and inaccessible. Cassandra is one of the few who has access to it, yet she cannot communicate her knowledge to others. Helen presents a difficult case in point. Her punishment would appear to be especially merited, yet it does not seem likely that she will be punished in any way. Helen also presents an exceptional case within the sequence of captive speakers. On the one hand, she is explicitly presented as a captive woman, Menelaus’s slave, and yet, in other ways, it becomes clear that she is not truly and irrevocably a slave in the same way as the Trojans. As an (apparently willing) abductee of Paris, she caused the sufferings of both the Greeks and the Trojans, and thus, if there is any justice, she should be a prime candidate for punishment. Menelaus, in fact, declares that he is bringing her back to Sparta to be executed. Hecuba, however, warns Menelaus not to look at her or bring her back in the same boat with him; her immense, and immensely destructive, power of attraction will surely master him. Menelaus’s inability to put Helen to death immediately implies that she is already beginning to bring him under her sway. Hecuba’s refutation of Helen’s defense is fairly devastating and convinces Menelaus at least on a rational level, but the deeper
power of persuasion clearly resides in Helen’s person. Her terrible beauty destroyed Troy and decimated the Greek warrior class. Words, set against the divine power of her beauty, are of minor import.

Helen appears as an exception to both the rules of slavery and of justice. She ought to be punished, yet will not be, whereas Andromache ought to be rewarded for her virtue, yet ends up a slave instead. The play’s structure encourages and intensifies the juxtaposition. The episode of Helen’s “trial” falls between the removal of Astyanax and the scene of the preparations for Astyanax’s burial. Andromache is the mirror opposite Helen: She is loyal, steadfast, virtuous, yet she must lose her husband and her child and live out her life as a slave. Helen, whose disloyalty caused the war, will return to Sparta to live with her husband. In the very moment she relinquishes Astyanax, Andromache fiercely denounces the Greeks, and Helen in particular. She denies thatTyndareus or Zeus was Helen’s father, but Vengefulness, Hate, Blood, and Death. The playwright thus draws a direct link between Helen’s actions and the death of Andromache’s child. Even more pointedly, the body of Astyanax is brought in at the very moment that the Chorus of captive Trojan women is expressing the wish that Menelaus be denied a successful return to Sparta after forgiving Helen’s shameful betrayal. The enslaved members of the Chorus are cut off from the homeland and their dead husbands, while Menelaus and Helen return to their homeland together to live out their lives comfortably.

Despite these sharp condemnations, however, the case of Helen is not simple, and Euridipes’ present play takes part in a long debate over her culpability in the Trojan War, to which Herodotus, Stesichorus, Homer, and others variously contribute. Homer made a good case for the bullying power of Aphrodite over Helen, and so Helen’s present argument regarding the goddess’s irresistible force is less implausible than it seems. Moreover, Alexander, the first play in Euripides’ tetralogy, may well have provided some support for the arguments that Helen makes: Paris was fated, from his birth, to destroy Troy, and if that is the case, Helen’s personal culpability becomes even more debatable. Helen is the offspring of Zeus, and from that perspective, her destructive effect on humankind ultimately has its divine origin in Zeus’s rape of Leda. The problem of Helen, therefore, is not simply one of personal culpability but also has a theological dimension. One could truly say that Zeus’s act of lust in swan form caused the central, catastrophic event in Greek mythology, the Trojan War.

Hecuba and the Chorus are clearly disturbed by the theological implications of the fall of Troy. The gods are abandoning the city that honored and worshipped them; they are abandoning their own temples to destruction. Troy was a city traditionally favored by the gods, and as the Chorus points out, the gods are known to have very close relations with Trojans. The Trojan Ganymede serves as Zeus’s cupbearer and sexual object; the goddess Dawn (Eos) chose the Trojan Tithonus as spouse; Apollo and Poseidon built the walls of Troy, which they now allow to fall into ruin. Hecuba, in two brief speeches near the end of the play, comes close to nihilistic despair: The gods have done nothing except cause suffering for Hecuba and Troy, which they now annihilate and consign to oblivion.

The play’s darkest moment, which deprives Hecuba of her last vestiges of hope, is the appearance on stage of Astyanax’s corpse. The killing of Astyanax is the play’s
one true action. Polyxena is already dead at the opening of the play, Priam has been killed, and the fates of the Trojan captives have been decided. Hecuba earlier consoled Andromache with the survival of her son and the possibility that he might one day renew the greatness of Troy. This hope is cruelly extinguished by his murder. Hecuba’s long, poignant speech over his corpse, which she prepares for burial, maximizes the emotional impact of his death. Both symbolically and concretely, Hecuba is burying what is left of Troy. She buries him, significantly, with Hector’s shield, the same shield that defended the city against the Greek invaders. The symbolism here functions in parallel to the manner of Astyanax’s death—being thrown from the walls of Troy. The walls stand metonymically for the city, and, specifically, for the defense of the city. Thus the fact that Astyanax, whose name means “lord of the city” in Greek, falls from those walls to his death produces a doubly cruel irony: The boy born to inherit Hector’s role as city defender dies by falling from the city’s defensive walls. The scene of his burial is followed immediately and significantly by the destruction of the city itself by fire.

By contrast with several other late Euripidean plays, no deus ex machina intervenes to save the day and vindicate the justice of the gods. To console us, we have only the opening dialogue between Poseidon and Athena, which promises that the Greeks will be punished for their crimes. The destruction of Greek lives and households, however, is not the same thing as any kind of salvation for Troy. The prospect remains bleak for Trojans and Greeks alike. The political background of the period, as commentators have observed, may have something do with the dark mood of the play and its exposure of human cruelty in war. By the time Euripides produced Trojan Women in 415 B.C.E., he had had the opportunity to observe some of the grimmer moments in the Peloponnesian War and, in particular, the recent events on the island of Melos in 416–415. The Melians, who sought to maintain neutrality, were besieged by Athens and surrendered. The men were killed, and the women and children enslaved. The focus of the play on the pointless sufferings inflicted on women and children, and on the cold realpolitik that motivates characters such as Odysseus, resonates strikingly with the punishment of the Melians. In certain passages, Euripides refers to Athens, albeit in broadly positive terms. The Chorus of captive Trojan women wishes to be sent to Athens and later recalls how Telamon, from Salamis near Athens, participated in an earlier sack of Troy. While the references are not openly critical, Athens is implicated in the Greek war effort and its subsequent inhumanity. Euripides reminds us that the Athenians, both in the play and in contemporary history, have done their share of killing and enslaving innocents civilians.

Further Information


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