The Trojan Women

Euripides’ The Trojan Women is acknowledged to be among the greatest surviving pieces of Greek tragedy. Although it won only second place in the City Dionysia, a dramatic festival, when it premiered in 415 BCE, it endured throughout antiquity in learned literary anthologies that helped to educate taste and reinforce Greek identity. Though it fell into disfavor during the Renaissance because of its flawed form, it has become one of the most commonly staged and adapted Greek dramas in the twentieth century because of its antiwar sentiment (often greatly exaggerated in modern productions and adaptations, such as that by Jean-Paul Sartre).

The Trojan Women tells the story of the women who survived the Greek capture of their city at the end of the Trojan War. They were destined to become the slaves of the victorious Greeks because the women’s husbands, brothers, and fathers had all been slaughtered by their conquerors. Its very subject matter is subversive of the Greek heroic ideals expressed in Homer’s Iliad, the great epic of the Trojan War. There are four main characters: Hecuba, who dominates the entire play, and her daughter and daughters-in-law, each of whom takes the lead in one act of the play. The first of these is the Trojan princess Cassandra, who is driven mad by the gods. Next is Andromache, who is forced to become the concubine to the Greek hero Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, who had killed her husband Hector in battle. Third is Helen, who is condemned to death...
for adultery but is pardoned because of her beauty and, in Euripides’ version, for her clever sophistic arguments. Finally, the Trojan queen Hecuba, present throughout the play, is left alone at the end to bury her infant grandson, whom the Greeks had murdered out of fear of the vengeance he might one day take if he grew to manhood. With its deep concern for injustice and impiety, The Trojan Women also reveals the stresses on Athens as it prepared to renew the Peloponnesian War at the end of the Peace of Nicias.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

It is thought that Euripides was born in Athens in 480 BCE. Knowledge of his life is based on an anonymous biography that is sometimes attached to manuscripts of his plays and that was probably composed hundreds of years after his death. A few other sources of information are contained in even later Byzantine (medieval) encyclopedias. These sources are often contradictory, and there is little way of establishing an accurate version of his biography. Much of the material in these sources is actually reworked from Euripides’ plays, as if they were autobiographical; other material is drawn from the comedic plays of Aristophanes, in which Euripides sometimes appears as a character. This situation is typical of many ancient authors. In the case of Euripides, all of the surviving material has been collected and translated into English by David Kovacs in Euripidea.

His family background is obscure, but he either was wealthy himself or could secure wealthy patrons to produce his plays. He began to compete in the annual Athenian dramatic festival of the City Dionysia in 456 BCE; he entered in twenty-two different years but won the first prize only four times (and once more posthumously). Posterity was kinder to him, however. All three of the surviving tragedians wrote about a hundred plays, but of Euripides’ works, eighteen tragedies and one satyr play still exist, compared with seven tragedies each for Aeschylus and Sophocles. The tetralogy (a set of three dramas and a satyr play) of which The Trojan Women was a part premiered in 415 BCE and took second place. His other notable plays include Medea (431 BCE), Electra (420 BCE), and the posthumously produced Bacchae (405 BCE). Supposedly, Euripides became disenchanted with his popular and critical failure in Athens, and in 408 BCE he accepted an invitation to join the court of Archelaus, the king of Macedonia, in northern Greece. Euripides died in 406 BCE, about a year after he moved there. The sources provide various elaborate means of his death (for example, being poisoned by rival poets jealous of his talent), but since Euripides was by then seventy-four years old, his death requires no fantastic explanation.

Euripides explored to an unparalleled degree the ideas of science, philosophy, and rhetoric that dominated the intellectual life of fifth-century BCE Athens. For this reason, the sources make him a close associate of such famous philosophers as Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Prodicus, and even Socrates, but that list could just as well be a selection of figures approximately Euripides’ age. In any case, Euripides’ plays are certainly an exceptional component of the intellectual and cultural achievement of classical Athens.

**PLOT SUMMARY**

Greek tragedies were divided into episodes in which the actors sing and speak, advancing the plot, and stasima (choral odes) in which the
chorus dances and sings, usually commenting on
the development of the plot in the preceding episode.

**Prologue, Lines 1–97**
The play begins with a conversation between the
gods Poseidon and Athene. Although no stage
directions are given in the original manuscripts,
it is probable that the gods were lowered onto
the stage by cranes, symbolizing their heavenly
nature. Poseidon is the first to appear. He names
himself as the patron of Troy’s people and
laments that his city has been destroyed by
Athene. He establishes the scene of the play as
a hill overlooking Troy (also known as Ilium),
which was probably visible in the background as
scenery painting. He briefly describes the end of
the siege, beginning with the deception of the
Trojan Horse, and centering on the acts of impi-
ety committed by the victorious Greeks (fre-
quently called Achaeans) that have left the
gods’ temples empty and defiled. He starts with
the murder of Priam, the king of Troy, who
sought sanctuary at the altar of Zeus. According
to Greek sacred law, Priam ought to have been
safe as long as his hand was on the altar, but the
Greeks broke that compact and killed him on
the altar. More fundamentally, Poseidon points
out that the destruction of Troy ends the very
considerable worship that the gods received
from Troy in the form of frequent sacrifices
and the divine treasuries stored in the city’s
temples.

Poseidon explains that the war is over. The
Greek ships are loaded with the sacred and public
treasures of Troy, and the last thing to go on
board will be the Trojan women, together with
their children. Now enslaved, they are all that is
left of the people of Troy since all adult men have
been killed. The women are even now being
assigned to individual Greek masters while they
wait in an encampment of tents. Poseidon men-
tions by name Helen, the cause of the war, and
Hecuba, the queen of Troy. He also mentions in
particular two of the daughters of Hecuba and
Priam: Polyxena, who has already been killed as a
human sacrifice at the tomb of Achilles (the great-
est Greek hero, who nevertheless died in battle a
few months before the end of the war), and Cas-
sandra, whom the god Apollo has driven mad.
Poseidon laments that Troy has been destroyed
because just as the Greeks overcame the Trojans,
the will of Hera and especially that of the warrior
goddess Athene overcame his own.

Athene appears and surprises Poseidon by
asking him to help her punish the Greeks by
sending storms to wreck their fleet on the home-
ward voyage across the Aegean Sea. She wishes
do this because the Greeks allowed the hero
Ajax to pull Cassandra away from the temple of
Athene, where she had sought sanctuary, thus
committing sacrilege and insulting her. Natu-
really, Poseidon agrees.

**Parodos, Lines 98–234**
The chorus dances onto the stage through the
doors in the skene, or backdrop to the action.
The scene begins with Hecuba already on stage,
that is, in the open air of the Trojan women’s
camp where she had slept during the night. It is
now dawn. She sings a song lamenting that Helen
ever came to Troy and her own consequent rever-
sal of fortune (typical of tragic plots) from queen
of Troy to slave groveling before the smoldering
city. She tells the chorus, composed of the other
captive Trojan women, that she cannot bear to

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**MEDIA ADAPTATIONS**

- In 1824, the French poet Casimir Delavigne
  prepared a version of Euripides’ *The Trojan
  Women* for singing as a cantata.
- In 1954, the French composer Paul Danblon
  composed an oratorio, *Les Troyennes*, based
  on Euripides’ drama, with a French libretto
  (lyrics) by Jean Le Paillot.
- In 1971, Michael Cacoyannis directed *The
  Trojan Women*, a film adaptation starring
  Katharine Hepburn, Vanessa Redgrave,
  Brian Blessed, and Patrick Magee. It was
  released on DVD by Kino Video in 2004.
- Elizabeth Swados composed a 1974 opera,
  *The Trojan Women*, loosely based on Euripi-
  dies’ original.
- The Greek composer Eleni Karaindrou com-
  posed incidental music for *The Trojan Women*
see Cassandra, since she has been driven mad on top of all her other suffering. She also informs them that the Greeks have decided to take the women as spoils and leave Troy that very day, rather than slaughtering them as they had the men, a fate some of the women feared. The other women echo Hecuba's lament, hoping that they at least do not have to go to Sparta and serve the hated Helen. (Helen's husband, Menelaus, is the king of Sparta.)

First Episode, Lines 235–510

The Greek herald Talthybius now enters the stage, accompanied by some of the soldiers guarding the camp. He delivers the news that each of the Trojan women has been allotted individually as a slave to one of the Greeks. He reveals that Cassandra has been given to Agamemnon as his concubine. Hecuba laments that this as an act of impiety, since her daughter was devoted to lifelong virginity in the service of Apollo. Hecuba asks about her other daughter, Polyxena. Talthybius hints at the truth, but Hecuba perhaps does not wish to understand. She changes the subject to Andromache, who has been given to Achilles' son Neoptolemus. Hecuba herself has been allotted to Odysseus. This is the worst news for her yet, since she especially hates Odysseus as the deviser of Troy's defeat. She laments:

To be given as slave to that vile, that slippery man,
right's enemy, brute, murderous beast,
that mouth of lies and treachery, that makes void
faith in things promised.

The chorus leader (coryphaeus) asks what will become of all the other Trojan women, but no answer is ever given. Their fate is the anonymity of slavery.

Talthybius orders the guards to get Cassandra from her tent, taking her first because she is the property of Agamemnon, who rules over all the other Greeks. As they go to get her, however, she lights a torch inside her tent. This panics Talthybius because he fears the women plan to burn themselves to death rather than become slaves. He asks, "Have they set themselves aflame / in longing for death?" Before the guards can act, Cassandra dances out of the tent, performing the kind of hymn appropriate to a wedding and hence carrying a torch. Since she is by no means going to be properly married to Agamemnon, Hecuba and the others take this as a sign of her madness. However, Cassandra goes on singing and reveals that she is happier than any bride because she will be able to take revenge for her family and city by murdering Agamemnon, a perfectly rational and honorable wish in the ancient Greek context (other versions of this myth more often make Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, the murderer of Agamemnon and Cassandra). She insists that although the Trojans died honorably fighting in defense of their city, the Greeks have actually suffered more since they lost thousands of soldiers merely to reclaim Helen, who willingly committed adultery, and Agamemnon himself had to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia, before the gods would let the Greek armada set sail at the beginning of the war. This very clear threat and well-reasoned analysis of the Greek situation Talthybius dismisses as evidence of her madness, perhaps because admitting these truths would be unthinkable to him. Cassandra finally turns to prophecy and reveals that Apollo has told her Hecuba will die before leaving Troy and that Odysseus will be doomed to wander through ten more years of suffering before returning home. Hecuba ends the episode with a long lament for her reversal of fortune, finishing with the famous final line: "Of all who walk in bliss / call not one happy, until the man is dead."

First Choral Ode, Lines 511–576

As the chorus dances, its song recalls how happy the women had been when it had seemed the war was over, how they celebrated as the Trojan Horse (supposedly a gift) was brought into the city to be dedicated at the temple of Athene, but then how Odysseus and his Greeks crept out of the Horse and brought about the fall of the city and all its attendant disasters.

Second Episode, Lines 577–798

Andromache and her son, Astyanax, are brought on stage in a wagon containing the arms of her husband, Hector, and other spoils of war. She finally reveals to Hecuba that Polyxena was sacrificed at Achilles' tomb, as she herself witnessed. Andromache tells Hecuba that Polyxena is better off, for the dead experience nothing, while she herself must now betray her dead husband while at the same hating Neoptolemus, the man who will father more children on her. Hecuba advises Andromache that instead she ought love her new master and make him love her, for in that way it might someday become possible for Astyanax (who is the rightful king of Troy) or his son to
return to Troy and rebuild the city. That is the only thing they can hope for, however unlikely. Talthybius returns and announces to the two women that he must tell them something so horrible it wishes he did not have the duty to speak it. The Greeks, persuaded by Odysseus, have decided to kill Astyanax by throwing him down from the walls of Troy. Only in this way can they be sure that he will not take revenge against them once he has grown up. When Talthybius moves to take the child, he urges Andromache not to resist and not to curse the Greeks, lest they go even further and leave the child unburied and without the religious rites for the dead.

Second Choral Ode, Lines 799–859
As the chorus again goes into its dance, its song recalls the myth in which Hercules and Telamon (father of Ajax and uncle of Achilles) sacked Troy in the time of Laomedon, Priam’s father. They recall also that the gods once loved Troy; that Zeus took his cupbearer, Ganymede, from Troy; and that Eos, the goddess of the dawn, married the Trojan Tithonus, but now the gods have abandoned the city to destruction.

Third Episode, Lines 860–1059
Menelaus, the king of the Greek city of Sparta and legal husband of Helen, now comes to take his wife from the camp. He says that he has little interest in her, but he came to Troy to take revenge on Paris, who violated his hospitality in stealing her away, although that debt has long since been paid by Paris’ death and now again by the destruction of Troy. He intends to take her back to Greece and execute her for the blood of all the Greeks spilled because of her adultery. As his soldiers bring Helen out of her tent, Hecuba urges Menelaus to instead execute her at once:

Kill your wife, Menelaus, and I will bless your name.
But keep your eyes away from her. Desire will win.
She looks enchantment, and where she looks homes are set fire;
she captures cities as she captures the eyes of men.

Told what her husband intends, Helen demurely asks permission to argue for her life. Menelaus agrees, and he also agrees to let Hecuba give a prosecution speech. The two women go over the facts of the case in the rhetorical language of the law courts, and Helen, in particular, argues in the manner of the sophists, actually echoing the arguments of the sophist Gorgias’s demonstration speech in defense of Helen. The chorus responds to her with the charge typically leveled against sophists by more conservative elements of Greek society, that she is using the persuasive power of clever rhetoric to advance unjust and immoral arguments. Hecuba, however, persuades Menelaus that Helen indeed deserves to die for her crimes, and he leads her off to his ships in the expectation of having her stoned to death once they return to Greece.

Third Choral Ode, Lines 1060–1122
As the chorus dances, its members sing a lament that Zeus, in dooming Troy to destruction by the Greeks, has brought about the end of his own worship in the rich cults of the city, that they will never be able to bury their husbands and give their graves the religious service demanded by tradition, and finally that, while they themselves will be slaves in an alien land, they hope that the ship bearing Helen will be wrecked at sea and drown her before she can resume her life as queen of Sparta.

Exodos, Lines 1123–1322
The performance of the text becomes more musical, and eventually the chorus and actors dance off the stage, back through the skene. Talthybius returns, bearing the body of Astyanax. He gives it to Hecuba for burial, together with Hector’s shield to serve as casket. She cleans and dresses the corpse and buries it, lamenting in song her sad fate and that of her family and nation. The only balm to her grief is the fact that her family will surely be remembered in song in later ages, a reference to the whole Homeric cycle of the Trojan War, but surely also to Euripides’ own play. As he leads Hecuba and the other women away to their Greek masters, Talthybius gives the orders for the city of Troy to be set fire for its final destruction (this may have been shown as some kind of special effect on stage). Hecuba tries to throw herself into the flames but is restrained by her guards.

CHARACTERS
Tragedies were performed by three actors, who took all of the parts in turn. The Trojan Women is
unusual in that the first actor (protagonist) played a single character, Hecuba, who is never off stage. The second actor (deuteragonist) probably played Poseidon, Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen, while the third actor (tritagonist) probably played Athene, Talthybius, and Menelaus.

**Andromache**

By virtue of being the widow of the Trojan prince Hector, Andromache is the daughter-in-law of Hecuba and mother of Astyanax. She is the main character of the second episode of the play. Euripides presents her as the epitome of the Greek conception of female virtue. She spent her days in the house engaged in domestic labor, such as weaving, and demurely submitted to her husband in all but household affairs. However, tempted she was to learn of the world through education or experience, she sacrificed that desire to keep her good name, not even leaving the house to get water at a well. The Greek audience would understand that this kept her safe from the suspicion of adultery, the charge most shameful to Greek women and their husbands. Her purity was so great that it became known to the Greeks and caused her to be selected as concubine by Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, who killed Hector. The most hateful part of the prospect before her is that she now must betray her husband, to whom she wishes to remain loyal even after he has died. Hecuba advises her that she must ingratiating herself with her new master for the sake of her son. However, when the news comes that Astyanax is to be killed, she is left without even that hope.

**Astyanax**

Astyanax is the son of Andromache and grandson of Hecuba. He is the rightful king of Troy after the death of his father, Hector, and his grandfather, Priam. (His name means “king of the city.”) He is murdered by the Greeks on the advice of Odysseus because “a hero’s son could not be allowed to live” and someday take vengeance against any of those who destroyed his city and family. Astyanax is certainly no older than two years and is a nonspeaking role. Whether he was represented on stage by an actual child or by some sort of dummy is unknown.

**Athene**

Athene (also spelled Athena) is the goddess who stirred up the Trojan War out of rivalry with the goddess Aphrodite over which was the fairest. Originally, Athene had helped the Greeks to attack the Trojans, because Aphrodite had given Helen to the Trojan prince, Paris, in return for judging Aphrodite’s beauty superior. However, by the beginning of The Trojan Women, the Greeks had offended Athene by desecrating her temple in Troy, and she plots with Poseidon to take revenge on them.

**Cassandra**

Cassandra is the last surviving daughter of Priam and Hecuba. She is the main character of the first episode of the play. Poets had considerable leeway in how to portray relatively minor characters like this. Euripides presents her as a priestess of Apollo who had been dedicated to perpetual virginity (an extremely rare situation in ancient religions), but “whom Agamemnon, in despite of the gods’ will / and all religion, will lead by force to his bed.” Apollo possessed her shortly before the beginning of the play. In Greek thought, possession did not entail a spirit entering the victim’s body. Instead, the god merely touched her and she was driven mad. Other treatments of Cassandra have her give true prophecies of the future that are not believed. She does this too in The Trojan Women, with respect to Odysseus’s wanderings. However, Euripides also gives her a similar role when she presents her concise analysis of the Greek situation, pointing out that they suffered more in their victory than the Trojans did in defeat. The Greeks reject this analysis as irrational, although it is all too plausible.

**Hecuba**

Hecuba was formerly the queen of Troy and is the mother of Polyxena and Cassandra, mother-in-law of Andromache (through her son Hector, killed during the war by the Greek hero Achilles), and grandmother of Andromache’s son Astyanax. She is the main character of the play. As queen, she suffers the greatest reversal of fortune and the greatest suffering through the loss of her family and city and, especially, through the fates of her daughters and grandson. Hecuba is completely overwhelmed by the enormity of her loss and can attempt to discharge her grief only through hostility toward those she perceives as responsible for it, such as Odysseus and Helen.

Throughout the play, whenever Talthybius delivers some horrible news, Hecuba puts the best possible interpretation on it, so that through a dialectical discussion with the herald, the full extent of the new misfortune is only gradually revealed. This builds up tension and fear in the
audience, who must wonder what will eventually be revealed. For instance, when Hecuba is told that her daughter Cassandra will become Agamemnon’s slave, she first imagines that Cassandra will be a maid to the king’s wife, Clytemnestra (itself a horrible fate because she is sister of the hated Helen), only to be told that she will become Agamemnon’s concubine, an act of sacrilege and so an even greater outrage. She frequently feels herself so utterly powerless that there is nothing left for her to do but cry out, “Tear face, beat bosom,” referring to stylized acts of public grieving in Greek culture.

In her debate with Helen, Hecuba is capable of making her own references to the philosophy of fifth-century BCE Athens. When she invokes Zeus, she follows the teachings of the philosopher Anaxagoras, suggesting that Zeus may be a physical principle or natural law, rather than an anthropomorphic (human-like) deity.

**Helen**

Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, was offered to Paris by Aphrodite as a bribe for judging Aphrodite more beautiful than Athene and Hera, setting in motion the events that led to the Trojan War. Menelaus, her legitimate husband, recovers his wife after the war and determines to execute her for adultery. However, as the main character of the third episode of the play, she engages in a sort of legal process whereby she defends herself against the capital charge, and Hecuba acts as the prosecutor. Euripides uses the device to make Helen, the worst transgressor of proper social roles because of her adultery, a symbol of sophistry, which many Greeks felt was a more fundamental transgression of social norms of right and justice, because of its duplicitous use of rhetoric. Helen’s speech is filled with the technical legal language created by the sophists: “Think what this means, and all the consequence.... You will all say this is nothing to the immediate charge.... I have witnesses.”

After Helen is finished, the coryphaeus accuses her in terms typical of the criticism directed at sophists: “She speaks / well, and has done wickedly. This is dangerous.” But Helen and Hecuba both use the same technique that was the essential ingredient in ancient rhetorical discourse and especially in the teaching of the sophists: the appeal to plausibility. They both present facts, and even agree on many points of fact, but each insists that her own interpretation is the more plausible.

Helen begins by saying that Hecuba herself and Priam are the true cause of Troy’s destruction because they had received clear prophecy that if they let their infant son Paris live, he would destroy the city, and yet they spared his life twice (this had been the subject of *Alexander*, the first play in Euripides’ trilogy of 415 BCE, which the audience would have seen earlier in the morning of the day they saw *The Trojan Women*). She reminds Menelaus that if Paris had picked either Hera or Athene in the goddesses’ contest, Paris might not have kidnapped her, but the gods would have given the Trojans the power to conquer Greece, so he was actually injured less by her adultery than if she had remained faithful. Next, Euripides has Helen echo the arguments put forth in the play Helen of the sophist Gorgias, the defense speech he had publicly delivered to demonstrate his rhetorical skill for arguing in favor of so obviously an indefensible case. Like Gorgias, she claims she was compelled to leave with Paris by force, that she was powerless to resist the gods who wished her to go.

Hecuba replies to Helen that the talk of goddesses being subject to vanity is so much nonsense, as is Aphrodite aiding Paris in his abduction of her. The only ‘Aphrodite’ (who represents love) involved had been Helen’s own desire. That is what persuaded her to betray her husband. Moreover, she had preferred to be a princess in Troy, a state far richer than the cities controlled by Menelaus. Hecuba bears witness that once the siege began, Helen had tormented Paris with jealousy by threatening to slip over the wall and return to Menelaus. Indeed, Hecuba herself had offered to help Helen leave, but she did not. She certainly made no effort to kill herself, which is what Greek morality demanded of a woman in her position. Hecuba persuades Menelaus, who, acting as judge, condemns her to be publicly stoned to death, but back in Greece. The audience, however, knows, from the *Odyssey* (and the chorus suspects) that Helen will still be alive ten years later, with Menelaus once more submissively in love with her beauty.

**Menelaus**

Menelaus is the husband of Helen, whose adultery led to the Trojan War. Once he recovers her after the war from among the other Trojan women, he condemns her to death for her betrayal. Although he remains resolved on this throughout the play, other mythic sources, such
as the *Odyssey*, suggest that Hecuba is correct in thinking he will eventually relent, being again captivated by her beauty.

**Poseidon**

Poseidon, god of the sea, begins the play with a prologue that describes the Greek capture of Troy. He laments the acts of sacrilege committed by the Greeks and the consequent failure of worship the gods will receive from Troy. When Athene proposes that they should join together to punish Greek impiety, he is highly suspicious of her because until that moment she had been on the Greek side, but nevertheless he eagerly joins in her plan.

**Talthybius**

Talthybius is the Greeks’ herald, charged with communicating their decisions to the Trojan women. He was evidently chosen for this task because he had been known at the Trojan court before the war. He frequently laments that he has no taste for delivering the cruel and horrible news that he must tell Hecuba time after time, suggesting that even an ordinary Greek can be disgusted by the excesses they are forced to commit by war.

**THEMES**

**Catharsis**

The earliest critics of Greek tragedy were two philosophers who lived in the generation after its peak, Plato and Aristotle. Both agreed that the function of tragedy was to arouse intense emotions. Plato feared that this process would tend to degrade the emotional life of the audience members and cause them to become worse people. He regretted that he could find little alternative to giving up tragedy. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, was more pragmatic and viewed tragedy in a very different light.

Aristotle believed that tragedy derived its emotional power from the imitation of events in real life, particularly because it did not show the audience the most pleasant aspects of existence but rather forced them to consider the most unpleasant aspects. Paradoxically, “though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art.” Tragedy achieved this goal through showing “incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.” Catharsis means “cleansing,” and it was the Greek word for the then common method of treating illness by forcing the patient to vomit. Aristotle means that the drama serves to heighten these emotions and thereby discharge them, so that the viewer experiences a pleasurable release of tension. Few dramas present a greater object of pity than Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*; she sees all of her sons killed in
battle, witnesses the murder of her husband as he seeks sanctuary at a divine altar, and falls from the status of a queen to that of a slave. The audience naturally shares her fear when each new announcement in the course of the play brings news that one of her daughters has been raped, murdered, or sent off into slavery, and finally watches her bury the corpse of her last remaining grandson with her own hands.

**Injustice**

In the oldest dramatic productions in the early fifth century BCE, it was customary for all three plays to deal with the same event in a more extended fashion. The only trilogy of this type that survives is Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which concerns Agamemnon’s son Orestes having to take revenge on his own mother, who had murdered his father. By the late fifth century BCE, it was more typical to have the three plays deal with different mythical episodes, but in 415 Euripides produced a trilogy that better corresponded to the older type. The three plays all treat material that comes from the mythical cycle of the Trojan War. Although they are not bound in the sense of telling parts of the same story, they all concern acts of injustice. The first is *Alexander*, which concerns the efforts of the brothers of the Trojan prince Paris (who was also called Alexander) to prevent him receiving his rightful inheritance and status. The second is *Palamedes*; it is the story of a Greek hero on whom Odysseus takes personal revenge by framing him for plotting to betray the Greeks to the Trojans, resulting in him being unjustly stoned to death. The third (and the only one whose text survives) is *The Trojan Women*, which concerns many acts of moral injustice inherent in the legal enslavement of the women, but in particular it is about the unjust murder of the child Astyanax to prevent him trying to take revenge on the Greek heroes when he grows up. The plot of the accompanying satyr play, *Sisyphus*, is unknown, but its main surviving fragment is a logical exposition of atheism.

**Persuasive Literature**

Sophists (the name means “wise men” or “sophisticated men”), such as Gorgias and Protagoras, were teachers of rhetoric, or the art of public speaking, in fifth-century BCE Greece. They especially congregated in Athens, where the democracy fostered their activities. Before the existence of print or any other kind of mass media, when citizens would have to defend themselves or undertake prosecutions in court without the aid of a lawyer, and where a speech well delivered in the council could persuade other citizens to accept or reject an idea and shape the course of state policy, the ability to persuade through words that sophists taught was of paramount importance. However, as the sophists analyzed what kinds of appeals could persuade people, they came to the opinion that all beliefs and moral standards were relative, changing from city to city and time to time, and therefore, such institutions as religion and law or concepts of right and wrong were social conventions created by people. They concluded not that these could be ignored, but that they could be exploited; an audience’s beliefs could be used to make audience members come to the conclusion desired by a skilled speaker. For these reasons, as much as they were highly sought out as teachers, they were hated by philosophers and intellectuals, especially the writers of tragedy and comedy, as well as the general public. To their critics, the sophists seemed to make the worse argument the better: that is, they made the less persuasive argument seem more persuasive and the morally inferior argument seem superior, or at least expedient.

Sophists were sometimes prosecuted for impiety or atheism (which were crimes in ancient Athens, where the state and religion were indistinguishable). In traditional Greek thought, impiety arose from the inability to tell right from wrong and so would naturally be associated with sophistic rhetoric. Anaxagoras, for instance, was prosecuted for attempting to explain astronomy in mechanistic rather than mythological terms, and one of the chief factors in the conviction of the philosopher Socrates was his association in the popular mind with the sophistic movement. The sophist Gorgias delivered a public speech in praise of Helen of Troy, claiming that she was completely free of guilt, a shocking supposition in an Athenian society nearly paranoid about adultery, where the honor of men depended on their ability to control the behavior of the female members of their families. In *The Trojan Women*, Euripides engages many sophistic themes about the nature of justice and religion, and his character Helen gives a speech defending herself. Euripides also engaged the sophists on much more serious matters. In his lost *Sisyphus*, the satyr play produced in 415 BCE together with *The Trojan Women*, Euripides has the title character speak the most extreme statement of atheism in Greek literature:
Then, when the laws were preventing men from doing violence openly, but they did it in secret, that was the moment I think when... some shrewdly intelligent and clever man invented for mankind fear of gods, so that there might be something to frighten bad men even if they do or say or think something in secret. From that time therefore he introduced belief in gods.

The satirical point of the play perhaps came when Sisyphus (famously condemned for attempting to deceive the gods by forever having to push an enormous boulder up a hill in the underworld, only to have it roll back down when he reaches the top) discovers the reality of divine punishment. Sophistic themes of atheism and impiety are hotly contested in a more serious vein in The Trojan Women itself, for example, during the debate between Hecuba and Helen.

**STYLE**

**Greek Drama**

Religious festivals in which actors represent characters in mythological scenes have been part of many cultures, but drama as it is known in the modern West began in Classical Athens, a period often considered a cultural high point in art, literature, and philosophy. Tragedy started out as part of the festival of the City Dionysia (celebrated in worship of the god Dionysus) in which a chorus of men would dance while singing a hymn. The choruses competed against each other for the honor of a prize. The word *tragedy* is formed from the Greek words for “goat” and “song,” perhaps suggesting that the victorious *coryphaeus*, or leader of a chorus, was awarded a goat. By the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, these performances had become extended so that lengthy scenes from myth were enacted in great detail by the chorus in conjunction with up to three actors, who performed additional dialogue that made complete stories. There were three types of drama: tragedy, which dealt with mythological themes in a serious manner; satyr plays, which gave burlesque versions of myth (hence the modern word satire); and fantastic and surreal comedies.

The City Dionysia was held each year in late March or early April. The main part of the celebration was the presentation of a series of dramatic cycles over three days. Each of the tragedies retold a familiar Greek myth in the form of a play. On the first day, there was a parade in honor of the god to the theater of Dionysus at the foot of the Acropolis (a hill), ending with the performance of dances by each of the three competing choruses (who would later also appear in the dramas). Next came the sacrifice of bulls to Dionysus in the theater. Over the following three days, each of the competing dramatists presented a trilogy of three tragedies and one satyr play, to make up a tetralogy. Each dramatist not only wrote the plays but paid for the production from his own resources (or from those of a patron), meaning that only aristocrats could compete. The audience consisted of about 20,000 adult male Athenian citizens. Women were not generally permitted in the theater. The performances began in the morning and lasted all day. Three audience members were chosen at random to act as judges. On the final day of the festival, five comedies would be presented, each by a different comedian. Aristophanes was the most prominent comedian.

**Tragedy**

The most important tragedians (and the only ones with plays that still exist in their complete form) were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In later periods, their work was constantly visited...
The plays alternated dialogue among the actors with choral odes in which the entire chorus (about fifty dancers) would come out and sing and dance in the orchestra, or circular dancing floor nearest the audience. A backdrop was provided by the skene, an architectural screen that could also contain painted scenery. The plays were necessarily set in one location and in real time (there were no changes of scenery or breaks between acts), as if the audience were witnessing an event as it unfolded. However, actors might go into the skene, particularly if they had to carry out some gruesome act such as murder, which was not allowed to be shown on stage. The actors and chorus could exit and enter the stage through the skene or from the wings on either side. In some cases, characters could enter from the wings on a cart (ekkyklema), either to represent a chariot or other wheeled vehicle, or because they were dead or dying. When gods appeared in a play, they would be lowered from the top of the skene by a crane (the famous deus ex machina literally “god from a machine”). The actors wore masks fixed in the predominant emotion of the characters they portrayed (though the masks might be changed while the character was off-stage). The masks contained megaphones that would amplify their voices to the audience. The actors wore buskins (boots) or stilts more than a foot tall and their costumes consisted of long flowing robes that trailed on the ground. Three actors performed all the roles (and therefore played more than one part), and all actors were male, even if they portrayed female characters. While not fully sung, the actors’ lines were probably not spoken, but chanted in some way, though little is known about this. Medieval plain chant might suggest something of the way the dialogue was performed, although some of the longer speeches, such as Cassandra’s in The Trojan Women, were clearly sung in a more complex manner. There is almost no surviving record of what the music in tragedy was like. The music, however, was also composed by the playwright. The subject matter of tragedy was drawn mostly from the Homeric epics or from other legends concerning the kings of Greece in the mythical period around the Bronze Age.

In the aftermath of the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, the best writers, such as Menander, shifted to new comedy realistically depicting everyday life, and the art of tragedy declined. Revivals became more important than new work. Dramas composed in the Roman Empire, such as those by Seneca, were mostly intended to be read rather than performed. This kind of work was more directly influential on Renaissance dramatists such as Shakespeare and the French playwright Racine. However, once Greek drama was rediscovered in the Renaissance, the performance of these works became immensely popular and led to the birth of opera as an art form. Although the music of Greek plays was not as extensive or complex as that of opera, the essential unity of tragedy and opera was defended as late as the era of the opera composer Richard Wagner and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, especially in the latter’s book The Birth of Tragedy.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**Trojan War**

The Trojan War and the return of its Greek heroes from Troy is the subject matter of the Homeric poems the Iliad and the Odyssey. These are the final records of an oral tradition of poetry that had flourished in Greece for centuries before the introduction of writing. In the generations after their publication, many other works were composed, the so-called Epic Cycle, which filled in details of the war left out of the two great poems. These probably also reflected traditional material. Aristotle mentions in the Poetics that The Trojan Women, like many tragedies, expands material that is mentioned in one of these works, the now lost Little Iliad, which told the story of the Trojan Horse and the capture of the city.

The Trojan War began when a golden apple inscribed “To the fairest” was cast into the divine court on Mount Olympus by the goddess Eris (who represents strife). Three goddesses—Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite—disagreed over which one should receive it. They selected the Trojan prince Paris (also known as Alexander) to decide the issue. Each bribed him—Hera with the rule
over the whole world and Athene with invincibility in battle—but Paris preferred Aphrodite’s bribe, to take Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, as his wife. Helen, however, was already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta, so Paris visited Menelaus as a guest and kidnapped Helen, taking her back to Troy. Before Helen’s original marriage, her hand had been sought by every prince in Greece. Odysseus decided the issue in favor of Menelaus by trickery, in exchange for being given Helen’s sister Penelope as his own bride. Each one of Helen’s suitors had sworn to guarantee the marriage with military force if necessary, so Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon (king of the chief Greek city of Mycenae) led an army composed of contingents of all the Greek states to Troy. After a siege that lasted ten years, Odysseus devised a ruse whereby the Greeks pretended they were admitting the futility of the war and sailing away, but left behind a large wooden statue of a horse as an offering. The Trojans took this inside their city to dedicate it in Athene’s temple. That night, while the people of Troy were distracted by celebrating their deliverance from war, Odysseus and a squad of men who were hidden in the horse crept forth to open the city gates and admit the Greek army, which had returned. After Troy fell to the Greeks in this way, the stage was set for Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*.

**Peloponnesian War**
The Peloponnesian War was a conflict between Greek city-states that grew from rivalry between the two leading cities, Sparta and Athens. The principal source of information about the war is the contemporary Athenian historian Thucydides.
After the defeat of the Persian attempt to conquer Greece in 480–479 BCE, Sparta, because of its superior infantry force, was the most powerful Greek state. However, Athens possessed the most powerful navy and was in control of the Delian League, an alliance of Greek city-states devoted to liberating Greek cities still occupied by Persia in Ionia (the Aegean coast of modern Turkey). As this goal was accomplished, Athens increasingly became an imperial power controlling its allies, and it was growing far more powerful than any other Greek state. Sparta protected its preeminent position by organizing the Peloponnesian League (named after the southern peninsula of Greece). The inevitable war between the two alliances lasted from 431 to 404 BCE. The first part of the conflict is generally known as the Archidamian War; in it, Sparta annually invaded Attica, ravaging the countryside around Athens and forcing the population to take shelter within the city walls of Athens, which the relatively primitive military technology of the Spartans could not attack. Athens was provided with food by sea. However, in 430 BCE, a serious plague broke out, killing more than thirty thousand Athenian citizens, including the leading politician Pericles. Athens maintained its naval supremacy, so both sides were essentially unable to attack the other. Military operations were also carried out elsewhere in Greece, and eventually, in the battle of Spachteria in 425 BCE, a group of about 300 Spartan soldiers were captured by the Athenians, a revolutionary event, since no Spartan had ever surrendered before. The Athenians threatened to execute these soldiers if the Spartans invaded Attica again. By 421 BCE, a truce between the two alliances, supposed to last for fifty years, was negotiated by the Athenian general Nicias.

Athens took advantage of the Peace of Nicias to strengthen itself by gaining new territory not allied with Sparta and therefore unaffected by the truce. In 416 BCE, Athens conquered and annexed
the Aegean island of Melos. However, in 415 BCE, the year Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* premiered, Athens undertook to conquer the island of Sicily in the western Mediterranean. However, the Sicilian expedition, led by the generals Nicias and Alcibiades, ended in disaster and the complete loss of the Athenian forces in Sicily. During the campaign, Alcibiades was prosecuted for impiety and defected to the Spartan side. On his advice, the Spartans seized and fortified the Attic village of Deceleia in 413 BCE, disrupting Attica as thoroughly as they had with their previous campaigns but at a fraction of the effort. This began the second phase of the war, known as the Decelean War. Surprisingly, Athens recovered from the Sicilian disaster, but it suffered civil war between democratic and oligarchic factions. Sparta began to receive money for the war from the Persian Empire, which it used to construct its own fleet. In 405 BCE, the Spartan commander Lysander caught the main Athenian battle fleet hauled up onto the beach at Aegospotami (on the Chersonese straits, between Europe and Asia) and destroyed it. After this, the Athenians had no choice but to give their unconditional surrender, ending the war and Athens’s position as a great power in 404 BCE.

**Critical Overview**

The first criticism of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* was delivered in 415 BCE by the judges of the City Dionysia; they awarded it only second place, behind the plays of the now largely unknown dramatist Xenocles. A generation later, Aristotle in the *Poetics* gives hints that Euripides suffered from the disconnection between popular and sophisticated taste. Aristotle reports that Euripides’ rival playwright Sophocles “said that he drew men as they ought to be, and Euripides as they are,” implying that audiences do not like to see men as they are. Aristotle adds his own comment that the popular criticism of Euripides for also dwelling on the reversal of fortune was mistaken. Aristotle had realized that suffering was paradoxically the key to the beauty of tragedy, and in no other tragedy is the heroines’ suffering so intense and sustained.

Gilbert Murray, the great classicist and translator of the first half of the twentieth century, suggests in *Euripides and His Age* that “Euripides must have been brooding on the crime of Melos during the autumn and winter” of 416 BCE; Murray thus argues for the first time a link between the Athenian defeat of Melos and Euripides’ play of 415 BCE. In the introduction to his translation *Greek Tragedies*, Richmond Lattimore is one of the staunchest defenders of the Melos connection, but he cautions that although it may have inflamed patriotic feeling at the time, *The Trojan Women* was directed not against Athenian imperialism so much as against war in general. However, even this supposition has been questioned, since Greeks of the fifth century BCE did not think of permanent peace as an attainable or even desirable condition. Therefore, more recent critics, such as Casey Duè in *The Captive Woman’s Lament in Greek Tragedy*, tend to think of *The Trojan Women* as similar to Aristophanes’ peace comedies as arguing for an end to a particular war, namely the Peloponnesian War, which, although it had brought Athens considerable strategic advantage, had also left the Attic countryside ravaged and a large proportion of the Athenian population reduced to refugee status, sheltering inside the city walls. Barbara Goff suggests that the connection to contemporary events is far from implausible but that it would have been made, or not made, by each individual audience member in 415 BCE.

Murray also deals with the other main theme of modern criticism, the play’s form. He observes that the structure of *The Trojan Women* is unlike any other drama and is subversive of any ordinary Greek use of myth:

> But it tells the old legend in a peculiar way. Slowly, reflectively, with little stir of the blood, we are made to look at the great glory until we see not glory at all but shame and blindness and a world swallowed up in night.

Later critics point out many ways in which *The Trojan Women* violates the tenets of tragedy. For instance, although there is a reversal of fortune in *Hecuba* and other noble Trojan women becoming slaves, there is no moment of self-discovery in which a hero, such as Oedipus or Agamemnon in other plays, who thought himself happy realizes that his true condition is pitiable and wretched, as Judith Mossman points out in her article in *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*. It has often been observed that, as Goff puts it, the play is liable to “charges of excessive emotionalism, and lack of movement and development.” Whatever the character of its antiwar message and whatever its formal defects, *The Trojan Women* was mostly ignored before the twentieth century and Murray’s
championing of it. In the last century, though, it has generally been acknowledged as among the best of the tragedies; it is among the most performed and the most frequently adapted, always to give it a more straightforward antiwar message.

CRITICISM

Bradley A. Skeen
Skeen is a classics professor. In this essay, Skeen examines impiety (irreverence) as the neglected main theme of The Trojan Women.

Euripides’ The Trojan Women explores the limits of human suffering as its characters witness their whole civilization being extinguished in the aftermath of war. The Trojan women have already seen their husbands and fathers killed, and Hecuba and Andromache must also face the murder of the infant Astyanax. They must see injustice triumph over justice when Helen, in their view the cause of all their ills, escapes punishment. Seeing these events on stage elicits fear and pity from the audience (which Aristotle identified as the main purpose of tragedy), perhaps to a greater degree than any other play. This very success raises the question of what purposes Euripides has in the play besides the emotional release that The Trojan Women shares with all tragedy.

The obvious conclusion is that The Trojan Women carries a message against war. Certainly, that is the message that has most often been read in the play during the last hundred years. Modern adapters from Sartre to Osofisan have felt the need to change the text to make the play speak about a specific war going on as they wrote. Sometimes classicists, starting with Murray a century ago, have read the original in that

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

• D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths, by Ingri and Edgar D’Aulaire, first published in 1961 and frequently reprinted since, gives short versions of the Greek myths as an introduction for younger readers unfamiliar with the material.
• The Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan composed a play, Women of Owu, based on Euripides’ The Trojan Women. It was first performed in 2004 and published in 2006. The setting is early modern Nigeria, but the play rather transparently criticizes the Second Gulf War.
• The foundational 1983 collection of essays, Images of Women in Antiquity, edited by Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt, presents a range of studies about the lives of women in antiquity, covering settings from ancient Mesopotamia to medieval Celtic society but firmly anchored in the Greco-Roman world.
• In a 2006 book intended for a general audience, The Trojan War: A New History, Barry Strauss surveys the representation of the war in the Iliad that serves as the background to The Trojan Women in conjunction with the archaeological record of the Greek Bronze Age, which sometimes tells a story quite different from Homer’s.
• In his 1997 study The Fall of Troy in Early Greek Poetry and Art, Michael J. Anderson demonstrates the importance of the fall of Troy not only in Greek literature but, for the first time, in Greek vase painting.
• Henry Treece’s 1967 novel for young adults, The Windswept City, is set during the last days of the Trojan War.
• The French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a play also called Trojan Women in 1965 that was translated into English in 1976. It is more of a comment on Euripides than a translation, and its message is decidedly against the postcolonial wars then raging around the globe, particularly the French conflict in Algeria.
way too, linking it to the conflicts of 416 BCE. A few months before the premiere of *The Trojan Women*, Athens destroyed the island city of Melos, killing all the adult men and selling the surviving women and children into slavery. Thucydides’ account of this event finds no parallel in all of Greek historical writing. He sharply stops the flow of his narrative and inserts text formatted like a drama, with the name of the speaker followed by dialogue. The two actors represent not individuals but the Melians and Athenians. What the dialogue contains is far from any historical speech that might have been made at the time. The form is adopted, the characters agree, so that the truth can be told plainly, without the need to “deceive the ears of the multitude by seductive arguments.” In other words, they will speak the truth, not engage in the deceptions of sophistic argument. What this truth amounts to is that Athens must pursue its interest no matter whom it destroys. Because its empire is based on force and fear, it is better that Athens cause destruction sometimes to raise fear. Nevertheless, the Athenians will let the Melians submit if they will. But the Melians will not submit, because it is not just. The Athenians succeed merely because they are strong. Far from stripping away sophistry as the Athenians claim, they show that it is the way of the world for the strong, not the just, to prosper. Nowhere does Thucydides come so close to veering from what Aristotle viewed as the role of the historian to that of the tragedian: “The distinction between historian and poet . . . consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be.”

But perhaps it is Thucydides’ treatment that looks more like *The Trojan Women* than the historical events the report both reveals and conceals. The concern for a truth destroyed by clever argument is a clear point of contact with Euripides, not something that would likely have been discussed on Melos. Sophistry is really only a special case in which the strong overcome the just—a clever speaker persuades the hearers against a speaker who is in the right—and the fear that is the way of the world is central to Thucydides’ exposition, and perhaps also to that of Euripides. The fate of Troy is not necessarily based on the fate of Melos. For a defeated city to have all the male citizens killed and its women and children sold as slaves was all too common in the Greek world. At the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, for example, in 429–448 BCE, Sparta had captured the Plataea, a city allied to Athens, and treated it in just that way. The difference was that at the beginning of the siege of the town, the Spartan king, Archidamus, made a public proclamation to Hera, the patron goddess of the city, that the Spartans were acting only because the Plataeans had violated their sacred oaths. After the city’s destruction, the Spartans built a large shrine to Hera over the ruins, together with facilities for receiving pilgrims from all over Greece, and they devoted the surrounding farmland to fund the shrine. In short, when Plataea was destroyed, the conquerors took special care not to outrage the gods. Agamemnon and Odysseus showed no such concern for religion.

It is not hard to read *The Trojan Women*, not as a play against war (Greeks commonly believed that the normal condition of a state was to be at war, and one does not find much praise of peace as an absolute virtue in Greek thought), nor even as a criticism of the Peloponnesian War in particular (Euripides, who had composed a victory song to celebrate Alcibiades’ first-place finish in the chariot race at the Olympic games, was closely connected to the democratic faction that supported the war), but rather as a play against impiety—disrespect for the gods—in a surprisingly old-fashioned tone. It is surprising because Euripides moved in the circles of sophists and philosophers at the forefront of Athenian intellectual culture. Nevertheless, the fact that the other three plays in the tetralogy produced by Euripides in 415 BCE all took various forms of injustice and impiety as their themes strongly suggests that this is the case also with *The Trojan Women*.

Impiety was sown in Athens from the dislocations of the war. In the first years of the siege of Athens, the city was visited by a plague. This is understandable, rationally, since the city was overcrowded with tens of thousands of refugees from the countryside. However, plague was traditionally seen as a punishment for impiety visited upon humans from the gods, and in the midst of the disaster it was difficult for even the most brazen freethinker not to view it in that light. Moreover, Greek religion was a form of exchange, based on the reciprocity between men that was the dominant feature of Greek life. Human beings gave gifts to the gods in the form of sacrifice and worship, while the gods gave gifts to humanity in the form of the fertility
of the land and the other good things to be enjoyed in life. If humanity broke the cycle of reciprocity, it became guilty of impiety and could expect punishment rather than blessings. During the war, the cycle of exchange was forcibly broken. The rites for the fertility of the fields could not be performed inside the city, or if they were, they could not be performed correctly, and that too was impious; the dead could not be buried and tended with their rites in family cemeteries, and so on. Whatever the Athenians did, the oracle of Apollo at Delphi (the greatest religious institution in Greece and staunchly Spartan in sympathy) rebuked them. The greatest disruption of this kind came from the interruption of the celebration of the mysteries of Demeter and Kore at the suburb of Eleusis, the most important cult in Athens. When the Spartans destroyed the goddesses’ temple, its priests were quick to blame their own government for starting the war in the first place and formed one of the most powerful factions for peace in Athens. In the first months of 415 BCE, Alcibiades profaned the mysteries of Eleusis by performing them at private dinner parties. This was a capital crime, and the motive of Alcibiades and his closest followers is hard to reconstruct. Certainly they did it because they could, because they had a sense that they could not be punished for their crimes. This was another symptom of the breakdown of cohesion in Athenian society occasioned by the war. It is very likely that it would have been known to Euripides, since it was the subject of the play The Baptists, a comedy by Eupolis that premiered at the City Dionysia in 415 BCE, a few days after The Trojan Women. When it came to the notice of the state that Alcibiades’ profanation was a fact rather than the fantastic plot of a play, the profanation was interpreted as a call to revolution and brought about Alcibiades’ political downfall.

At the beginning of The Trojan Women Poseidon and Athene set out to punish the Greeks for impiety, promising to rain down on them all the misfortunes described in the Odyssey and in the plays of Aeschylus’ Oresteia trilogy: shipwreck, murder, and worse. This seems to follow a very traditional model. The Greeks have broken the cycle of reciprocity between themselves and the gods by acts of impiety and will be punished. Not only have the Greeks murdered suppliants at altars and murdered innocents unjustly, they have also brought the worship offered by the Trojans to the gods to an end. Poseidon complains:

- So I must leave my altars and great Ilium,
- since once a city sinks into sad desolation
- the gods’ state sickens also, and their worship fades.

Euripides seems to leave little doubt that he is referring to acts of impious destruction, like those the Athenians carried out at Melos, in his warning against following the Greek example at Troy:

- The mortal who sacks fallen cities is a fool,
- who gives the temples and the tombs,
- the hollowed places of the dead to desolation. His own turn must come.

The Greeks at Troy, and perhaps the Athenians, Euripides suggests, doom themselves by their impieties. But it is impiety that is to be avoided, not war.

If Athene and Poseidon were the patrons of the Greeks and Trojans during the war and had plans and desires opposed to each other, Zeus, who made the final decisions, was an impartial judge. His judgment against Troy brings about the loss of worship that Poseidon complains of, and thereby breaks the cycle of reciprocity between mortals and immortals, which the chorus of Trojan women recalls their city kept intact:

- Thus, O Zeus you betrayed all to the Achaeans: your temple in Ilium, your misted altar,
- the flame of the clotted sacraments,
- the smoke of the skyng incense . . .
- Gone are your sacrifices, the choirs’ glad voices singing to the gods night long, deep into darkness;
- gone the images, gold on wood laid.

Perhaps the greatest suffering the Trojan women endure, greater than any insult from the Greeks, is to have the faithful honor they showed to the gods cast aside as nothing. One could argue that the Trojans brought about their own downfall with their own impiety when Priam spared the life of his son Paris, who was prophesied to be the doom of Troy, and when he received him with his adulterous, kidnapped
bride in an affront to Zeus, the guarantor of human hospitality. However, those events had very little meaning to those Trojans who faithfully carried out the worship of Zeus. Certainly there was nothing they could have done about them. The suffering of the Trojan women begins to suggest that the innocent suffer, even that the pious suffer, a truth that points in the direction of the birth of Stoic philosophy a century after Euripides. The playwright and even the gods can offer no answer to the plight of the Trojan women.

A few years after Euripides’ death, when the Spartan general Lysander finally captured Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War, the suggestion was made by some of his advisors that all the male Athenians should be killed and the women and children sold as slaves, but one of the members of the council of war sang the opening of a chorus from Euripides’ Electra. After that, no one could vote to destroy a city that had created such beauty. If Euripides failed in 415 BCE to dissuade the Athenians from returning to a war whose impious result led to their own ultimate defeat, he at least persuaded another audience not to exceed the bounds of justice in victory.


Lee A. Jacobus

In the following essay, Jacobus provides biographical information on Euripides and discusses his influences.

Euripides (c. 485–c. 406 B.C.), last of the great Greek tragedians, did not enjoy the personal popularity accorded Aeschylus and Sophocles, possibly because his work criticized Athenian politics and society. Moreover, he was not highly regarded because he broke away from the formality of language and theme of his predecessors.

Euripides was raised in Salamis, the island from which the Greeks decisively defeated the Persians in 480 B.C. This victory heralded the Periclean Age (c. 460–404 B.C.), when Athens enjoyed its greatest power. During that time, however, the Athenians spent almost three decades fighting the Peloponnesian Wars (431–404 B.C.), which drained their energies and treasury. Eventually, they were forced to relinquish their dominance to Sparta. In such an environment, the officials and patriots of Athens were not happy with the work of someone who reminded them of their mistakes and questioned their values.

Euripides is especially noted for shifting the focus of dramatic events from the gods to humans. He valued individual human beings and the working of their wills. Influenced by the teaching of the Sophists, wandering professors who taught argument and philosophy, he agreed with Protagoras’s principle “Man is the measure of all things.” The ancients sometimes referred to Euripides as the philosopher of the stage.

One aspect of his dramatic critique of Greek culture was an unusual emphasis on women. Medea is the first thoroughly developed female character in Greek drama. She is treated as an independent woman, not as Jason’s wife or as someone’s mother. She is herself. Athenians, intolerant of foreigners and women, felt both groups to be inferior to Greek aristocratic men. It is no wonder that of the twenty plays Euripides produced at the feasts of Dionysus only five won prizes.

Of his ninety-two plays, eighteen survive—more than twice as many as survive from any other Greek tragedian: Alcestis (438), Medea (431), The Children of Hercules (c. 430), Hippolytus (428), Andromache (426?), Hecuba (c. 424), Cyclops (c. 423), The Suppliants (c. 422), Electra (c. 417), Heracles (c. 417), The Trojan Women (415), Helen (412), Iphigenia in Tauris (c. 412), The Phoenician Women (c. 412–408), Ion (c. 411), Orestes (408), The Bacchae (405), and Iphigenia in Aulis (405). Another play, Rhesus, long attributed to Euripides, is now thought to have been written by an anonymous fourth-century B.C. playwright. Ten of Euripides’ remaining plays place women at their center.

Euripides continued Aeschylus’s innovations in his use of the skene. Instead of representing the front of a palace, the skene in Euripides’ plays sometimes represented a peasant’s hut, a rural shrine, or other common structure. He was interested in theatrical devices, especially machines that gave him the opportunity to achieve dramatic effects. He often used the mekane—a crane or derrick that lifted actors in or out of the play—to resolve his dramas when his characters found themselves in impossible situations. His choral odes, although beautiful, are sometimes considered detachable from the episodes of dramatic action. Moreover, his dialogue is more colloquial—closer to everyday speech—than is the dialogue found in other Greek tragedies. All these deviations from the dramatic
norm emphasize the humanity in his plays and elevate human values over those of the gods.

Eighteen months before his death, Euripides left Athens for the court of King Archelaus in Macedon. His departure may have signaled his dissatisfaction with the politics of Athens, or it may have been prompted by the indifference of Athens to his talents. In any event, his works were performed long after his death, and, ironically, his posthumous popularity dwarfed that of the other tragic playwrights.


B. E.

In the following review, B. E. describes the 1974 LaMama production of *The Trojan Women* and the avant-garde techniques used.

*The Trojan Women* is the most recently developed of three unrelated pieces that were performed as a trilogy on 18 October 1974 to inaugurate the LaMama Annex in New York City. (*Medea* was created at LaMama in 1972; *Electra* was created for the Festival Octobre a Bordeaux, the Festival d’Automne, and LaMama E.T.C. in Paris in 1973.)

The development of *The Trojan Women* spans five months. It was conceived in a workshop at the II Festival Nacional de Teatro in Brazil. After rehearsal at LaMama in New York, an enlarged company performed an hour-long version of the three pieces called *Fragments*. In September, *The Trojan Women* was performed with *Electra* at Sarah Lawrence College.

Euripides’ text is used as the basis for the action. The hour and twenty minute performance is sung and chanted in a collection of ancient languages—Greek, Mayan, Nahuatl, Enochian, etc. Therefore, meaning is conveyed by the pitch and rhythm of sounds rather than words. Dialog chanting is punctuated with percussion. Group chants that emerge as songs are scored with horn, clarinet, recorder, flute, conch, bells, drums, and a gamelon made of round metal saw blades.

The new LaMama Annex is 100 feet long, 48 feet wide, and 30 feet tall. The space was formerly used for filming. A 28 x 20 proscenium is at the far end of the space. Each of the lengthwise walls has two walkways, which are used for both spectators and performing. One of these walkways is at near ground level, the other approximately eight feet above. The musicians are on ground level to the left of the proscenium.

A steep ramp leads to an acting space above and to the left of the entrance.

The program describes *The Trojan Women* as “an Epic Opera composed by Elizabeth Swados; conceived and directed by Andrei Serban.” Here, Epic refers to an interpretation of Brechtian dialectics. The whole is the sum of parts in opposition.

The first part is conceived of as the enslavement of the Trojan women by the soldiers. The eleven men, eleven women, five children, and three musicians enter the lobby singing a homage to Troy. They move through the audience and lead them to the first performance area in the hall, which is divided by a black curtain. In the center of this space, the women huddle on a small platform encircled by soldiers and surrounded by the audience. In response to the soldiers’ threatening song, the women defiantly sing “Dios Limna,” which signals the end of the first section. The audience watches the enslavement as if were in their midst.

The second section is a ritual that the audience observes with detachment. As the program notes indicate, “The audience is invited to follow the action of the play by moving together from one area to another where the action takes place, and by taking a seat when the actors so indicate.” After the next three scenes, separately concerning Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen, the audience is directed to sit on the side platforms. From here, they observe the final movements of the play.

In the Cassandra scene, which follows the enslavement, an actress is spotlighted left of the proscenium, brandishing a torch. As she prophesies, she is approached by a soldier who slips a noose over her head and violently drags her off.

The Andromache scene begins on the high platform by the entrance. Andromache bathes her child, who then crowns himself the last king of Troy. Soldiers appear carrying a wooden cage, force the child into it, and bear him off. Andromache leaps from the platform into the crowd and is lead away by the soldiers.

The scene of Helen’s desecration takes place in the center of the hall. She is forced into a cage and taunted by women and soldiers alike. This is the only time in the performance that women and soldiers unite. Helen has been their mutual nemesis. As she pleads and rants, the actors strip her and throw mud and straw at her. Her wig is ripped

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*The Trojan Women*
off and her shaved head is exposed. An actor costumed as an enormous bear is led into the cage where he symbolically rapes her. Finally, as the hall fills with smoke, Helen, naked, is carried off to the highest place, where she is destroyed, represented by a loud explosion.

Euripedes’ tale is complete. What follows is Serban’s addition. As the smoke settles and the audience finds seats, three children holding candles sing a lament. The body of the child/king is carried aloft in funeral procession and laid on a large rug. A weaving woman carries her loom up the ramp, stabs herself, and gently, slowly slides down to the bottom. Blue light on a sheet of mylar gives an eerie reflection to complete the representation of her drowning.

In the next action, a woman is separated from the chorus of women and given to a god/demon, who is at the top of the ramp. The actor representing the god/demon wears a headdress of black cloth strips and pieces of fur. At the completion of this symbolic rape, a messenger bearing a torch enters. The men beat the women down as they attempt to scramble up the ramp in mock assault. Following the last woman down, the men herd the women into a circle where they are chained. The Trojan women whisper the “Dios Limna” as the soldiers lead the procession out through the proscenium. The performance is over.

The most important element in *The Trojan Women* is vocal sound. Swados and Serban prepared the text without regard to literal meaning. The libretto of ancient language is transliterated in Roman syllables. The newcomers learn the sounds without pitch or rhythm from experienced company members who have learned it from Swados. When pronunciation is mastered, the sounds are orchestrated, using harmony and a variety of parts. At this point, Serban stages the movement.

*Raymond Anselment*

*In the following essay, Anselment examines the three unities of time, place, and action in The Trojan Women.*

*The Trojan Women,* like much Euripidean drama, defies conventional notions of Greek tragedy. The panorama of suffering comprises a series of episodes which appears to lack precise focus. The Trojan women who pass across the foreground of gutted Troy in a tableau of unrelied horror are the helpless, communal victims of uncontrollable forces. Even Hecuba, who emerges from the pageant as the dominant figure, neither initiates nor determines the course of events. Yet the dramatic impact, far from being a spectacle of shamelessly exploited pathos, is a striking, even overwhelming recreation of human suffering. *The Trojan Women* combines the senselessness and the anguish of war into a unified tragic experience which is simultaneously a great dramatic indictment of war and a moving study in individual heroism.

The play’s forcefulness, it is generally suggested, stems primarily from the tension generated in its linear, unlocalized movement. Characters are intentionally simplistic because they assume supporting roles in a collective indictment of war’s horror. The Trojan women—Cassandra, Polyxena, Andromache, Hecuba, and finally Troy herself—comprise a crescendo of sorrow dramatized in successive episodes which accentuate mounting suffering as feeble hopes are tantalizingly promised and then cruelly frustrated. But the emotional power of *The Trojan Women* cannot be attributed solely to this dramatic “law of increasing tension.” While the rhythmic movement of suffering undoubtedly influences the audience’s emotional involvement, it does not determine the nature of the dramatic experience. In fact merely emphasizing an increasing progression of horrors could easily undercut its dramatic effectiveness, since human emotions are easily jaded and excessively frustrated sorrow is dangerously laughable. Moreover, focus on the victims’ collective suffering disregards the individuals and minimizes the scope of their experience. “Pathos,” “pathetic,” “pity”—all frequently employed terms—understate the complexity of the experience and imply a detachment which misrepresents the actual dramatic involvement.

DEPRIVED OF TRADITIONAL VALUES AND IMMERSED IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF NEGATION, THE AUDIENCE IS DRAWN TO AND PSYCHICALLY INVOLVED WITH THE ONE CHARACTER WHO, UNBOWED BY SUFFERING, CONTINUES THE QUEST FOR MEANINGFUL ORDER."
The play avoids becoming an exhibition of pathos because Euripides creates a tension much more complex than the visceral appeal of unrelieved suffering. He achieves a psychic involvement through a double perspective which structures the plight of the Trojan women. The perspectives are the dramatic realization of the play’s fundamental postulate: war is irrational and hence absurd. Seen from one perspective war is totally incomprehensible; it inverts fundamental values and defies rational understanding. The other perspective, however, unrelentingly asserts that war, whatever its fantastical nature, is inescapably real. The perspectives juxtaposed establish a form of reciprocal reenforcement. The absurdity, in denying any rationale for war, increases the horror of a very immediate and pointless suffering. In turn the vivid reality of war makes the insidious absurdity more graphically and poignantly apparent. The audience, caught between these two perspectives, cannot easily maintain a detached passivity; Euripides involves them in a dramatic experience which demands that they try to tolerate the paradoxically meaningful and meaningless void.

The initial absurdity and the play’s fundamental inversion are quickly established in the prologue. Poseidon, who ignores the prostrate figure of Hecuba, surveys the ravaged remains of Troy and places the ten years of battle in perspective. Gone is the splendid city he and Phoebus Apollo once built; in its place are desolation and death. The extent of the destruction, emotionally summarized in Poseidon’s elegiac lament, is further developed in his exchange with Athene. Troy and her inhabitants are not the only losers; “after ten years’ harvests wasted here,” the expectant Greek victors will now endure further storm-tossed terror in “a most unhappy coming home.” In this apparently fickle world, destruction seems to have no termination and war promises only hollow victory; attempts to comprehend or order the inherent absurdity are futile. Athené’s justification of the Greeks’ punishment for desecrating the fallen city is lost in bitter irony. In a fit of jealousy the goddess had forced the Greeks to destroy Troy; now she proposes to destroy the Greeks because they have “outraged my temple and shamed me.” In both instances the retributive penalties are inordinately disproportionate, and the argument of petty spite mocks rational comprehension.

It is from this point of view that subsequent action must then be reassessed. As the gods leave and Hecuba lifts her physically and spiritually enervated body from the ground, her opening lament to changing fortune gains new dimension. She and the chorus of Trojan women who unite in communal suffering express the bittersweet memories of former happiness and the growing fears of future misery which make the immediate anguish even more unbearable. And the future, as the messenger Talthybius confirms, holds still greater sorrow. For the moment, Hecuba reels under the new knowledge that the wife of noble Priam must become the slave of Odysseus, the most despicable of Greeks; unaware of Talthybius’ cryptic revelation of Polyxena’s death, her cry “O wretched, given/the worst lot of all” is premature. The dramatic irony inherent in her specific situation is in turn reinforced by the more general, pervasive irony of the absurd. If the great suffering apparent in the opening movement of the play could be justified in any way, it might be more tolerable; but the perspective established in the prologue renders everything empty and meaningless. Some consolation might arise from the knowledge that the Greeks too will suffer greatly, but even this is negative; because the Trojan fate is now tied to that of the Greeks, no alleviation is possible. An immediate, moving situation is thus simultaneously made distant and paradoxically even more forceful.

The emotional potential is further increased by a pattern of imagery which extends the dimension of the implicit perspectives. As the vanquished queen painfully struggles to her feet, she falters:

O head, O temples
and sides; sweet, to shift,
let the tired spine rest
weight eased by the sides alternate,
against the strain of the tears’ song
where the stricken people find music yet
in the song undanced of their
wretchedness.
(ll. 115–121)

The dance imagery in Hecuba’s opening lines is striking in part because it has been prefigured. In the opening lines of The Trojan Women Poseidon, almost incidentally, begins his long speech with the introductory remark,

I am Poseidon. I come from the Aegean
depths
of the sea beneath whose waters Nereid
choirs evolve.
the intricate bright circle of their dancing feet.  
(ll. 1–3)

The allusion to the graceful Mediterranean nymphs is more than mere ornament; Euripides juxtaposes the divine dance of joy and the human dance of misery. His intention is clearly apparent in the conclusion to Hecuba’s opening lament:

And I, as among winged birds
the mother, lead out
the clashing cry, the song; not that song
wherein once long ago,
when I held the scepter of Priam,
my feet were queens of the choir and led
the proud dance to the gods of Phrygia.  
(ll. 146–152)

The great discrepancy between past and present perspectives, like that between the divine and the human, dramatizes the inversion. The dance, conventionally a symbol of harmony and joy, is now transformed into a symbol of agonizing sorrow and rampant destruction. Once in blissful ignorance, the chorus later says, the Trojans welcomed the peace offering of the wooden horse:

and all Troy singing, and girls’
light feet pulsing the air
in the kind dance measures;
indoors, lights everywhere,
torchflares on black
to forbid sleep’s onset.  
(ll. 545–550)

Then the dance hideously and ironically mocked their premature joy; now the dance aptly describes their new suffering. The “song undanced of their wretchedness,” an appropriate gathering metaphor for the entire play, structures the complex procession of horrors which informs _The Trojan Women_.

Cassandra’s appearance, which immediately follows the disclosure of Hecuba’s fate, clearly illustrates the emotional involvement produced by this unique polarization. Garbed as a stage Fury, with her whirling torch she bursts onto the stage before the grief-stricken Hecuba in frenzied dance:

Dance, Mother, dance, laugh; lead; let your feet
wind in the shifting pattern and follow mine,
keep the sweet step with me,
cry out the name Hymenaeus

and the bride’s name in the shrill
and the blessed incantation.  
O you daughters of Phrygia robéd
in splendor,
dance for my wedding,
for the lord fate appointed to lie beside me.  
(ll. 332–340)

Cassandra’s startling words and dance, which Hecuba dismisses as the incoherent raving of a “crazed, passionate” daughter, at first seem the heavily ironic expression of a distraught virgin betrayed into captivity. As such her dramatic entrance, initially an abrupt departure from the oppressive atmosphere, vividly increases the emotional tension. But the full effect of Cassandra’s scene is even more complicated. The whirling torch and insane dance, later reenacted in other circumstances, symbolize the suffering associated with war. But from another perspective the “wedding” dance, an expression of passionate feeling, promises a form of inverted bliss; and the apparently incomprehensible dance of madness becomes a dance of unrestrained joy. Doomed to tell the truth yet not to be believed, Cassandra sees that her inescapable servitude to the victorious Agamemnon offers an unexpected satisfaction. The forced sexual union will afford Agamemnon neither fulfillment nor new life in its offspring; his reward will be death at the hands of his jealous wife Clytemnestra.

Cassandra’s dance, a contrast to the joyous torchlight dance of the Trojan girls, prefigures the final outrage committed against the Trojan women, the burning of Troy.

This new knowledge, understood only by the audience, creates another dimension of horror. As Cassandra continues to look beyond the apparent chaos and suffering, she sees the irony and emptiness of the Greek victory; in her unwavering logic, Troy’s “fate is blessed beside the Achaeans.” Agamemnon, who earns the sarcastic epithet “clever man,” had sacrificed his own child for his brother’s worthless wife; he also led a nation into futile war in the name of the guest law. But the very principle used to justify the war was meaningless; no one had threatened to take the Greek lands, and the war actually subverted the very ideal it hoped to affirm:

Those the War God caught
never saw their sons again, nor were
they laid to rest
decently in winding sheets by their wives’ hands, but lie buried in alien ground; while all went wrong at home as the widows perished, and barren couples raised and nursed the children of others, no survivor left to tend the tombs, and what is left there, with blood sacrificed. For such success as this congratulate the Greeks. (ll. 376–383)

The vanquished are then ultimately victorious, for they died for their country, “that glory which is loveliest,” and they were honorably buried by the people they loved. In an irrational world devoid of absolutes, Cassandra forces the audience to ponder, “Then was Hector’s fate so sad?” However, the question implies a relative answer which the play refuses to concede. Cassandra’s arguments, although they rationally suggest the paradoxical victory of the defeated, offer scant consolation; only the dead—and Cassandra must die to fulfill the revenge promised—find grim and ultimately meaningless satisfaction. For the living, as Andromache the next captive in the tableau of Trojan women illustrates, the prospect is only further pain. A vivid emblem of war’s aftermath, he arriva with hers so now a god heaped with plunder from ravaged Troy dispels any thoughts of final victory. The processional appearance of Hector’s helpless wife and son, a striking parody of the dignified entrances traditionally accorded tragic figures of royal stature, evokes from both the chorus and Hecuba a heightened recognition of the life they have lost and the horrors they now must face alone. But the full effect of the suffering is yet to come. Andromache’s announcement of Polyxena’s death shatters Hecuba’s illusions about her daughter’s safety and increases the intolerable anguish. The oppressive suffering is extended in Andromache’s long denunciation of her misfortunes.

Much more than an emotional cry of woe, Andromache’s assertions unrelentingly and rationally assault fundamental values. The basis of her plea is a desire for death:

Death, I am sure, is like never being born, but death is better thus by far than to live a life of pain, since the dead with no perception of evil feel no grief, while he who was happy once, and then unfortunate, finds his heart driven far from the old lost happiness. (ll. 636–640)

Denied the oblivion of death, Andromache must accept a disordered world in which former happiness can only remain a source of taunting pain. In this absurd existence honor and honesty become futile values which offer only greater suffering. As she pointedly asserts, her life exemplified the virtues of an ideal wife. Although her role demanded sacrifice, she willingly curbed her feminine wishes and defined her life according to her husband’s will. Yet ironically her virtues have only enhanced her value as a captive and increased her present dilemma:

If I dash back the beloved memory of Hector and open wide my heart to my new lord, I shall be a traitor to the dead love, and know it; if I cling faithful to the past, I win my master’s hatred. Yet they say one night of love suffices to dissolve a woman’s aversion to share the bed of any man. (ll. 661–666)

Reduced to this wretched state her desire for death, a denial of the life force so crucial to the Greek vision, becomes a logical conclusion. War has destroyed and overturned all values; “That one thing left / always while life lasts, hope, is not for me” (ll. 680–681).

Andromache’s conclusions receive no viable rebuttal. Hecuba can only counsel endurance in the hope of some future joy: “On some far day the children of your children might / come home, and build. There still may be another Troy” (ll. 704–705). But this chimerical hope is rudely and immediately dashed with the announcement that her son Astyanax must die. Stripped of her one comforting delusion, Andromache accepts reality:

O darling child I loved too well for happiness, your enemies will kill you and leave your mother forlorn.
The urgency of this desire, which finds its counterpart throughout Greek drama, is quickly frustrated in the events that follow. Although the ordered, rational processes of “mortal mind” are employed, the result is a sham.

Helen’s facile defense, essentially a denial of all personal responsibility, is quickly demolished in Hecuba’s denunciation. The effect should be a gratifying vindication of justice: if Andromache must suffer for her loyalty, at least Helen will pay the ultimate penalty of death for her treachery. But even this qualified reassurance is nothing more than a mockery. The audience knows that justice will never be fulfilled and that Helen will use her feminine wiles to escape death and to live a long, prosperous life. Hecuba and the chorus of Trojan women also sense the inevitable outcome. Despite Menelaus’ somewhat doubtful reassurances that he will punish his wife, the women fear and even anticipate Helen’s eventual triumph. Reason may have judged Helen guilty, but reason has no effective place in the world of nonreason.

The dislocation is fully revealed in the conclusion to Helen’s scene. Although she is led off to the ship which will supposedly take her to a just punishment, the choral ode which visualizes her journey bitterly questions this futile hope:

I am cut from my country;
as she holds the golden mirror
in her hands, girls’ grace,
she, God’s daughter. (ll. 1106–09)

This explicit recognition of life’s inequity is followed by an event which recalls and reinforces a far greater injustice. Helen’s place on the stage is now occupied by the body of Astyanax; the comparison between the two women is tacitly complete.

Astyanax’s broken body, carried on the shield of Hector, is emblematic of the total dramatic experience in The Trojan Women. The dead boy and the captured shield suggest the father and son united now both in death and in defeat. For the Trojan women who helplessly watch and mourn, the procession signifies the final recognition of the end of present and future expectations. The burning of Troy is thus almost anticlimactic, for there are now no men to attempt a future rebuilding. But more than a termination of hopes, the impromptu bier mutely emphasizes the real victims of war. Like the intimate domestic scene in The Iliad when Astyanax reacts with fright to his father’s awesome helmet, this scene similarly juxtaposes Hector’s son and an instrument of terror. But no trace of humor lessens the implications of the contrast. More relentlessly than The Iliad, Euripides’ play asserts that the women and the children bear the brunt of war’s horror.
Yet in dramatizing the plight of the innocent, Euripides does not cheapen the emotional impact. The death of the child, even more than the suffering of the women, offers great potential pathos; but again the complex perspective heightens rather than diminishes the emotional involvement. Hecuba, understandably affected by the new sorrow, does not languish in her intensified suffering; instead she tries to comprehend the reasons for her grandson’s death. But her efforts are futile, and at best she can conclude:

What shall the poet say,
What words will he inscribe upon your monument?

*Here lies a little child the Argives killed,*
because
*they were afraid of him.* (ll. 1188–91)

This epitaph to the victors’ shame is also an acknowledgement of reason’s further extension into the realm of absurdity. Odysseus, traditionally recognized among the Greeks for his clever reasoning, is the mastermind behind the death of Astyanax. From his vantage point the scheme seems prudent; in the larger context of traditional values, however, the accomplished deed denies easy comprehension. The audience, emotionally responsive to the suffering, is further involved in the dramatic paradox. Odysseus can rationally justify his action, and Hecuba can understandably denounce his “mind unreasoning.” The inclination is to respond to Hecuba’s position, yet logic favors Odysseus’ callousness. Caught between these two perspectives, reason must finally be denied, for it has no meaning in the realm of the absurd.

The frustration of meaningful value is compounded in the scene’s terminal speech. Just before the Greeks remove Astyanax’s body, Hecuba gropes for a semblance of order which might give purpose to their suffering:

The gods meant nothing except to make
life hard for me,
and of all cities they chose Troy to hate.
In vain
we sacrificed. And yet had not the very hand
of God gripped and crushed this city
depth in the ground,
we should have disappeared in darkness, and not given
a theme for music, and the songs of men
to come.
(ll. 1240–45)

The vanity is then confirmed in the play’s last dance, the burning of Troy. But the consolation Hecuba seeks seems small compensation. The destruction of Troy should be remembered as a timeless exemplum of the inhumanity and senselessness of military conquest; yet the Athenians who perpetuated the saga of Troy in their literature nevertheless also reenacted the same horrors in their actions. Euripides, a master of the ironic, may have intended an irony in Hecuba’s consolation; certainly a modern audience cannot ignore the irony of human short-sightedness as history blindly pursues the absurd.

Yet the vision of *The Trojan Women* is not totally negative or nihilistic; in a world without conventional ordering forces one character provides a semblance of stability crucial to the tragic unity and the “theme for music, and the songs of men to come.” Although her dramatic nature does not readily conform to conventional notions about the tragic character, Hecuba deserves comparison with the heroic figures traditionally dramatized in Greek tragedy. Studies which minimize her stature do so perhaps in part out of the misguided notion that all tragedy involves a demonstrable *hamartia*. Hecuba, of course, is not responsible for the relentless suffering inflicted upon her, and she approximates none of the *hubris* too often ascribed to Greek tragic heroes. As a victim of circumstances totally beyond her control, she is the central representative of the drama’s communal suffering. However, she is more than the paradigm of innocent suffering whose presence throughout the drama gives continuity to the series of episodes. Unlike the sketchy, monochromatic character too often presented in critical evaluations, Euripides’ Hecuba manifests a personal, quite unpretentious yet nevertheless moving heroism. In refusing to yield to the physically and spiritually devastating onslaught, Hecuba achieves a self-definition and wisdom well within the rhythm of Greek tragedy.

Hecuba’s distinction (although perhaps partly associated with some quantitative measure of experienced anguish) depends primarily upon the manner with which she confronts her experience. Near the end of the play Hecuba summarizes the “song undanced” which she has painfully realized:

That mortal is a fool who, prospering,
thinks his life
has any strong foundation; since our
fortune’s course
of action is the reeling way a madman
takes,
and no one person is ever happy all the time.
(ll. 1203–06)

Other characters in the play share similar knowledge acquired through unrelieved suffering, but only Hecuba struggles with the full impact of her sorrow. Cassandra, for example, transcends her immediate suffering with a divine madness that sees future revenge, while Andromache bitterly and despondently yields an existence of insuperable frustrations. Hecuba at first also experiences this very human reaction; when her initial suffering is compounded by the appearance of Cassandra, her spirit is almost broken:

What hope? What use?
Guide these feet long ago so delicate in Troy,
a slave’s feet now, to the straw sacks laid on the ground
and the piled stones; let me lay down my head and die
in an exhaustion of tears. Of all who walk in bliss
call not one happy yet, until the man is dead.
(ll. 505–510)

But Hecuba never totally succumbs to despair. Her tenacious spirit, though at times greatly weakened, finds strength in the role she must play. Although no longer queen and matriarch of Troy, Hecuba refuses to relinquish her communal responsibility. Near the end of the opening lament in which she defines her misery and isolation, Hecuba concludes she is “among winged birds / the mother” (ll. 146–147). This self-characterization, sustained in her continual references to the chorus and other Trojan women as “my children,” is manifest in her actions. Initially the paralyzing shock of her own suffering saps her spirit, and she can only tell others to lighten their hearts as she herself slips into growing despondency. Cassandra’s totally incomprehensible actions only increase this despair; it is Andromache’s plight, however, that produces a significant change. When the grief-stricken woman expresses a desire for death, Hecuba who just before her appearance had uttered the same wish briefly asserts, “Child, no. No life, no light is any kind of death, / since death is nothing, and in life the hopes live still” (ll. 632–633). This advice, although sudden and contradictory, is readily understood as an instinctively maternal response. In meeting someone even more helpless and sorrowful than herself, Hecuba momentarily forgets her own wretchedness and reaches out to comfort and to protect. Her gesture, an affirmation of life, is symbolically appropriate; as a mother, the source of life, she gropes for meaningful purpose in life.

Hecuba’s assertion of self does not approach the magnitude of an Oedipus or an Electra, for the pervasive vision of the absurd frustrates her efforts. The fleeting consolation given to Andromache, the uncompromising judgment of Helen, and the mournful dirge for Astyanax all are positive, hopeful actions; however, in each case external events relentlessly deny their fulfillment. While the dramatic thrust naturally emphasizes this steady accumulation of misfortunes, Hecuba’s commitment should not be minimized. Her voice of protest, which becomes increasingly apparent, is no longer primarily concerned with the magnitude of her suffering. The aggressive accusations hurled against Helen’s perfidious conduct and the Greeks’ senseless murder of Astyanax are tinged with personal bitterness, but they extend beyond self-concern. In questioning the basis of their actions, Hecuba is struggling for an elemental ordering force which might relieve the engulfing chaos. No answers are found and no code of conduct is suggested, yet Hecuba achieves a form of wisdom that completes her character.

In the senseless world of war Hecuba learns that the only certain verities are life and death; death attractively offers escape and life promises only further suffering. Accepting life on these terms demands an act of faith, and this Hecuba ultimately understands. From her experiences she gains more than knowledge of war’s horrors; she gains the more valuable knowledge that despite pain and deprivation life may be meaningful. In part the consolation has no greater support than her realization that a valueless life still has potential while “death is nothing.” More positively, however, she realizes man’s ability to endure in unpretentious, ennobling dignity when no other alternative to defeat is possible. This modest affirmation, if only tenuously set forth, is completed in her exit. After she hears the fate of Troy, the last of the Trojan women, she still finds compassion in the midst of her own suffering: “Come, aged feet; make one last weary struggle, that I / may hail my city in its affliction” (ll. 1275–76). Her final dirge culminates one phase of the endless suffering, and Hecuba now faces the future:
O shaking, tremulous limbs,
this is the way. Forward:
into the slave’s life. (ll. 1327–30)

In contrast to the lethargic, prostrate Hecuba in the opening scenes of the play, this final effort is significant. Although her unsteady steps are those of a captive, Hecuba’s spirit remains unvanquished. Movement forward, if only into captivity, implies purpose. Hecuba has achieved an heroic wisdom similar to the knowledge of all Greek heroes—the acceptance and the assertion of the life force. She has met overwhelming suffering and endured.

This is the understated heroism which emerges forcefully in the course of the play to complete its tragic unity. Through the play’s multiple perspectives, Euripides jolts the audience out of its detachment and involves them in the omnipresent suffering. Deprived of traditional values and immersed in an atmosphere of negation, the audience is drawn to and psychically involved with the one character who, unbowed by suffering, continues the quest for meaningful order. The ultimate nature of the dramatic experience of The Trojan Women becomes then an answer to the question:

What’s Hecuba to him or he to her,
That he should weep for her?


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Further Reading


The essays in this volume deal with ancient tragedy, its renaissance, and its modern reception.


Croally focuses on The Trojan Women to argue that the purpose of tragedy in Athenian society was to question tradition through the Socratic method.

Euripides, Trojan Women, translated by Diskin Clay, Focus, 2005.

This recent translation focuses on stage performance by inserting extensive stage directions suitable for a modern production.
This is a survey of Greek drama with a special emphasis on modern productions and modern adaptations rather than merely translations.

This is an English translation of the play by the Roman playwright, philosopher, and politician Seneca. His version takes a very different approach from that of Euripides.