The Trojan Women (Troades) Play by Euripides, 416 BC

Play, 415 B.C.

Alexander G. McKay

Greek Playwright ( 480 B.C. - 406 B.C. )

Other Names Used: Euripedes;


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Euripides' drama of the defeated Trojans and their experience with Greek brutality and inhumanity followed the infamous siege of the neutral island of Melos in 416 BC and immediately preceded the departure of the Athenian expeditionary force against Syracuse, a campaign that ended disastrously for the Athenians in 413 BC. Thucydides' account of the parley between the Athenian commanders and Melian representatives and the subsequent siege is marked by opportunism, arrogance (hubris), and rejection of the claims of justice (Thucydides 5, 84–116). The Athenian victory resulted in the slaughter of the Melian men, and the enslavement of the women and children. Thucydides (and Euripides) saw the campaign as critical; the glory of the event was eclipsed by the suffering of the vanquished.

Euripides' The Trojan Women was part of a lost, probably connected, trilogy, Alexander (= Paris), Palamedes, and The Trojan Women; the satyr play was Sisyphus. The plays, in succession, treated the tragic error that attached to Priam's compassion and ultimate tragic error in the rescue and nurture of Paris (Alexander); the political intrigue against the high-minded Palamedes which had dire consequences for the Greek perpetrators (Palamedes); vignettes of cruelty and suffering after defeat (The Trojan Women); in all likelihood, the satyr play dealt with deceit and destruction. The coherence seems somewhat strained because the plots are still uncertain.

The theme of The Trojan Women is the debasement of human nature and the sorrow war brings for its victors as well as the defeated. The persistent tone is sorrow rather than bitterness. The play opens with Poseidon's renunciation of Troy to escape the pollution of death. Athena, properly the patroness of the Greeks, regards them as
sinners bound for personal disaster in their return to Greece. As sackers of cities, temples, and tombs, nemesis is inescapable. Hecuba, the former queen reduced to rags and misery, expresses hatred for Helen, and observes that even the victorious Greeks have made their wives widows and their virgins husbandless. Talthybius, the Greek herald, forthright, unimaginative, but basically sympathetic, reports the assignment of the Trojan women to the respective lords and captors: Cassandra to Agamemnon; Polyxena, as it finally emerges, to be sacrificial victim to dead Achilles; Andromache, Hector's widow, to Neoptolemus, Achilles' son; and Hecuba to the detested Odysseus. Cassandra is introduced carrying a bridal torch and dressed in her prophetic robes; consecrated to Apollo, and to virginity, truthful but never believed, her words and fire-dance accent Greek insensitivity and forecast the ultimate holocaust. The chorus of women performs a solemn dance recalling the entry of the Trojan Horse into the city.

Brilliant spectacle ensues with the arrival of a chariot carrying Andromache and Astyanax, Hector's son. Talthybius reports, with some reluctance, that by order of Odysseus Astyanax must die. The separation of mother and child is deeply poignant. The chorus sings of an earlier siege of Troy, involving Telamon of Salamis and Heracles when, because of the Trojan king Laomedon's deceit, the gods had once before abandoned Troy. Menelaus, pompous, arrogant, conceited, and an incompetent commander, indicates that he endorses Helen's execution. Hecuba responds with a measure of urgency, composes a pun on Helen's name ("destroyer") and criticizes Helen's still elegant attire.

A debate, technically an agon, a contest or legalistic argument, ensues between Helen and Hecuba. Helen offers a cool, rational defence of her past actions, and seeks to exonerate herself from personal guilt by alleging that she is the victim of others and of divine powers, of Hecuba and Priam (who raised Paris), of Aphrodite (who captivates mortals and awarded her to Paris), of Paris (by reason of his physical beauty and sexual appetite), and of Menelaus (who was foolish enough to leave Helen and Paris alone in his palace). Hecuba's hatred knows no bounds: she rejects the Judgement of Paris as fiction, argues that Aphrodite equates with Aphrosyne (lewdness, folly, or mindlessness), that Helen was intrigued from the outset by eastern luxury and exotically designed clothes (which she still wears in contrast to Hecuba's rags). Hecuba's is a speech of deep-seated hatred and contempt, fired by prejudice. Her "courtroom" rhetoric is more persuasive; but Helen's beauty is invincible. The chorus responds with a prayer for the destruction of the Greeks. Talthybius reappears with the corpse of Astyanax resting on Hector's massive shield but only after he has bathed the child's battered body, thrown from the walls of Troy, in the Scamander river. Hecuba arranges the burial of the child and pronounces an impressive, agonized lament over her grandson. The chorus responds with unrestrained lamentation over the exodus of the Trojan captives and the ultimate devastation of the city.

Throughout, Euripides lays emphasis on suffering and maltreatment and plays down the heroism of men on the battlefield. The heroic focus of the Iliad has shifted to the fate of the losers. The concentration on women as the objects of men's aggression and brutality underscores the harshness of the drama. Perhaps the most impressive
moments in the play are Cassandra's sophistic outburst in her "mad" scene when she argues that the Greeks have won a hollow victory, for they have destroyed the possibilities of the continuing life of their native land, her prophecy that her forced marriage to Agamemnon will be prelude to his destruction, and her forecast that the sly, unpleasant Odysseus will be a wanderer for years to come. Finally, the play offers a timeless litany of the suffering that war brings to victors and victims alike.

—Alexander G. McKay

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