Summary

In 416 B.C.E., the Athenian empire, at war against Sparta, captured the neutral island of Melos in the Aegean Sea. Punishing the Melians for their resistance, the Athenians killed all the men who remained on the island and reduced the women and children to slavery. This act of unprovoked aggression turned Euripides against the Athenian cause in the Peloponnesian War, a cause that he had earlier supported. For example, his negative depiction of the Corinthians in the *Medea*, written during the first year of the war, may be traced in large part to the alliance that existed between Corinth and Sparta. Fifteen years later, however, Euripides has shifted from seeing the Spartans and their allies as the enemy to seeing war itself as the enemy.

The structure of *The Trojan Women* is episodic. That is to say, it does not so much tell a continuous story as depict a series of individual and discrete scenes. The sum total of the episodes is not a plot, as in standard narrative tragedy, but an impression. The impression that Euripides sought to convey in *The Trojan Women* is that war is unspeakably horrible. The author attempted in the various scenes of this tragedy to depict the suffering that war causes even for those innocents who do not fight in it, innocents such as women, children, and the elderly.

Unity is provided in the drama by the continual presence of Hecuba. In her person are represented all wives who have lost their husbands in war and all mothers who have lost their children. Each successive episode brings word of new sorrows to Hecuba. When she first appears to the audience, she is aware that she has lost her city, her position, and most members of her family. That seems tragic enough, but Euripides wanted to illustrate that war spares nothing for the innocent, not even their hopes. Hecuba must also endure seeing her daughter Cassandra apparently afflicted with madness. (The audience, however, which knew that the curse of Cassandra was to prophesy the truth but never to be believed, would have realized that her “madness” was really an accurate prediction of the future.) In the following episode, Hecuba learns that another daughter, Polyxena, had been sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles. Finally, Hecuba must endure the slaughter of Andromache’s infant son, Astyanax, who is flung from the walls of Troy. Hecuba concludes (lines 1280-1283) that it is futile even to call upon the gods for help; the prayers of the innocent go unanswered.

The only consolation available to Hecuba is that her sufferings, and those of the other Trojans, were so severe that they will always be remembered (lines 1240-1250). Hecuba knows that, if it were not for their many sorrows, the Trojans would not become the subject of songs for generations yet unborn. This realization is cold comfort, indeed, but it is the only consolation that Euripides was willing to admit in this play. His goal was to see that later ages never forgot what the Trojans, like the Melians, had endured.
Summary

On the second morning after the fall of Troy and the massacre of all its male inhabitants, Poseidon appears to lament the ruins and vows vengeance against the Greeks. To his surprise, Pallas Athena, the goddess who aided the Greeks, joins him in plotting a disastrous homeward voyage for the victors who despoiled her temple in Troy. They withdraw as Hecuba rises from among the sleeping Trojan women to mourn the burning city and her dead sons and husband. The chorus join her in chanting an anguished lament.

Talthybius, the herald of the Greeks, arrives to announce that Agamemnon chose Cassandra to be his concubine and that the other royal women of Troy were assigned by lot—Polyxena to the tomb of Achilles, Andromache to Achilles’ son Neoptolemus, and Hecuba herself to Odysseus, king of Ithaca and conceiver of the wooden horse that led to the fall of the city. Amid the cries of the grieving women, Cassandra appears, bearing a flaming torch in each hand. The chorus is convinced that she is mad as she dances and prays to Hymen, god of marriage, that Agamemnon take her soon to Argos as his bride, for there she will cause his death and the ruin of his entire family. As for Odysseus, she foretells that he will suffer for ten more years on the seas before reaching his homeland. As Talthybius leads her off, he observes that Agamemnon himself must be mad to fall in love with the insane Cassandra.

Hecuba, broken with grief, collapses to the ground. From the city comes a Greek-drawn chariot loaded with the spoils of war and bearing Andromache and her infant son Astyanax. Cursing Helen, the cause of all their woe, Andromache calls upon the dead Hector to come to her and announces enviously that Polyxena was just killed upon the tomb of Achilles as a gift to the dead hero. Drawing upon her last remaining strength, Hecuba tries to comfort the distraught Andromache and urges that instead of mourning for Hector she win the love of Neoptolemus so that her son might grow to adulthood and perhaps redeem Troy. At this point, the reluctant herald Talthybius announces the Greeks’ order that the son of so distinguished a warrior as Hector must not be permitted to reach adulthood but must be killed at once by being hurled from the battlements of Troy. As Talthybius leads away Andromache and her son, a fresh lament and cursing of Helen goes up from the grieving women of Troy.

Suddenly King Menelaus comes striding in the sunlight with his retinue to demand that his faithless wife Helen be dragged to him by her blood-reeking hair. Hecuba pleads with him to slay Helen at once, lest her beauty and feminine wiles soften his will, but Menelaus remains determined to take her back to Greece, where the relatives of those who died for her sake might have the pleasure of stoning her to death. Helen approaches, calm and dignified. Her plea for the right to speak being supported by Hecuba, she argues that she is not responsible for the fall of Troy. The first blame must be attributed to Priam and Hecuba, who refused to kill the infant Paris as the oracle commanded; the second to Aphrodite, who bewitched her into submitting to Paris; the third to Deiphobus and the Trojan guards who prevented her from escaping to the Greeks after she came to her senses. Goaded on by the chorus of Trojan women, Hecuba jeers at these claims, insisting that the gods would not be so foolish as Helen would have them believe, that her own lust drove her into Paris’s arms, and that she could always have escaped Troy and her own shame by way of suicide. Helen, falling to her knees, pleads with Menelaus not to kill her. Hecuba also kneels to beg Helen’s immediate death and to warn Menelaus against taking her aboard his ship. Menelaus compromises: Helen will return to Greece on another ship and there pay for her shameful life. As Menelaus leads her away, the chorus wails that Zeus forsakes them.

Talthybius then returns, bearing the crushed body of Astyanax on Hector’s shield. He tells Hecuba that Andromache, as she was being led aboard Neoptolemus’s ship, begged that the infant be given proper burial. The performance of that rite was more than Hecuba could bear, and she was restrained by force from throwing herself into the flames of the city. As the captive women are led to the Greek ships, the great crash of Troy’s collapsing walls is heard, and the city is engulfed in smoke and darkness.
Characters: Characters Discussed

Hecuba

Hecuba (HEH-kyew-buh), the queen of Troy. Aged and broken by the fall of the city, she is the epitome of all the misfortune resulting from the defeat of the Trojans and the destruction of the city. She is first revealed prostrate before the tents of the captive Trojan women, with the city in the background. Her opening lyrics tell of the pathos of her situation and introduce the impression of hopelessness and the theme of the inevitable doom that war brings. The Greek herald enters with the news that each of the women has been assigned to a different master. Hecuba asks first about her children, Cassandra and Polyxena; then, when she finds that she has been given to Odysseus, she rouses herself to an outburst of rebellious anger. Cassandra appears and recalls the prophecy that Hecuba will die in Troy. After Cassandra is led away, Andromache, who appears with news of the sacrifice of Polyxena, tries to console Hecuba with the idea that Polyxena is fortunate in death, but Hecuba, in reproach and consolation, points out to Andromache and the younger women of the Chorus the hope of life. Her attempts to console those younger than herself, here and elsewhere, are her most endearing feature. The other important aspect of her character, the desire for vengeance against Helen, who has caused her sorrow, is shown in her reply to Helen’s plea to Menelaus. Hecuba’s reply is vigorous: She points to Helen’s own responsibility for her actions and ends with a plea to Menelaus to kill Helen and vindicate Greek womanhood. Hecuba’s last action is the preparation of the body of Astyanax, the young son of Andromache and Hector killed by the Greeks out of fear, for burial. Her lament over the body is profoundly moving. At the end of the play, she is restrained from throwing herself into the ruins of the burning city.

Cassandra

Cassandra (kuh-SAN-druh), the daughter of Hecuba, a prophetess chosen by Agamemnon as a concubine. When she first appears, wild-eyed and waving a torch above her head, she sings a parody of a marriage song in her own honor, but she soon calms down and prophesies the dreadful end of Agamemnon because of his choice and of the suffering of the Greeks. She views aggressive war as a source of unhappiness for the aggressor. As she leaves, she hurls the sacred emblems of her divine office to the ground and looks forward to her triumph in revenge.

Andromache

Andromache (an-DRO-muh-kee), Hector’s wife, allotted to Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. She brings Hecuba news of the sacrifice of Polyxena and compares her fate in accepting a new lord to Polyxena’s escape through death. When she learns of the Greeks’ decision to kill Astyanax, her son by Hector, she gives expression to her tortured love as a mother. Unable to condemn the Greeks because they would refuse Astyanax burial, she curses Helen as the cause of misfortune.

Helen

Helen, the beautiful and insolent queen of Sparta abducted by Paris. Her pleading before Menelaus is an attempt to place the blame for her actions on others: on Priam and Hecuba because they had refused to kill Paris at the oracle’s command, on the goddess Aphrodite because she promised Helen to Paris at the time of the judgment, and on the Trojan guards who had prevented her return to the Greeks. She departs, proud and confident.

Menelaus
Menelaus (meh-nuh-LAY-uhs), the king of Sparta and the husband of Helen, who has been returned to him, the man she wronged, to kill. It is evident that he will not do so. His eagerness to assure others that Helen has no control over him and that he intends to kill her becomes almost comic.

**Talthybius**

Talthybius (tal-THIH-bee-uhs), a herald of the Greeks. He appears three times: to fetch Cassandra, to execute Astyanax, and to bring back the body of Astyanax for burial and set fire to the remains of Troy. A kindly man, he is unable to carry out the execution of Astyanax personally.

**Astyanax**

Astyanax (as-TI-uh-naks), the infant son of Andromache and Hector. He is flung from the highest battlement of Troy because the Greeks believe that a son of Hector is too dangerous to live.

**A Chorus of Trojan women**

A Chorus of Trojan women, whose odes express a mood of pity and sorrow for the Trojans.

**Poseidon**

Poseidon (poh-SI-duhn), the god of the sea and patron of Troy. He appears, at the beginning of the drama, to take official leave of the city; he had favored it, but the gods aiding the Greeks had proved too strong, especially Pallas Athena. His monologue also gives the necessary background for the play.

**Pallas Athena**

Pallas Athena (PAL-uhs uh-THEE-nuh), the goddess of wisdom. She confronts Poseidon as he bids farewell to Troy and proposes a common vengeance against the Greeks, though she had favored them earlier. Because their impious behavior at the capture of Troy has alienated the gods, the Greeks are to be punished as they go to sea. This threat of retribution looms over the entire play.

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

*The Trojan Women* is a masterpiece of pathos as well as a timeless and chilling indictment of the brutality of war. The circumstances of its composition, and the raging moral indignation behind it, refer to an incident in the Peloponnesian War that occurred a few months before the tragedy was presented in March, 415 B.C.E. The people of Melos tried to remain neutral in the Athenian conflict with Sparta, and Athens responded by massacring the grown males and enslaving the women and children. In *The Trojan Women* Euripides shows Troy after the men were slaughtered, with a handful of women waiting to be taken into bondage. The parallel is clear and painful. Euripides does not stop with that. The women in their anguish show dignity, pride, and compassion, whereas their conquerors are vain, unscrupulous, and empty. Further, the conquering Greeks are shown to be headed for disaster, since the gods have turned against them. When this play was produced, Athens was preparing a large fleet to take over Sicily, an expedition that ended in calamity. The prophecies of sea disasters in the play no doubt made the Athenian audience squirm. Indeed, the whole tragedy seems calculated to sting the consciences of the Athenians. That they allowed it to be produced is amazing. The fact that a nonentity named Xenocles won first prize that year, defeating Euripides, is scarcely surprising.

This play concludes a trilogy of tragedies on the legend of Troy. It was preceded by *Alexandros* (another name for Paris), which dealt with the refusal of Priam and Hecuba to murder their infant Paris, who would
eventually bring about the destruction of Troy. This is important because, in *The Trojan Women*, Hecuba sees the full consequences of her choice. *Alexandros* was followed by *Palamedes*, where Odysseus exacts a dire revenge on the clever Palamedes through treachery. *The Trojan Women* merges the Trojan and Greek lines of tragedy, showing them to be complementary aspects of a central agony. This final play presents the culmination of this story of suffering. It is as bleak and agonizing a portrait of war as has ever been shown on the stage.

However, Euripides merely dramatizes a brief portion of the aftermath, about an hour or two the morning after Troy was looted and burned and the Trojan men were put to death. In that time, one sees enough to realize that war is the most devastating, unheroic activity that humanity has ever devised. No one wins. The Greeks in their swollen vanity commit atrocities against both the gods and human decency, and they are about to receive their just punishment, as Poseidon, Athena, and Cassandra state. The action of the play consists of the revelation of those atrocities, one after the other, as they overwhelm the helpless old queen, Hecuba. It is primarily through Hecuba the enormity of Troy’s fall is experienced. The chorus of captive women, Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen serve to balance and to counterpoint Hecuba’s anguish as well as to contribute to it.

A brief time before, Hecuba was the proud queen of a great, wealthy city, and within the space of a night she is reduced to a slave. Hecuba witnesses her husband Priam’s murder and knows almost all of her children were butchered. Longing for death, she experiences one dreadful thing after another. She learns that she is the prize of Odysseus, the vilest Greek of all, and that her few daughters will be handed out as concubines. She sees her daughter Cassandra madly singing a marriage hymn, and she finally grasps that Cassandra, through prescience, is really singing a death song for herself and for the commander of the Greeks, Agamemnon. Believing her daughter Polyxena to be alive, Hecuba learns from Andromache that the girl had her throat slit. Hecuba, trying to comfort Andromache with the prospect of Astyanax’s growing to manhood, sees the little boy taken from Andromache to be executed. Menelaus arrives to drag Helen back to Greece, and Helen, who causes the whole war, calmly faces him down, oblivious of Hecuba’s accusations. In this way Hecuba loses the satisfaction of seeing her worst enemy killed, and it is clear that the shallow, worthless Helen will go unpunished. In her final anguish, Hecuba must look upon her poor, mangled grandchild lying on the shield of her dead son, Hector. The last ounce of torment is wrung from her, and she makes an abortive suicide attempt. Hecuba’s stark pathos is drawn out to an excruciating dramatic degree.

Yet the play is not a mere shapeless depiction of human pain. Hecuba’s suffering is cumulative. There is also a pattern to the appearances of the chorus, Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen. The chorus of captive women serves to generalize Hecuba’s grief. If Poseidon will create future misery for the Greeks, the chorus shows the past and present pain of the Trojans on a large canvas. It places Hecuba’s agony in perspective as one calamity among many. Moreover, Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen extend the portrayal of the victimization of the women who become the spoils of war: Cassandra, the raped virgin and crazed bride of death; Andromache, the exemplary wife and mother turned into a childless widow and handed over to the son of the man who killed her husband; and brazen Helen, the faithless wife who has the knack of getting her own way in every circumstance. The contrast among these three cannot be more striking.

Euripides takes pains in *The Trojan Women* to show that the only justice in war is punitive and nihilistic. War arises from numerous individual choices and leads to disaster for everyone, the conquered and the victors alike. With Thucydides the historian, Euripides shares the view that power corrupts, promoting arrogance and criminality. His vision of the suffering caused by the war is as valid today as it was when he wrote the play and as it must have been when Troy presumably fell.
Critical Essays: The Trojan Women

The dramatic setting is the city of Troy, just captured by the Greeks after a bitter, ten-year war. With the exception of Talthybius, the Greek herald, and Menelaus, the Greek husband of Helen, all the mortal characters in the play are Trojan women, prisoners of war who face cruel servitude in Greece.

The tragedy is noted not for suspense-filled, dramatic scenes but for passages of powerful lyric lamentation. The pathetic solo song of Hecuba, queen of Troy, leads into an elaborate passage sung by both the queen and the chorus of Trojan women. This lyric tone intensifies in later scenes, with the solo songs of Hecuba’s daughter Cassandra, the duet between Hecuba and her daughter-in-law Andromache, and a final song between the queen and the chorus sung as their city burns to the ground.

Neither the audience nor the Trojan women are offered any moral solace in this play. The criminal Greeks are not punished. Rather, the play focuses on the sufferings of the innocent victims of war. Andromache, widow of Hector, is forced to become mistress of the son of her husband’s slayer. Her infant son, Astyanax, is cruelly hurled to his death from the walls of Troy. Cassandra, who is chosen to become the mistress of Agamemnon, leader of the Greek expedition, offers the women their only legitimate hope for vengeance, but, ironically, she is not believed. The Trojans interpret Cassandra’s true prediction of Agamemnon’s impending death as a sign of Cassandra’s madness and another reason for lamentation. Yet Helen, whose seductive and sinister charms caused the war, receives a reprieve in the play from the execution the Trojan women hope for her. For the victims of war in this tragedy, there is no justice, only suffering.

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Analysis: Places Discussed

*Troy

*Troy. Ancient city on the coast of Asia Minor that according to tradition was destroyed by the Greeks. In Euripides’ play, the city’s breached walls—which were originally built by Poseidon—symbolize the city’s fate, and also serve as the backdrop throughout the play. Encamped before the walls, the captured Trojan women mourn their dead. From these walls they depart for slavery in Greece. Andromache’s son, Astyanax, is hurled to his death from the walls, and his grandmother, Queen Hecuba, buries him here before she herself departs in slavery. The collapse of the walls themselves in a conflagration caused by the Greeks symbolizes, at the end of the play, the final end of Troy itself.

Achilles’ tomb

Achilles’ tomb. Located on the plain outside Troy, the burial place of the Greek hero Achilles lies offstage in this play. Although the Greeks’ greatest warrior is dead, he requires his share of Trojan plunder. During the play Hecuba learns that the Greeks have sacrificed her daughter, Polyxena, as a gift to the dead Achilles.

*Greece

*Greece. Homeland of Troy’s hated conquerers and the destination of all the surviving women of Troy, including Hecuba, Andromache, and Cassandra. The crimes of the Greeks in this play, especially the murder of Astyanax, distort the natural tendency of Euripides’ Greek audience to identify with their homeland and encourage them to sympathize instead with the conquered Trojans.

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