

# Introduction to Euripides, *Trojan Women*

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Euripides' *Troades*—the *Trojan Women*, or *Daughters of Troy*—was first performed at the Great Dionysia in the spring of 415 BCE. It was presented as the third of three original Euripidean tragedies relating to the Trojan War: (1) *Alexandros*, (2) *Palamedes*, and (3) the *Trojan Women*. A satyr play entitled *Sisyphos* completed the tetralogy, which we know from the official Didascalia won second prize.<sup>1</sup> The other three dramas of the tetralogy are largely lost, although tantalizing fragments have come down to us through papyrus fragments and ancient quotations.<sup>2</sup>

*The Trojan Women* portrays the sad lot of the surviving women and children of Troy after the taking of their beloved city by the Greeks. The Chorus represents and speaks for the Trojan women as a group. The drama presents through the sequence of scenes, as dramatic centerpieces, individual Trojan noblewomen: devastated widowed queen and mother Hecuba, raving grief-stricken assault-victim Cassandra, widowed mother Andromache, hapless young Polyxena—whose fate, being sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles, fulfilled offstage, is presented through reports, to the audience in Poseidon's opening monologue, to the women onstage later by Talthybius—and Paris' (Alexandros') widow, Spartan runaway Helen, held captive along with the Trojan women. All of the individually presented women, and the child whose fate is decided by the Greeks in the action portrayed in the drama (Hector's and Andromache's hapless son Astyanax), are associated with the royal family. The women who appear onstage through actors—Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen—each have different viable claims to being much greater figures of Ancient Greek Myth and World Literature than the great nameless crowd, here represented by the Chorus, of captive Trojan women facing concubinage or enslavement in Greece. As in Homer and other poets before Euripides, Helen has a dual Greco-Trojan identity. Before leaving Sparta with Paris to be his wife in Troy, Helen was a female Ancient Greek hero in her own right. Hecuba, Cassandra, and Andromache are noble women forced to endure extreme injustice and inhumanity. Their different responses to the situations unfolding in the tragedy elicit audience sympathy and pity appropriately accorded to tragic heroines. Helen, universally blamed as the cause of the ten-years war, faces

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<sup>1</sup> H.J. Mette, *Urkunden dramatischer Aufführungen in Griechenland* (Berlin/New York—DeGruyter 1977) IIIA1,99-103 at p.87 f. (cf. Id. At p.21 f.).

<sup>2</sup> The fragments are collected in the magisterial edition of Richard Kannicht, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen—Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2004) vols. 5.1 (*Alexandros*) and 5.2 (*Palamedes*); also in vols. VII and VIII of the handy Loeb Classical Library edition of Christopher Collard and Martin Cropp (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London 2008). For edition with English translation and scholarly commentary on *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*, see C. Collard, M.J. Cropp and J. Gibert, Euripides. *Selected Fragmentary Plays* vol. II (Oxford—Aris & Phillips Classical Texts 2004) pp.35ff.

threats of a similarly ruinous fate, but—after tense confrontation by Menelaos and a three-way debate joined by Hecuba with the Chorus chiming in on her side, advancing that Menelaos punish and kill the faithless traitor woman—the Menelaos-Helen Episode ends with Menelaos and Helen leaving the stage to sail back to Greece together. The native Trojan, Phrygian, or Anatolian women who survive the Greek invasion, occupation, and killings, face at the end of the drama transport to Greece, bereft of city, home, family, and hopes of freedom and happy lives.

By the time the action of this tragedy opens, as we learn from the prologue monologue of Poseidon, Priam and all of Priam's and Hecuba's children except Cassandra are dead. The city—this would refer to the neighborhoods of the city—is described in the Prologue by Poseidon as still smoldering and being looted. In the final scene Talthybios enters dispatching to put the city's towers, what is left of the city, to the torch. Hecuba and the women of the Chorus recoil in shock and horror at the crashing down of the wall towers of Troy, the final piece of their beloved city's total destruction. Between the beginning and the end of the drama poignant scenes typify the cruelty of the Greek victors and the pitiful helplessness and grief of the surviving Trojans who did not somehow escape captivity.

The final destruction of the Trojans is presented as happening in present time. The calamities of the Greeks, the the gods' denial of the Greeks' successful return home [*nostos*] with the Trojan gold and other loot, is portrayed in the Prologue through the dialogue between Poseidon and Athena as forthcoming. The broader narrative of the drama framed in the discourse of the gods in the Prologue underscores that war degrades both sides, or all sides, victors and vanquished.<sup>3</sup>

The tripartite Prologue (vv. 1–152) opens with Olympian perspectives first of Poseidon in a farewell monologue addressing Troy, his cherished city whose stone walls he recalls having erected with Apollo at his side (1–47), then of Poseidon and Athena in dialogue. Athena is outraged at the *hubris* (v. 69, in verb form, participle from *hubrizein*, verb used by Hecuba at v. 1020 to characterize Helen's behavior in the Trojan court) and sacrileges of the Greeks after she had assisted them to victory and enlists Poseidon as a willing partner in vengeance on the Greeks after they set sail irreversibly on the high sea for home (48–97). She announces to Poseidon (and in so doing to the audience, of course) that she has changed sides and came to Poseidon to form an alliance of gods against the Greeks, which Poseidon willingly joins, in agreement with Athena's design to hit the Greeks with very hard return voyages. The third part of the Prologue features prostrate Hecuba singing a monody of lament (98–152), including

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<sup>3</sup> A paradoxical Greek proverb (this may be a flipped version of a proverb using the same words) to this effect runs “The vanquished weep. The victor is destroyed.” Zenobius Athous II 81 (ed. Bühler (Göttingen 1999) Κλαίει ὁ νικηθεὶς, ὁ δὲ νικήσας ἀπόλωλεν

angry recrimination of Helen (130–137). The theme of Helen’s responsibility for so much death and suffering of both Greeks and Trojans is a recurrent theme of the drama.

The Parodos (vv. 153–234), the choral song accompanying the procession of the Chorus to the orchestra structure in front of the individual actors’ stage (proscenium)—which does double duty as a *kommos*,<sup>4</sup> choral laments in exchanges between onstage actor(s), here Hecuba, and the Chorus, which enters as two Half-Choruses—introduces the Chorus of captive Trojan women who in response to Hecuba’s cries of woe, have emerged from tents into which they had been herded by their Greek captors. The women bewail their grievous losses and the uncertain fates that await them as captives, slaves, and servants.

The first Episode (vv. 235–510) presents the first of a series of stage entrances of Talthybios, the herald, messenger, and voice through whom the Greek chieftains’ offstage debates and decisions are revealed to the Trojan Women and to the audience. Talthybios announces that the Greeks have decided the fates of individual Trojan women by the chieftains’ casting lots for them, one by one. Invited to ask about the identity of Greeks to whom individual women will be assigned, Hecuba asks about the the fate of Polyxena and is given false comfort by Talthybios’ ambiguous answers. She then inquires about the decision regarding Cassandra. Talthybios reveals that Agamemnon took her not to be a houseservant, but to be a concubine. Talthybios orders Hecuba to deliver Cassandra to him. Cassandra enters the stage with torches in hand (ambiguous wedding-procession symbols and symbols of both destructiveness and destruction) and predicting Agamemnon’s and her own fated ends upon arrival in Greece, insanely relishes prospective revenge. She sees herself as Troy’s avenger.

The first Stasimon (vv. 511–567) is a choral ode of lament and grief, recalling the disastrous unanticipated deception of the “Trojan horse” and bewailing the fates of the Trojans at the hands of the Greeks who conquered the city after gaining entry into the city by stealth.

The second Episode (vv. 568–798) presents—through Andromache’s onstage appearance with her young son Astyanax, Talthybios’ announcing of the Greeks’ decision (championed by Odysseus) to kill innocent young Astyanax and hauling Astyanax off to be thrown off a tower to his death, Andromache’s being carted off with war booty to be Neoptolemus’, her husband’s killer’s son’s slave—the escalating cruelty and *hubris* of the Greeks.

The second Stasimon (vv. 799–859, Chorus) is a somber series of reflections on Troy’s history with its trials, defeats, glories, and present ruin. It raises many questions about the relationships between the city and the gods its citizens honored and worshipped.

The third Episode (vv.860–1059) brings Helen and Menelaos to the stage and pits Helen and Hecuba against each other in opposing speeches in which Helen attempts to persuade

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<sup>4</sup> At v.294—by Talthybius’ choice of word ἐκκομμίζειν [*ekkommizein*] we are subtly prepared for more *kommoi* to come. This non-obligatory formal part of a tragedy, as well as other formal parts, described in Aristotle, *De Arte Poetica* (“*Poetics*”), Chapter 12 (Bekker p. 1452b14–27). See footnote to the (PDF) Introduction to Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*.

Menelaos to forgive her and Hecuba argues that Menelaos should show the traitorous woman no mercy. This section of the drama gives the audience almost comic relief from the laments and *kommoi* that precede and follow.

The third Stasimon (1060–1117) continues the Chorus' meditations on Troy and the gods, who once, no longer, cherished Troy.

The last scene, the Exodus (1118–1332), returns Talthybios to the stage. Opening this final scene, he carries in little Astyanax's body with Hector's shield to be buried by his grandmother Hecuba. At least one commentator, K.M. Lee, characterizes this aptly as symbolizing the height of the Greeks' *hubris*.<sup>1</sup> It also symbolizes another theme of the drama, the Trojans' loss of hope. The human action culminating in the disgraceful treatment of Andromache, Hecuba and the child at the end of the tragedy vindicates the stern judgments pronounced by Poseidon and Athena on the Greeks in the Prologue. Another detail that functions as a *leitmotif* that ties the beginning and the end of the tragedy together: references to the stone walls of the city erected by gods and torched by Talthybios on orders of Odysseus and the other Greeks in the high command at the end of the war. Talthybios' men's torches may bring to mind Cassandra's torches that gave spectacular effect to the first Episode of the tragedy.

Numerous scholars have noted parallels with the Athenian treatment of Melos in 416 BCE, the year before *The Trojan Women* was first performed at the Great Dionysia. It seems possible certainly that Euripides had the Athenians' murderous treatment of the Melians in mind when he wrote this tragedy that exposes through mythological exempla the human cost to both sides of cruel treatment of conquered people and the justice of divine retribution against hybristic conquerors. *The Trojan Women* can be understood as a tragedy on the level of individual characters, but also as a tragedy of good bodies politic brought down by fatal flaws, flaws which seem to have been prefigured in the first two tragedies of the Trojan trilogy, *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*. *Alexandros* exposed the Trojans' recklessly or with extreme tenderheartedness ignoring an oracle that Paris would be the ruin of Troy. *Palamedes* exposed an opposite fatal flaw—envy [*phthonos*]. Kindly old Priam would naturally have exemplified and promoted the first *hamartiā* (flaw) that brought down Troy. Odysseus would naturally have exemplified and advanced deceptive, evil schemes to destroy envied persons and destroy or steal their treasures, take credit for their accomplishments, and bring the wrath of the gods upon himself and his people.

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<sup>1</sup> K.H. Lee, Euripides, *Troades* 1976, reprinted Bristol Classical Press 2001, p. xv and *passim*. (Curiously, this useful commentary is not mentioned in the catalogue of noteworthy commentaries on individual dramas of Euripides on p.x of James Diggle's 1984 OCT *Euripidis Fabulae* vol.1.)