HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

The Trojan Women. 415. B.C.E.

Euripides

Overview.

It is worth remembering that we retain only a fragment of the plays of Euripides, under twenty out of at least ninety. Of the eighteen or so remaining three are narrowly focused on the Trojan Women taken captive at the fall of Troy, and returned to Greece. Two of these plays concern the fates of individual women—Hecuba and Andromache—both of whom are miserable victims of history, and who are suffering equally from the death (Hecuba) of their children or the threatened death of Molossos, the son of Andromache. Each woman, as she falls, goes down in the midst of extensive collateral damage. The present play widens its scope to the entire panoply of Women from Troy, as they are being allotted to their Greek masters, who will take them home as prizes.

The holocaustic tenor of the present plays is arguably related to the general meltdown of mainland Greekl culture, at this moment in the Peloponnesian War, when what rules of civility remain are being shattered. Two specific events may play into the vicious mentality evident in Euripides' play. The very year of this play sees the Athenians mounting a vast naval expedition to Sicily, an all out aggressive move, on the eve of the desecration of the widely scattered *herms*—sacred figures of the god Hermes, which dot the city scape of Athens and which are widely dispersed throughout the city. The shock of this desecration merges into the general Athenian sentiment that 'anything goes.' 415, the year of production of this play, is also the year of what contemporaries (and notably the historian Thucydides, in his *History*) called the Melian massacre. during which the Athenian navy cruelly punished the residents of the island of Melos, for their refusal to cooperate with the growth of Athenian sea power in the Aegean. In other words, *The Trojan Women* depicts a virtual post apocalyptic scene, imagined on the margins of Greek culture. Typically, Euripides turns to the mythical-historical past to expound his commentary on the savagely contemporary present.

Characters

Poseidon, god of the sea.
Athena, warrior goddess.
Hecuba, queen of Troy; enslaved.
Chorus of captive Trojan women.
Talthybius, Greek herald
Cassandra, daughter of Hecuba and Priam
Andromache, widow of Hector, mother of Astyanax
Menelaus, Greek commander, husband of Helen
Helen, wife of Menelaus, then of Paris

Synopsis.

The play opens with a cameo appearance of the gods Poseidon and Athena, in a narrow enclosure outside the walls of Troy. As they concur, on their plan to create stormy havoc on the Greeks' return home, we see the ragged figure of Hecuba emerge from the darkness. There then follows-- and this is basically narrativeless play before us, which resembles an oratorio more than a play—a passing drama featuring the Trojan women who appear in the last book of the *Iliad* (Hecuba, Helen, Andromache), caressing and adoring the broken body of Hector, whom Achilles has slain. The outcome, for the women, is in no doubt; each, by the end of the play's performance, will have been allotted to her slave master and taken away to the stormy sea.

Story

Poseidon and Athena. The two gods convene, to plot a stormy crossing for the captive women, on their passage to Greece. Hecuba, ragged and despairing, appears in a small captive enclosure, outside the walls of Troy. All eyes focus on the collection of captive tents aligned along the sea shore.

Hecuba. Hecuba and the chorus of captive Trojan women wail back and forth to one another, over their impending fate, and the destruction of Troy.

Cassandra, daughter of Hecuba and Priam, mock rejoices at the fate awaiting her, as the slave and bedmate of Agamemnon. Her joy derives from the sinister pleasure she will have in bringing death to her new master. She is already seeing—in her prophetic eye-- the beautiful death of Agamemnon under the knife of his son Orestes, at the end of the war.

Hecuba and Andromache. These two queens of suffering debate over which of them has become the more disadvantaged victim; Hecuba enduring th loss of her son, Hector, Andromache the brutal loss of her son, Astyanax, whom the conquering Greeks will throw over the walls of Troy, to smash like eggshell on the ground below.

Menelaus and Helen. The figures whose relationship launched the Trojan War itself, Helen and Menelaus of Sparta, spar angrily with one another before the walls of Troy. You would think—and Euripides is quite ironic enough for this--that the old married couple is simply indulging in a fireside spat from the old days. Paris is not mentioned.

Andromache drowns out the cries of suffering and despair, having heard the detailed report, from the Greek herald Talthybios, of the dreadful circumstances of the murder of her son, Astyanax.

Themes

Lament. The Trojan Women themselves lament from start to finish, as they are destined, in the course of this drama, to learn their Greek masters and fates.

Humiliation. Hecuba wonders to what humiliating role she will be relegated, as the servant of Agamemnon. She, after all, is the queen of the Trojans. She anticipates becoming a maidservant who opens the door for guests.

Divinity. The gods Athena and Poseidon introduce the present play, and put the stamp of destiny on the events that follow, and which are not simply the traces of individual fates, on three or four noble ladies, but also the seal of doom on the Trojans, whom the Greeks view as ‘enemies of history.’

Grandeur. Though the present play is steeped in loss, pain, and suffering, the panorama of noble figures who address us, and the high language—often of debate, even in lament—fascinate our attention, and impress on us the lofty dignity of the characters whose lives and deaths are being opened to us.

Character Analysis

Hecuba Hecuba is the main character, though it is true that her laments meld into the broad chorus of wailing, and that she is strikingly ‘one among many.’ As the queen of the Trojans, and the mother of Hector, Hecuba stands out; worthy of dignity but fallen to a humble and wretched state, driven to debating with Andromache over which of them is the more miserable, or debating against Helen, as the bitch who unleashed the entire war. Hecuba faces the prospect, as Agamemnon’s slave, of working for the commander on the most menial level.

Empathetic. In dialogue with Andromache, over which of the two women is the more miserable, Hecuba shows keen empathy for her fellow captive, to whom she cries: 'I weep for you, abandoned…'

Anxious. 'What will I be? A servant at the door?' Hecuba frets painfully as she looks ahead, to the life she will have as Agamemnon's slave.

Hating. When Hecuba learns, from the herald Talthybius, that she will be given to Odysseus, she howls with misery, declaring loudly that she loathes the man.

Sisterly. Prior to the arrival of the Greek herald, with his announcement of the allocation of slaves, Hecuba has bonded powerfully with the Chorus of Trojan Women, and is one with them in trembling at their fate.

Motherly. Hecuba feels deep compassion for her daughter Cassandra, who will become the slave of Agamemnon. It is only in Euripides' play, Hecuba, that we will see how cannily Hecuba uses Cassandra's influence with Agamemnon, to construct her revenge against Polymestor.

Discussion questions

From a certain perspective, this play is one long and sustained lament. In that it follows in the footsteps of Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 B.C.E.) or of his *Suppliants* (458 B.C.E.), equally lament filled dramas about genuine suffering among the defeated enemy *(Persians*) and individual abuse, and flight from violent would be oppression, exercised by male relatives of fleeing maidens (the theme of *The Suppliants*..The plays of flight and post conflict violence, by Aeschylus, are ample evidence, that in the classical period the Athenians appreciated the cultural values of enemy-respect and empathy, as well as the kinds of friendship (Philoktetes for Neoptolemos) or ultimate understanding of the human condition (Achilles with the body of Hector) we see in earlier Greek literature.

The laments in Euripides' post-war victims-tragedies draw on the ancient Hellenic traditions of guest friendship (philoxenia) which arguably date to the earliest Dorian experience, pre-Homeric, and reflect stages of mutual respect and support which are inseparable from survival in early Mediterranean culture. What do you think of this kind of perspective, on the tradition of lamentation in Greek culture? Does the thinking in this passage help you to contextualize the lamentations in Euripides' *Trojan Wome*n—or for that matter in the Book of *Lamentations* of the Prophet Jeremiah (late sixth century B.C.E.)

To what kind of modern theatrical production would you compare *The Trojan Women*, which doesn't have any plot in the conventional sense? Would you call the present play an oratorio?

Would contemporary theater be successful, if it undertook to present the case for the 'other side,' or specifically for the side that has killed many of one's own troops and disrupted one's own home life for ten years? Examples?