

The Women of Troy by Euripides

An Introduction

"The Women of Troy" (also known as "The Trojan Women") is a tragedy by the ancient Greek playwright Euripides. It was first presented at the City Dionysia of 415 BC, along with two other unconnected tragedies and one comedy. It follows the fates of Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra and the other women of Troy after their city has been sacked, their husbands killed, and their remaining families about to be taken away as slaves. It is often considered one of Euripides' greatest works, and among the best anti-war plays ever written.

Dramatis Personae (Characters in the Drama)

POSEIDON, god of the sea and earthquakes

HECUBA, deposed queen of Troy

CHORUS OF CAPTIVE TROJAN WOMEN

TALTHYBIUS, a Greek herald

CASSANDRA, daughter of Hecuba

ANDROMACHE, wife of Hector, son of Hecuba

MENELAUS, king of Sparta

HELEN, wife of Menelaus and the cause of the war

Synopsis

The play begins with the god Poseidon lamenting the fall of Troy. He describes the city's desecration. The sanctuaries of the gods are splattered with blood. King Priam is dead. The Trojan gold is being loaded into the Greek ships and the captive Trojan women await their allotted fate.

As the dawn comes, the dethroned Trojan queen Hecuba awakens in the Greek camp to mourn her tragic fate and curse Helen as the cause, and the Chorus of captive Trojan women echoes her cries. The Greek herald Talthybius arrives to tell Hecuba what will befall her and her children: Hecuba herself is to be taken away as a slave of the hated Greek general Odysseus, and her daughter Cassandra is to become the conquering general Agamemnon's concubine.

Cassandra has been driven mad due to a curse under which she can see the future but will never be believed when she warns others. She foresees that when they arrive in Argos, her new master's embittered wife Clytemnestra will kill both her and Agamemnon, although because of the curse no one understands this response, and Cassandra is carried away to her fate.

Hecuba's daughter-in-law Andromache arrives with her baby son, Astyanax and confirms the news, hinted at earlier by Talthybius, that Hecuba's youngest daughter, Polyxena, has been killed as a sacrifice at the tomb of the Greek warrior Achilles. Andromache's own lot is to become the concubine of Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, and Hecuba counsels her to honor her new lord in the hope that she may be permitted to rear Astyanax as a future saviour of Troy.

However, as though to crush these pitiful hopes, Talthybius arrives and reluctantly informs her that Astyanax has been condemned to be thrown from the battlements of Troy to his death, rather than risk the boy growing up to avenge his father, Hector. Andromache, cursing Helen for causing the war in the first place, is taken away to the Greek ships, while a soldier bears the child away to his death.

The Spartan king Menelaus enters and protests to the women that he came to Troy to revenge himself on Paris and not to take back Helen. Helen is brought before him, still beautiful and alluring after all that has happened, and she begs Menelaus to spare her life, claiming that she was being

held against her will and that she did attempt to return to Menelaus more than once. Hecuba scorns her story as a lie, and warns Menelaus that she will betray him again if she is allowed to live, but he remains implacable.

Towards the end of the play, Talthybius returns, bearing with him the body of little Astyanax. Andromache's ship has already departed, so it falls to Hecuba to prepare the body of her grandson for burial. As the play closes, the women bury Astyanax and make his funeral a symbol of their dead hopes. Flames rise from the ruins of Troy and the remaining Trojan women are taken off to the ships of their Greek conquerors.

Analysis

"The Women of Troy" has long been considered an innovative and artistic portrayal of the aftermath of the Trojan War, as well as a penetrating depiction of the barbaric behaviour of Euripides' own countrymen towards the women and children of the people they subjugated in war. Although in technical terms it is perhaps not a great play - it has little developing plot, little construction or action and little relief or variety in tone - its message is timeless and universal.

Premiering in the spring of 415 BCE, as Athens' military fate was held in the balance sixteen years into the Peloponnesian War against Sparta, and not long after the Athenian army's massacre of the men of the island of Melos and their enslavement of their women and children, Euripides' tragic commentary on the inhumanity of war challenged the very nature of Greek cultural supremacy. In contrast, the women of Troy, notably Hecuba, appear to shoulder their burdens with nobility and decency.

Led by the circumstances they find themselves in, the Trojan women, Hecuba in particular, question their faith in the traditional pantheon of gods and their dependence on them, and the futility of expecting wisdom and justice from the gods is expressed again and again. The gods are portrayed in the play as jealous, head-strong and capricious, which would have greatly disturbed the more conservative contemporaries of Euripides, and it is perhaps no surprise that the play did not win in the Dionysia's dramatic competition, despite its obvious quality.

The main Trojan women around whom the play revolves are deliberately portrayed as very unlike each other: the weary, tragic old queen, Hecuba; the young, holy virgin and seer, Cassandra; the proud and noble Andromache; and the beautiful, scheming Helen (not a Trojan by birth, but her view of the events is also presented by Euripides for contrast). Each of the women is granted a dramatic and spectacular entrance into the play, and each reacts to the tragic circumstances in her own individual way.

The other (less grand but equally pitiful) women of the Chorus also have their say and, in calling attention to the grief of the ordinary women of Troy, Euripides reminds us that the grand ladies of the court are now just as much slaves as they are, and that their sorrows are actually very similar in nature.

Of the two male characters in the play, Menelaus is portrayed as weak and officious, while the Greek herald Talthybius is represented as a sensitive and decent man caught up in a world of depravity and grief, a much more complex character than the usual anonymous herald of Greek tragedy, and the only Greek in the whole play who is presented with any positive attributes at all.