

THE TROJAN WOMEN: INTRODUCTION

The Play: Date and Composition

External evidence indicates that *The Trojan Women* was most likely produced in 415 BCE, as the third play of a tetralogy with *Alexander*, *Palamedes*, and the satyr-play *Sisyphus* (all lost). Unusually for Euripides, all three tragedies were thus drawn from the same body of mythic material involving the Trojan War: *Alexander* (of which quite substantial fragments survive) dealt with the rediscovery of Paris as an adult after he had been exposed as an infant, *Palamedes* with Odysseus' treachery by which he tricked the Greeks into killing their fellow soldier Palamedes. Though the three plays did not form a single coherently connected narrative of the sort Aeschylus seems to have favored in his trilogies, they did present the three episodes in chronological order and were linked with one another by various shared themes. In the competition that year, Euripides came in second to the obscure playwright Xenocles' tetralogy of *Oedipus*, *Lycaon*, *The Bacchae*, and the satyr-play *Athamas* (all lost).

A few months before the date on which, according to most scholars, the play was produced, the Athenians had captured the small Greek island of Melos and slaughtered all the adult men and enslaved all the women and children. Under the circumstances, it is difficult not to see Euripides' play, with its extended reflection on the piteous fate of a defeated city and its people, as being colored by that recent event.

The Myth

Euripides' *Trojan Women* portrays the fall of Troy from the point of view of the defeated: given that all the Trojan men have been slain by the Greek victors, it is their women - mothers, daughters, wives - who give voice to the suffering of the city. The play begins with the two gods Poseidon and Athena setting aside their previous opposition during the Trojan War and amicably negotiating the destruction of the victorious Greeks for their sacrilege during the sack of the city. But then it moves to a purely human level of unrelieved distress focused above all on Hecuba, the aged former queen of the city, and her family. In contrast to the play *Hecuba*, here the woman who had ruled Troy and, with her, all the defeated Trojan women and children are deprived not only of the act of vengeance, but even of the bare hope for it. Amid the laments of the chorus of anonymous Trojan captives, the various members of Hecuba's family are assigned as slaves or concubines to their future Greek masters; the prophetess Cassandra exults over the death of Agamemnon, which she can foresee; Hector's widow Andromache announces that Polyxena has been sacrificed to the dead Achilles (in contrast to *Hecuba*, Polyxena's death is much less prominent here); and Andromache's young son Astyanax is carried off to be hurled down from the city's walls. Then Helen, Menelaus' wife, whose elopement with the Trojan prince Paris (a son of Hecuba and Priam) had caused the war, debates with Menelaus and Hecuba about how much she should be blamed for what has happened and whether or not she ought to be punished; Menelaus promises to have her killed when they arrive home in Sparta (but we know he will not do so). Finally the corpse of little Astyanax is brought on stage and mourned, and Hecuba and the remaining Trojan women leave to sail off with Odysseus, to whom she has been assigned.

The bloody and heart-rending aftermath of the Trojan War - including all the episodes dramatized here - was extensively depicted in ancient Greek epic, lyric poetry, and art. Euripides himself chose to base a number of different tragedies upon these

stories. For example, about ten years before he wrote *The Trojan Women*, he had dramatized later events in *Andromache*. In *Hecuba*, written about nine years before *The Trojan Women*, he portrayed many of the same incidents as he does here. So the main events of this play are likely to have been well known to Euripides' audience already, though the formal and rather legalistic debate between Helen and Hecuba seems characteristically Euripidean and in this form is probably his invention. The play seeks to create an effect upon its audience less by surprise and original plot inventions than by its exploration of the traumatic consequences of war and its almost unrelieved, yet lyrical, portrayal of loss and displacement.

Transmission and Reception

The Trojan Women was not especially popular in antiquity, certainly much less so than *Hecuba*, which treats much of the same legendary material. For example, only a couple of papyri of the play have survived, containing fragments of a plot summary and of some lines. But it did end up being selected as one of the ten canonical plays most studied and read in antiquity. As a result, it is transmitted by three medieval manuscripts and is equipped with ancient and medieval commentaries.

Greek and Latin authors who portrayed Hecuba's sufferings after the fall of Troy inevitably drew upon this play and upon *Hecuba*. Roman tragedies by Ennius (*Andromache*) and Accius (*Astyanax*) are lost; but Seneca's *Troades* (*Trojan Women*) does survive, containing many close echoes of this play of Euripides along with others from his *Hecuba*, and was widely read during the Renaissance. Epic poets like Virgil, Ovid, and Quintus of Smyrna also followed the outlines of Euripides' plot at least in part and presumed their readers' familiarity with his text; and Hecuba eventually became a standard example for the vicissitudes of fortune.

Although during the Middle Ages and Renaissance *The Trojan Women* was largely overshadowed by *Hecuba* (and Seneca), things

have been very different in modern times. Already in the middle of the nineteenth century, Hector Berlioz based the first two acts of his opera *Les Troyennes* (1856 - 5g) not only, unsurprisingly, upon Virgil's Aeneid but also, innovatively, upon *The Trojan Women*. Since the mid-twentieth century, the experience of the horrors of war, along with changes in dramatic taste, have led to a remarkable resurgence in the play's popularity, and in recent decades it has been one of the most frequently staged of all Greek tragedies. The play has been successfully adapted by such authors as Jean- Paul Sartre (*The Trojan Women*, 1g65), Suzuki Tadashi (1g74), Hanoch Levin (*The Lost Women of Troy*, 1g84), Andrei Serban (1g74/1gg6; with music by Elizabeth Swados), Charles Mee (n.d.), and Ellen McLaughlin (2008). It has also been the subject of notable films by such directors as the Mexican Sergio Vejar (*Las Troyanas*, 1g63) and the Greek Michael Cacoyannis (*The Trojan Women*, 1g71, starring Katharine Hepburn, Vanessa Redgrave, and Irene Papas).