

# Women of Troy by Euripides (Don Taylor's version)

Being one of the few texts that was added to the text list this year, Euripides' play *Women of Troy* is definitely a daunting task for English (& EAL) students to tackle due to the lack of resources and essay prompts available. In fact, the only materials that can be found on the internet are those analysing the older translation of the play (titled *The Trojan Women*). That is why we are here to help you as much as we can by offering you a mini-guide of *Women of Troy*, in the hope that you can get a head start with this play.

## INTRODUCTION AND AUTHOR'S VIEW

*Women of Troy* is a tragedy which takes place in the immediate aftermath of the Trojan war, critiquing the atrocities committed by the Greeks to both people of Melos and Troy. By constructing a play in which women are able to dominate the stage and exude their genuine despair in response to their impending enslavement, Euripides shifts the perspectives from epic tales of Greek and Trojan male heroes to the conversely affected women who suffered at the hands of the heroes while simultaneously providing both the contemporary and modern audience with a unique insight into the true cost of wars. This is especially significant because the society was pervaded by patriarchal values, where women were subordinated to their male counterparts. Euripides' proto-feminist works were not well received by his peers at the time of writing as women's personal thoughts and pain were not commonly discussed in the Hellenic repertoire.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Trojan war occurred as a result of the conflict between Greece and Troy and was said to last for over 10 years. According to a tale, during a festival on the Olympus, Athena, Aphrodite and Heras were fighting over a golden apple. They chose a random mortal, which was Paris who would then be the Prince of Troy, to decide who the most beautiful goddess of the three was. As a reward for picking her, Aphrodite promised Paris that he would be married to the most beautiful woman in the world, which was Helen – wife of Menelaus, the Spartan prince. Aphrodite had her son Eros (a cupid) enchant Helen and Paris so that they would fall endlessly in love with each other. Helen then escaped from Menelaus' palace to be with Paris, starting the war between Greece and Troy. Menelaus was enraged he convinced his brother Agamemnon to lead an expedition to retrieve Helen. The Greek army was commanded to attack the Trojans. The siege lasted for more than 10 years until

the Greeks came up with a strategy to abduct Helen from the palace. The Greek soldiers build a giant wooden horse and hid in there to get in the citadel of Troy, attacking them in the middle of the night and won the war. After the war the Greek heroes slowly made their way home. However, the journey home was not easy, Odysseus took 10 years to make the arduous journey home to Ithaca because Poseidon agreed to punish the Greeks for the atrocities committed before and after their victory.

## MAIN LANGUAGE OR LITERARY DEVICES

- Simile (e.g. dragged as a slave)
- Euphemism (e.g. serve Achilles at his tomb – euphemism for death)
- Symbolism (e.g. Hector's shield or Troy's citadel)
- Animal imagery (e.g. howl of agony)
- Rhetorical question (e.g. for what reason)

## THEME ANALYSIS AND TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

### Wars

#### Love and lust

Euripides' works often warn the audience of the detrimental effects brought on by excessive passion, asserting that it is best to moderate emotions and exhibit *sophrosyne* (*the power of self-control over one's emotions*). He often criticizes the goddess of love, Aphrodite for enchanting mortals and leading them into a life governed by love and lust. In this play, he purports that it is inherently Aphrodite's fault that the Trojans are fighting against the Greeks, as it is Aphrodite who makes Paris and Helen endlessly fall in love with each other.

#### Potential textual evidence:

- In *Women of Troy*, Euripides presents a particularly acerbic critique on Menelaus' "uncontrollable lust" in "sen[ding] a hunting party to track down Helen" as he juxtaposes the cost of the Trojan war being and the prize that they receive.
  - "tens of thousands dead"
  - "giving up the pleasure of his family and children"
  - "these Greeks [beginning] to die"

→ All that in exchange for one woman - Helen

- His chastisement is further bolstered by Cassandra's rhetorical question asking "they kept on dying, for what reason". This manoeuvres the audience into acknowledging the pointlessness of the Trojan war as it is not worth risking so many lives over Helen or any minor military conflict. In doing so, Euripides once again lambastes the actions of those vindictive and bloodthirsty Greeks.

## Cost of war

The play primarily focuses on the loss and pain of the Trojan civilians that survived the war and are sieged in the city after the war and are eventually either killed or enslaved after the Fall of Troy. While the Trojan war is the setting of many famous classical works being examined by various different angles, not many focus on the consequences suffered by women. This enables Euripides to raise the question of whether or not such victory is worth fighting for while simultaneously inviting the audience to emulate the playwright's disapprobation of such a violent and brutal resolution of conflict.

You can also use the evidence from the above to justify your arguments on the cost of wars. They all aim to magnify the extent to which the Trojan people, as well as the Greeks have to suffer as result of this pointless war.

Potential textual evidence:

We can also discuss how wars affect beliefs and their people's faith. In the Hellenic society, Gods have always been a significant part of their life as it is believed that mortals' lives are always under the influence of divine intervention. This is evidenced through the ways in which Hellenic people build temples and make sacrifices to the Gods, thanking the Gods for allowing them to live prosperous lives and begging for their forgiveness whenever they wrong others. This is why it is significant when Hecuba referred to the Gods as "betrayers" in her lamentation, implying that there is a change in attitude in time of tragedy. Events such as this make people question their fate and belief, galvanising them to wonder "what good [gods] were to [them]".

## Integrity and sense of duty

Some characters in Women of Troy are also fundamentally driven by their sense of duty and integrity and act according to their moral code regardless of what the circumstances may be. Hecuba, for instance, sympathises with the Chorus of Troy and acts as a leader even when she lost her title and her home. She is held responsible for her actions but is still governed by her honesty, integrity as Helen makes her plea. Talthibius is also governed by both his sense of duty and integrity. Despite his understanding of Hecuba's circumstances, he still follows his order and ensures that the Trojan women are allocated to their Greek households. However, he does not disregard her sense of morality and treats Hecuba with understanding and sensitivity.

Helen, on the other hand, does not demonstrate the same degree of moral uprightness. In time of tragedy, she chooses to lie and shift the blame to others to escape her execution.

She prioritises her own benefits over everyone else's and allows thousands of others to suffer from the impacts of her treachery in eloping with Paris.

## Hecuba - Mother of Troy

Potential textual evidence:

- In employing the simile comparing herself to “a mother bird at her plundered nest”, Hecuba reminds the audience of her endless love for the city of Troy, implying that the devastation of her own home also further deepens her pain. In this scene, Hecuba is portrayed as a female leader who rules with her passion and love.
- The image her Hecuba as an empathetic Queen is also exemplified through the ways in which she “weep[s] for [her] burning home”. As the term “home” invokes connotation of warmth and affection, Hecuba's endearment for the city she governs is established, accentuating the portrayal of Hecuba as a leader with a passion for her duties.
- This in turn propels the audience to be more inclined to feel commiseration for her when she is held responsible for her city's destruction. As the representative of Troy's leadership that enables such brutality to occur leading to the wars, Hecuba bears the guilt and responsibility for “[giving] birth to all the trouble by giving birth to Paris” and consequently for the cataclysmic consequences that ramified from Paris' involvement with Helen (although she is simply an innocent bystander) → Social accountability for war

## Talthybius

Talthybius is sympathetic towards women, establishing himself as a complicated figure with a strong sense of integrity. This is epitomised through the ways in which he employs euphemistic language when announcing the dreadful news to Hecuba. He tries his best to be sensitive and mitigate the impacts of Hecuba's daughter death to her, announcing that Polyxena “is to serve Achilles at his tomb” and that “her fate is settled” “all her troubles are over”. He was being sensitive and subtle instead of abruptly delivering the news. While he represents an enemy state, he shows that men can also be compassionate, contradicting the Phallogocentric belief that men should only be governed by cool logic.

## God/Fate

The prologue of the play opens with a conversation between Poseidon and Athene, foreshadowing their divine retribution against the Greeks. Witnessing the immediate aftermath of the Trojan war, they curse the war which they ironically themselves initiated, thus condemning the horrific injustice of the conflict and the actions of its vengeful and blood thirsty so-called heroes. This is evidenced through the ways in which they punished Odysseus by creating obstacles on his journey home.

However, it can also be argued that the gods in *Women of Troy* themselves act as a symbol of injustice in a way. From the feminist view, the Fall of Troy and the enslavement of Trojan women demonstrate the gods' lack of care as they disregard the monstrosities that occur to

women after the Greeks' victory. The divine intervention which is promised in the beginning casts the following injustices cursed upon the women of Troy in a different light as it can be argued that they caused the war. While their retribution against the Greeks can be seen as a means to punish the heroes, it is evident that that they are more concerned about the sacrilege committed and the disrespect they receive after the Trojan war than the injustices suffered by women. This thereby humanises the gods and fortifies the notion that they also have personal flaws and are governed by their ego and hubris.

The idea that there are forces beyond human control is enhanced, and Poseidon and Athene's pride proves that humans are just innocent bystanders at the mercy of the gods. It can be argued that the chain of unfortunate events are unpredictable as they are determined by gods, whose emotions and prejudices still control the way they act. On the other hand, the characters in the play do at times make choices that would lead to their downfall and tragic consequences. For instance, it is Menelaus who decided to go after the Trojans just because of one woman and he was not enchanted or under any influence of divine intervention.

## Gender roles

Euripides centres his play on Trojan women, enabling the discussion on the cause and effect of war. Given that female's points of view were not commonly expressed in plays or any forms of art works, Euripides's decision to have his play focus on women allows the Athenian audience, comprised of mainly male Athenians, to observe a part of the military conflict that was not seen before.

The protagonist Hecuba, for example, is portrayed as the archetypal mother. While this image is presented during the aftermath of the Trojan war, Euripides also uses Hecuba as a representative of contemporary Hellenic women as this archetype is universal for all circumstances. It is evident that Euripides' play mainly focuses on Hecuba's grief, with her lamentation dominating the prologue. This implies that the protagonist, in this instance, also acts as a diatribe against the patriarchal society which allows women to suffer greatly as a result of wars and military conflict. However, this play differs from other plays written by Euripides in that he also explores a woman's burden and responsibility as a leader, allowing the audience to understand the difficulties of being woman of power in time of crisis.

### Hecuba - Mother of her children

Potential textual evidence:

- From the outset of the play, the former queen of Troy is portrayed as a miserable mother suffering from the loss of her own children and "howl[ing] for her children dead" (echoed by the Chorus, referred to as "howl of agony"). By employing animalistic language in describing Hecuba's act of mourning over Hector's death as a Euripides intensifies the magnitude of her emotional turmoil as it is likened to a loud and doleful cry usually uttered by animals → It is almost not humanly possible to endure so much pain

- This notion is bolstered by the image of Hecuba drowning in “her threnody of tears” as it engages the pathos of the audience, establishing her as a victim of war and emphasizing the poignant story that is to be unveiled.
- The simile comparing herself to a woman “dragged as a slave” in her lamentation further fortifies Hecuba’s portrayal as a victim of a play. Here, the juxtaposition between her former title “by birth [as] Troy’s ... Queen” and her current state magnifies the drastic change in life and the loss she suffered, compelling the audience to better sympathise with Hecuba. → Powers can be ephemeral in times of crisis

### **Chorus of Trojan women – pain and suffering of the Trojan women**

It can be argued that Hecuba acts as the paradigm of the Trojan women as her pain, in a way, represents the suffering of the majority of Hellenic women in time of war (i.e. the deaths of her children, slavery, the devastation of her city), which enhances Euripides’ condemnation of a society where military conflicts can easily be facilitated. The Chorus of the play often echoes her deepest pain, establishing a sense of camaraderie between female characters of the play.

In this play, the Chorus acts as the voice of the “wretched women of Troy”, representing the views of the unspoken that are objectified and mistreated by their male counterparts. After Troy lost the war, women were seen as conquests and were traded as slaves, exposing the unfair ethos of a society that was seen as the cradle of civilization. By allowing the Trojan women to express their indignation and enmity as a response to their impending slavery, Euripides is able to present a critique on the ways in which women were oppressed in Ancient Greece.