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An Inquiry into the Horrors of War

**TTT**

*29* t *Euripides, THE WOMEN OF TROY*

Notwithstanding Pericles' claims to the contrary, each of classical Hellas's poleis, including Athens, was a brotherhood of warriors organized for the primary pur­pose of waging war — usually against other Hellenes. The most destructive of all the Hellenic wars fought during the fifth and fourth centuries b.c.e. was the Peloponnesian War (431—404), which grew ever more bitter as the fighting dragged on. Both sides were guilty of atrocities, but one of the most infamous was Athens's doing. During a brief truce in the autumn of 416, Athens tried to compel the neutral island of Melos to join its confederacy. When the Melians declined, an Athenian fleet captured the island, killed all of Melos's adult male citizens, and enslaved all its women and children. It is against the background of the capture of Melos and the spirited public debate early the following year over whether Athens should launch a massive naval expedition against the Greek city of Syra­cuse in Sicily that we should place *The Women of Troy.* Written and produced by Euripides (ca. 480—406 b.c.e.) in the spring of 415, the play was performed while the expeditionary force against Syracuse was assembling in Athens's harbor. As Euripides seems to have feared, that expedition proved disastrous for Athens and became the tragic turning point in the war for the city. After the debacle at Syra­cuse, Athens never fully recovered, and the defeat that came in 404 was almost a foregone conclusion.

Euripides' audience was well acquainted with the legends of the troubles and disasters that beset the victorious Greeks after they sailed away from Troy (Chap­ter 2, source 12), and it could not fail to miss the playwright's implied warning about the Syracusan adventure. It was an article of Hellenic social-ethical phi­losophy that acts *of hubris* (unrestrained arrogance) inevitably invite the punish­ment *of nemesis* (retributive justice). How prophetic the playwright turned out to be.



Whereas Hippocrates studied the clinical course of physical disease, Euripides specialized in diagnosing emotional disorders and mental breakdowns, especially those brought about by social ills. Deep compassion underlay his dissections of tortured human psyches. Although his extant plays show him to be a person who sought more to understand than to judge, he was an outspoken critic of the in­dignities visited upon those whom society exploited. In *The Women of Troy* his sympathies •went out to the victims of war, especially its female victims, but he also reserved some sympathy for otherwise honorable soldiers who were coars­ened and often destroyed by war.

Significantly, toward the very end of his life Euripides voluntarily left Athens, choosing to live in the wilds of faraway Thessaly. Athens had become a much less pleasant place in which to live as a result of the ongoing war that was turning out so badly for the city. Its chief architect of the war, Pericles, had strongly implied in his funeral oration that Athens could not fail to •win the war, given its pre­sumed moral superiority over Sparta, its chief enemy. How wrong he was — on several levels.

As is true of most Greek tragedies, the setting is in the legendary past. The scene is Troy, following its capture by the Achaeans. All the men of Troy are dead or have fled the city. Amid the ruins we meet four characters: Hecuba, widowed queen of Troy; her daughter-in-law, Andromache, the widow of Troy's greatest hero, Hector; Talthybius, the official messenger of the Greek army; and Astyanax, the child of Andromache and Hector. Looming behind the scenes but never ap­pearing on stage is Odysseus, whom we saw in the *Odyssey* (Chapter 2, source 12), but this Odysseus is quite different from the hero of Homeric epic song. As our excerpt begins, Hecuba is about to learn the fate of her daughter Polyxena.

*QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS*

1. What picture emerges from this scene of the fate of •war captives in the  
   Hellenic World?
2. What does Andromache's initial speech allow us to infer about the role and  
   place of women in Euripides' society?
3. Assuming Euripides intended this play to be a commentary on the Melian  
   massacre and the projected expedition against Syracuse, what was his  
   message?
4. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* served as Hellas's core cultural texts, and  
   Achilles, Odysseus, and their comrades were regarded as great ethnic  
   heroes. What does Euripides' characterization of the Achaeans at Troy  
   suggest about his art and message?
5. Were he alive, what do you think would be Pericles' reaction to this play?  
   Be specific in your answer.
6. This is a strange tragic play. The protagonists are passive; there is no plot to  
   speak of and little action, and nothing is resolved. Horror simply follows  
   upon horror. What, if anything, is so humanistic about this nondramatic  
   drama?

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***7.* Compare the social criticism of Thucydides with that of Euripides. What do they share, and what do those common elements suggest about Hellenic rationalism?**

andromache

Polyxena lies dead upon Achilles' tomb,

a gift to a corpse, to a lifeless thing.

hecuba

My sorrow! That is what Talthybius meant —

I could not read his riddle.1 Oh, too plain.

andromache

I saw her there and left the chariot

and covered her dead body with my cloak,

and beat my breast.

hecuba

Murdered — my child. Oh, wickedly!

Again I cry to you. Oh, cruelly slain!

andromache

She has died her death, and happier by far

dying than I alive.

hecuba

Life cannot be what death is, child.

Death is empty — life has hope.

andromache

Mother, O Mother, hear a truer word.

Now let me bring joy to your heart.

I say to die is only not to be,

and rather death than life with bitter grief.

They have no pain, they do not feel

their wrongs. But the happy person who has come

to wretchedness, his soul is a lost wanderer, the old joys that were once, left far behind. She is dead, your daughter — to her the same as if she never had been born. She does not know the wickedness that

killed her. While I — I aimed my shaft at good repute.

'Unable to tell Hecuba the truth, he had said that Polyxena was watching Achilles' tomb and was free from trouble.

I gained full measure — then

missed happiness.

For all that is called virtuous in a woman I strove for and I won in Hector's house. Always because we women, whether right

or wrong, are spoken ill of

unless we stay within our homes, my longing I set aside and kept the house. Light talk, glib women's words, could never gain an entrance there. My own thoughts were enough for me, best of all teachers to me in my home. Silence, a tranquil eye, I brought my husband, knew well in what I should rule him, and when to give him obedience. And this report of me came to the Greeks for my destruction. When they captured me Achilles' son2 would have me. I shall be a slave to those who murdered — O Hector, my beloved — shall I thrust

him aside,

open my heart to the man that comes to me, and be a traitor to the dead? And yet to shrink in loathing from him and make my masters hate me — One night, men say, one night in a man's bed will make a woman tame — Oh, shame! A woman throw her husband off and in a new bed love another — Why, a young colt will not run in the yoke with any but her mate — not a dumb beast that has not reason, of a lower nature. O Hector, my beloved, you were all to me, wise, noble, mighty, in wealth, in

manhood, both.

No man had touched me when you took me, took me from out my father's home

2Neoptolemus (see Chapter 2, source 12).

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I and yoked a girl fast to you. And you are dead, and I, with other plunder, am sent by sea to Greece. A slave's yoke there. Your dead Polyxena you weep for, what does she know of pain like mine? The living must have hope. Not I,

not anymore. I will not lie to my own heart. No good will

ever come. But oh, to think it would be sweet.

A WOMAN3

We stand at the same point of pain. You

mourn your ruin, and in your words I hear my own calamity.

hecuba

Those ships — I never have set foot on one,

but I have heard of them, seen pictures

of them. I know that when a storm comes which

they think

they can ride out, the sailors do their best, one by the sail, another at the helm, and others bailing.

But if great ocean's raging overwhelms them, they yield to fate.

They give themselves up to the racing waves. So in my many sorrows I am dumb. I yield, I cannot speak.

The great wave from God has conquered me. But, O dear child, let Hector be, and let be what has come to him. Your tears will never call him back. Give honor now to him who is your master. Your sweet ways — use them to allure him. So doing you will give cheer to your friends. Perhaps this child, my own child's son, you may rear to manhood and great aid

for Troy,

and if ever you should have more children, they might build her again. Troy once more be

a city! Oh — one thought leads another on.

But why again that servant of the Greeks? I see him coming. Some new plan is here.

*(Enter Talthybius with soldiers. He is troubled and advances hesitatingly.*)

talthybius

Wife of the noblest man that was in Troy,

0 wife of Hector, do not hate me.  
Against my will I come to tell you.

The people and the kings have all resolved —

andromache

What is it? Evil follows words like those.

talthybius

This child they order — Oh, how can I

say it —

andromache

Now that he does not go with me to the same master —

talthybius

No man in Greece shall ever be his master.

andromache

But — leave him here — all that is left of Troy?

talthybius

1 don't know how to tell you. What is bad,  
words can't make better —

andromache

I feel you kind. But you have not good news.

talthybius

Your child must die. There, now you know

the whole, bad as it is.

andromache

Oh, I have heard an evil worse

than a slave in her master's bed.

talthybius

It was Odysseus had his way. He spoke

to all the Greeks.

'One of the women of Troy, who comprise the chorus.

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andromache

0 God. There is no measure to my pain.

taithybius

He said a hero's son must not grow up —

andromache

God, on his own sons may that counsel fall.

talthybius

— but from the towering wall of Troy

be thrown.

Now, now — let it be done — that's wiser. Don't cling so to him. Bear your pain the way a brave woman suffers. You have no strength — don't look to

any help. There's no help for you anywhere.

Think — think.

The city gone — your husband too. And you a captive and alone, one woman — how can you do battle with us? For your own good

1 would not have you try, and draw  
hatred down on you and be shamed.

Oh, hush — never a curse upon the Greeks. If you say words that make the army angry the child will have no burial,4 and

without pity —

Silence now. Bear your fate as best you can. So then you need not leave him dead without

a grave, and you will find the Greeks more kind.

andromache

Go die, my best beloved, my own, my treasure,

in cruel hands, leaving your

mother comfortless. Your father was too noble. That is why they kill you. He could save others, he could not save you for his nobleness. My bed, my bridal — all for misery — when long ago I came to Hector's halls to bear my son — oh, not for Greeks to slay, but for a ruler over a teeming Asia. Weeping, my little one? There, there.

4And his shade will have no peace as a consequence. 'Helen. By running off to Troy with King Priam's son, Paris, she had brought down on Troy the wrath of her husband

You cannot know what waits for you.

Why hold me with your hands so fast, cling so

fast to me? You little bird, flying to hide beneath

my wings. And Hector will not come — he will

not come, up from the tomb, great spear in hand, to

save you.

Not one of all his kin, of all the Trojan might. How will it be? Falling down — down —

oh, horrible.

And his neck — his breath — all broken. And none to pity. You little thing, curled in my arms, you dearest to your mother, how sweet the fragrance of you. All nothing then — this breast from where your baby mouth drew milk, my travail too, my cares, when I grew wasted watching you. Kiss me — Never again. Come, closer, closer. Your mother who bore you — put your arms

around my neck. Now kiss me, lips to lips.

0 Greeks, you have found out ways to torture  
that are not Greek.

A little child, all innocence of wrong —

you wish to kill him. . . .

Quick! Take him — seize him — cast

him down —

if so you will. Feast on his flesh. God has destroyed me, and I cannot —

1 cannot save my child from death.

Oh hide my head for shame and fling me into the ship.

*(She falls, then struggles to her knees.}*

My fair bridal — I am coming — Oh, I have lost a child, my own.

A woman

O wretched Troy, tens of thousands lost

for a woman's sake,5 a hateful marriage bed.

(Menelaus of Sparta), his brother (Agamemnon of Mycenae), and their Achaean allies.

talthybius *(drawing the child away)*

Come, boy, let go. Unclasp those loving hands,

poor mother.

Come now, up, up, to the very height,

where the towers of your fathers crown

the wall, and where it is decreed that you must die.

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*(To the soldiers)*

Take him away.

A herald who must bring such orders should be a man who feels no pity, and no shame either — not like me.