

are pointed in their condemnation of the Greeks' decision to have the child 'callously murdered' (p.36), and even Talthybius acknowledges that it is 'an indecent thing' (p.35).

## Poseidon and Athene

### Key quotes

'So now I too shall desert famous Troy.' (Poseidon, p.6)

'I shall make the Greeks' return home a disaster.' (Athene, p.7)

Poseidon and Athene are characterised as petty and vengeful gods, more interested in their personal stakes than in the sufferings of humans. The loss of human life that has occurred due to their meddling appears to be of no account to them. Poseidon seems more concerned with the 'smoking ruin' of the city, and the fact that he has been 'defeated' (p.5), than with the circumstances of the survivors, whose 'screams and moans' (p.6) are heard on the banks of the river. Instead of intervening, Poseidon deserts the remaining Trojans. Furthermore, both Poseidon and Athene are revealed to be 'cavalier' (p.7) in their attitudes; after years of enmity, they decide to join forces and bring destruction upon the Greek fleet 'so that the Greeks will learn their lesson ... and fear the power of the gods' (pp.8-9).

## The effects of war

During Euripides' lifetime, war became a normal part of life for Athens, which had been in conflict with Sparta for more than sixteen years by the time *The Women of Troy* was first performed. Many citizens supported war, and sought to emulate the courageous exploits of their mythical and historical ancestors through conflict. Yet there were also those who questioned the wisdom of Athens' actions. Euripides was one such person. Only one year before *The Women of Troy* was performed, the citizens of Athens voted to put to death the men of Melos, and to enslave its women and children. Through his play, Euripides aims to create moral unease in his audience by highlighting the suffering of his central characters, and the dishonour and foolishness of the men who inflicted this suffering.

### The innocent suffer during war

### Key quotes

'What I am suffering, and have suffered, what I will suffer yet, is more than enough to make anyone fall and never get up again.' (Hecuba, p.24)

'... a whole generation of women raped in their own bedrooms, breeding bastards for the Greeks.' (The Chorus, p.28)

Through his depiction of the horrors experienced by the women in *The Women of Troy*, Euripides strips away the heroic vision of conquest that prevailed in Athens at the time. In particular, he seeks to create empathy for the victims of war by systematically revealing the crimes against individuals who are wholly undeserving of what happens to them. The plight of the Trojan citizens is first observed by Poseidon, as he looks over the smoking ruins of the city. Seeing the captured women 'on the riverbank of the Scamander', he notices that their 'screams and moans' echo along the river (p.6). This sensory imagery highlights the suffering of these defeated women, positioning the audience to feel

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pity for them. Through the subsequent exposition of the circumstances of Cassandra, Andromache and Hecuba, it becomes clear that the women's suffering is not only a consequence of the loss of their husbands, their sons and their homes, but is caused by the ongoing violation of those aspects of their identities central to their very being.

The violation of Cassandra is a key moment utilised to provoke pity and concern for the women. Already 'dragged' by Ajax from her 'sanctuary' in Athene's temple (p.8), Cassandra is sought out by Agamemnon to be his concubine even though she is a 'consecrated virgin' (p.15). As she is 'Apollo's nun' (p.15), even Apollo himself will not touch Cassandra, so to violate her virginity 'flouts all religious feeling' (p.6). Cassandra's fate is considered so horrific that Hecuba calls upon her to 'strip off your sacred habit' (p.15), and Cassandra, despite 'pretending to celebrate her fate as a blessing, clearly fears what is to come when she asks her mother to 'lead me to him, and if I don't seem overwhelmed at the prospect ... give me a good shove, force me, by violence, if you have to!' (p.19). Cassandra's anger at her fate, and her vehement desire that 'by means of this marriage of mine I shall destroy' the Greeks (p.21), indicate that her words of celebration of her 'marriage' are ironic, and that she is mournfully having to say goodbye to 'all the ritual of Dionysus' (p.23) that marked her as sacred.

The horrific extent to which honourable women are violated is further emphasised through Andromache. While Cassandra's body was considered inviolable due to 'religious feeling' (p.6), Andromache's fate is equally unpalatable to the audience, for she is renowned as the consummate wife – loyal and obedient. As Andromache laments her fate with her mother-in-law, she reminds the audience of the loss of her husband, Hector, a man recognised for both his bravery and his gentleness, who stands in contrast to the lesser men to whom she must now become a slave. Andromache reveals her impossible plight – she must 'be a slave in the very house of the man who murdered my husband', but 'if I refuse to allow this Prince to touch me, I'll provoke the hatred of the man whose power is total over me and mine' (p.33).

By accentuating the inappropriate fates of Cassandra and Andromache,

Euripides provokes his audience to reflect on the lives of the women they have taken as slaves, such as those who survived the slaughter of Melos.

The loss of royal status and relegation to slavery is considered just as horrific as the violation of women's bodies. Andromache pointedly states that she and her son were 'born royal' but are now 'soldiers' plunder' (p.31). Even more significantly, Hecuba is reduced from her 'state as a Queen, half divine' (p.12) to a slave 'throned in the dust' (p.10) who wears a 'crown of pain' (p.58). The eradication of any agency Hecuba has over her life, reinforced in the closing moments of the play when Talthybius points out that 'she belongs to Odysseus now' (p.58), serves as a warning to the audience that such a fate could easily be theirs should they fail to be victorious in the conflict against Sparta.

The death of Astyanax provides the most confronting depiction of how the innocent suffer in war. The child's youth is conveyed through the image of him burying his 'timid face' in the folds of Andromache's dress 'like a bird creeping under his mother's wing' (p.36). The audience is reminded that, without a father to protect him, this child's fate lies in the hands of his enemies, who decide that he must die even though he is 'guilty of nothing' (p.37). Following Astyanax's death, Hecuba recollects happy days with her grandson, then envisions the days that will never be – this is a moment of such pathos that it is difficult for the audience to bear, for nothing can justify the death of a child so innocent. Presented with this multitude of sufferings, the audience is moved to feel pity for the victims of war, and to recognise the full extent of their humanity, their nobility and their honour.

### The nature of valour

#### Key quote

'Any sensible man must hate war; he does his best to avoid it. But if it should come, even if it should end like this, it is no shame for a city, indeed, it is a crown of honour to die nobly, with dignity.' (Cassandra, p.21)

An unusual type of heroism is presented in *The Women of Troy* – that of the victim, whose ability to bear up under terrible suffering is evidence of

their valour Cassandra vehemently claims her place among the heroes of Greek tragedy: she considers herself a heroine, a female warrior whose 'wedding' will be an act of war, and an opportunity for revenge, for 'by means of this marriage ... I shall destroy them' (p.21). Cassandra claims equality with 'the greatest of men', her brother Hector, whose 'brightness would have remained hidden' (p.21) had the Greeks not attacked, asserting that her own death will be equally glorious, for her prophesied destruction of 'the House of Atreus' will be a 'victory' for the Trojans (p.24). Cassandra thus suggests that her suffering, and by extension the suffering of the other Trojan women, ennobles the soul. They may be victims, but they meet their victimhood valiantly, so that even the simple act of Hecuba declaring 'I won't fall' and calling upon her 'old limbs' to 'strengthen' (p.60) as her slavery begins becomes an act of bravery.

Pointedly, the final line of the play is given to the Chorus, who exhort one another to 'march down to the Achaean fleet' (p.61) – the use of the verb 'march' indicates an action usually undertaken by heroic soldiers marching into battle, not women entering slavery. As classics scholar Dana Munteanu writes, Euripides 'reverses the usual perspective on war: instead of focusing on the glorification of male military prowess and sacrifice, [the play] turns to female suffering and transforms the mourning of war victims into eternal poetic monuments' (Munteanu 2011, p.144).

In contrast to the valour of the women who stand to greet their new lives with honour and dignity, the men who figure in the play exhibit both spiritual and moral degeneration. Euripides exposes the conquering Greeks as men controlled by their basest emotions: lust and fear. The first indication of the Greeks' lack of honour is Agamemnon taking Cassandra, a virgin whom even the god Apollo left untouched, as his concubine. Poseidon condemns this action as 'a dangerous business ... that flouts all religious feeling' (p.6). Even Talthybius, the loyal Greek soldier, admits that Agamemnon is 'shot through with lust' (p.15), a sentiment echoed by Hecuba when she invokes an image of Cassandra being 'thrust at spear-point into some Greek's bed as a slave of his lust' (p.18). By highlighting the immorality of Agamemnon, condemned as

being 'some second Ajax' (p.31), Euripides pointedly suggests that those men who seek to satiate their carnal desires by imposing sexual slavery upon noblewomen are not heroic at all.

In addition to highlighting the moral degeneracy of the conquering Greeks, Euripides also calls into question their valour. The Greeks' decision to murder Astyanax is evidence of inexcusable cowardice and folly: these formerly fierce warriors are so fearful of reprisal for their actions that they are willing to commit the 'indecent' act of infanticide because 'the son of such a father must not be allowed to grow up' (p.35). As Hecuba points out, there is no epigram that can be written for Astyanax that will not bring shame to the Greeks – his death is an everlasting indictment of their cowardice. The barbarism of the Greeks serves as a condemnation of those who inflict violence and suffering without valid reason, and provides a warning of what might befall Athens if men with power violate principles of goodness and honour. The suggested choice is clear: war should only be waged in a manner that shows respect to the gods and mercy to the survivors.

## The role of women

### Key quotes

'Death is what she deserves. And other women will learn from her example that wives who betray their husbands must expect to die for it.' (Hecuba, p.47)  
*'Being Hector's wife, I aimed at the highest a woman could wish for, and I hit the mark.'* (Andromache, p.32)

Euripides' characterisation of the major female characters in his play provides revealing insights into how women were treated and thought of in Athenian society. Women were expected to be passive entities, obedient to the will of their fathers and husbands. By valorising key women, such as Cassandra and Andromache, while demonising Helen, Euripides' play reinforces the Athenian ideal of womanhood.

The expectation in Athenian society was that young women would remain virgins until after marriage. Through the character of Cassandra,

Euripides suggests that the young woman's desire to remain a virgin should have been respected by the Greek conquerors. The actions of Agamemnon and Ajax, in violating Cassandra's virginity, is vehemently condemned by Hecuba, by the gods – who describe it as 'a dangerous business' (p.6) – and even by Talthybius, who accuses his leader of allowing his 'uncontrollable lust ... [to] get the better of him' (p.22). By suggesting that Cassandra's violation will bring destruction upon 'the House of Atreus' (p.24), Euripides asserts that the sanctity of a woman's body must be protected.

### Key point

The violation of Cassandra is only able to occur because her father and brothers have died. Euripides reminds his male audience that the interests of their daughters can only be protected if the men are alive, thus provoking them to consider everything they risk in going to war.

A particularly strong vision of the ideal wife is presented through Andromache. In ancient Greece, the management of the household and the rearing of the children were important aspects of a wife's role. It was inappropriate to have contact with males who were not family members, and so activities within the home, such as weaving, were encouraged. This is the vision that is given of Andromache. Like Cassandra, Andromache is helpless because she has no protector, a point highlighted by her pathetic cry, 'My husband! Where are you? I need you now. Save me!' (p.29). As a consequence, she is subject to the ravages of the conquering Greeks, despite the fact that she has been 'the perfect wife', 'joyfully fulfilled at home' and never wanting to leave Hector's house 'because that's the certain way to compromise a woman's reputation' (p.32). This characterisation of Andromache as the 'ideal wife' who would 'give in gracefully' (p.32) to her husband's authority heightens the audience's recognition of the true worth of this woman, and thus causes them to question the appropriateness of her fate. Euripides suggests that women who live up to these ideals should not be subjected to such horror, even though they are 'without any power to prevent it' (p.36).

In contrast to this idealised vision of Andromache, Euripides presents the behaviour of Helen, whom Andromache accuses of being the daughter of 'Destruction ... Envy and Murder and Death, and every evil thing that crawls on the face of the earth' (p.37). Helen is similarly lambasted by Cassandra, who asserts that Helen 'was not dragged away from her home by force, but ran away and was unfaithful, because she didn't want to' (p.20), and by Hecuba, who accuses her of knowing nothing about 'loyalty, duty, love' (p.46). By establishing the full degradation of Helen's morality and having Hecuba accuse her of being unable to abstain from infidelity, Euripides prompts his audience to question whether such behaviour should go unpunished, as was known to be the usual outcome, despite Menelaus' claims that Helen would 'endure a terrible death that will be a warning to all women in the future to be chaste and moral in their behaviour' (p.49). Euripides recognises, as Menelaus notes, that 'that's by no means an easy lesson to teach' (p.49), and so uses his play as a vehicle through which to criticise the way men treat women who have lived up to societal expectations.

### Women and slavery

#### Key quotes

'You are quite without any power to prevent it so don't imagine otherwise. No one can help you. The city is in ruins, your husband dead. You are quite alone, and believe me we are capable of dealing with a single woman if we have to, so don't make a fight of it ...' (Talthybius, p.36)

'And whose misery is greater, the dead, whose day is passed, or the living, who must live in slavery?' (Hecuba, pp.11–12)

Although the idea of being enslaved was often more repugnant to the Athenians than death itself, slavery was an accepted part of Athenian society in Euripides' time. Much agricultural and industrial labour was completed by male slaves, while in the households of wealthy Athenians domestic duties such as cooking, serving food, cleaning and childcare were undertaken by female slaves. Such women were particularly

vulnerable, for they no longer enjoyed the protection of their fathers or husbands, and sexual exploitation and physical abuse were very real threats. By highlighting the plight of the 'wretched women of Troy' who are 'facing a life of slavery' (p.11), Euripides questions whether any women who are enslaved deserve their fate.

In *The Women of Troy*, Euripides is careful to depict the women who are being enslaved as of high social and moral status, whose devotion and fidelity both to their husbands and to their city is the same as that expected of women in contemporary Athens. Euripides' characterisation of the women in his play questions the justice of their being forced to become 'soldiers' plunder' (p.31), objects to be used and abused at will. When Talthybius avoids telling Hecuba about Polyxena's death, he somewhat cryptically declares that she should 'consider [her] child fortunate' (p.16), suggesting that Polyxena's fate is preferable to that faced by the women who are still alive. This idea is affirmed by Andromache, who asserts that Polyxena is 'happier dead than I am living' (p.31). The fate of Andromache herself, a woman praised because she 'made it [her] business to be the perfect wife' (p.32), is especially frowned upon – she must 'be a slave in the very house of the man who murdered [her] husband ... yoked' (p.33) like an animal without control over her own being.

### Key point

*The Women of Troy* powerfully inverts the stories of Homer's *The Iliad* by shifting the focus from men to women, placing the women centre stage and men on the periphery.

## Hope and fear

### Key quotes

'No, no one is happier dead. The living at least have hope. To be dead is to be nothing.' (Hecuba, p.32)

'I'm not stupid enough to delude myself with false expectations, pleasant though such comforting daydreams might be ...' (Andromache, p.33)

The idea of hope is destroyed in the course of events in *The Women of Troy*. Ultimately it is represented as a type of self-delusion used by those trying to escape the truth. While Andromache immediately recognises the true horror of her situation – that she is facing 'a life of agony' (p.32) – Hecuba and the Chorus attempt to cope with their circumstances by looking to their futures with hope, as this allows them to survive despite everything. For much of the play, hope is a sustaining force for the women, however illusory it may be.

Initially, the Chorus and Hecuba contemplate the various civilisations within the Greek Empire where they would be 'happy enough to live' (p.13). To the audience, this ironic moment highlights what a twisted illusion hope is for these women because, as foreshadowed by Poseidon and Athene in the prologue, most of the Greek fleet will never return to Greece. Regardless, the women persist in looking for glimpses of light in the future, whether that be in the possibility of the resurrection of Troy, or that Helen may 'never come safe home to Sparta, never repossess that bedroom in her own house and hearth' (p.50). Yet this hope becomes, as Adrian Poole describes it, 'a terrifying ... lethal commodity' for 'desire one last thing, or worse, voice this desire, and that one last hope will be smashed' (Poole 1976, p.276). As the plot progresses, each of these sustaining hopes is destroyed as Talthybius communicates and carries out his orders. This is most pointedly demonstrated in the fate of Astyanax. Hecuba suggests to Andromache that 'with luck, you may bring up this grandson of mine to be the saviour of Troy' and that the boy might 'build a new city from the ashes' (p.34), only to have these hopes destroyed by Talthybius, who delivers the ruling of the Council that 'the son of such a father must not be allowed to grow up' (p.35).

### Key point

Although the women's hopes are destroyed over the course of the play, Hecuba's Herculean effort to stand and walk onwards to her fate, joined by the women who 'turn [their] weary feet to the harbour' (p.61), can be read as an expression of Hecuba's earlier claim that 'the living at least have hope' (p.32).

## Fate and the gods

### Key quotes

'When a man sacks a town and destroys everything, even sacred temples and the tombs of the dead, he's asking for trouble. The same destruction, sooner or later, will fall on his own head.' (Poseidon, p.9)

'Soon no one will remember this city; everything is dying, even the name: there is no place on earth called Troy.' (The Chorus, p.60)

Throughout the play, in addition to reflecting upon their present suffering, Hecuba, Andromache and the Chorus devote substantial time to narrating and reliving the past. The night on which Troy fell receives special attention in the first *stasimon*, as the Chorus relive the moment the wooden horse was 'heaved ... like a black ship' into the streets of Troy, where 'the whole city was singing' (p.27). The audience is reminded of the great standing Trojan civilisation once held; by highlighting the utter destruction and abandonment of Troy, the desolation of the sacred temples and the eradication of a future through the death of Astyanax and the torching of the city, Euripides suggests that even the greatest of civilisations can be brought to its knees through folly and complacency. In doing this, Euripides prompts his Athenian audience to question their own safety and security and to contemplate that Athens one day might fall. This warning is today recognised as evidence of Euripides' prescience, for the Sicilian Expedition – for which preparations were being made while *The Women of Troy* was first being performed – was a significant defeat for the Greeks.

The fate of the Greeks is as important as that of the Trojans in the delivery of Euripides' warning. Looming over the play's action and mocking the desire of the Greek army to 'celebrate, leave Troy, and go home' (p.57) is the known fate of the Greek army following their departure from Troy. The 'sorrows that lie in wait for Odysseus' (p.23) and the Greek fleet, known to Euripides' audience thanks to Homer's *The Odyssey*, provide a warning that even the most powerful armies can be brought down. Athene's determination that 'the Greeks will learn

their lesson, and in future, respect my temples, and fear the power of the gods' (p.9) is a pointed reminder that Troy was destroyed because of her interventions, suggesting that no-one can ever be sure of their fate, for such matters lie in the hands of the gods.

Perhaps most importantly, Euripides suggests that the actions of the gods cannot be understood by mortals, and that mortals should not look to the gods to intervene in their lives, no matter how deserving of assistance they may be. Euripides dramatises how an unreasonable expectation that the gods will intervene in the fates of the deserving simply leads to a loss of faith, as demonstrated in the Chorus' pleas to Zeus in the third *stasimon*: 'do you even care ... do you even remember, King of gods, that we exist ...?' (p.49).

## The power of language

### Key quotes

'So that's what Talthybius meant, the truth his diplomatic evasion concealed.' (Hecuba, p.31)

'A liar, a deceiver ... whose double tongue twists truth into lies, friendship to enmity!' (Hecuba about Odysseus, p.16)

*The Women of Troy* is fundamentally concerned with language and its uses; language is a powerful tool of persuasion, but it is also a tool of deception. The Trojan women use language to generate hope that they might find some escape from their circumstances. However, the dramatic irony of these hopes, generated by the audience's foreknowledge of the women's fate, reveals that by articulating their hopes the women are simply deluding themselves, hiding from the harsh reality of their future lives. Similarly, Menelaus deceives himself and the Trojan women when he claims that he will not become 'a slave of [his] lust again' (p.41) as Hecuba fears, but will ensure that Helen is 'punished as she deserves' (p.49). Greek mythology tells us that these claims are as ironic as the hopes of the women, and that Menelaus is as guilty of self-delusion as they are.

The use of language to deceive others is most obvious in the case of Talthybius – when Hecuba prompts him for news of her youngest child, Polyxena, Talthybius refuses to reveal the true horror of her fate, instead declaring ‘she is to serve Achilles, at his tomb’ (p.15) and that ‘all’s well with her’ (p.16). His vague allusion to Polyxena’s fate in the claim that ‘all her troubles are over’ (p.16) demonstrates how words can be used to equivocate and to delude. Such ‘diplomatic evasion’ (p.31) is not admirable, and serves only to heighten Hecuba’s anguish when Andromache subsequently reveals the truth – a truth that leaves Hecuba struggling to comprehend the cruelty of the Greeks, as shown through the frequent use of ellipsis.

Euripides clearly questions the morality of those who use language to lie and manipulate. His characterisation of Odysseus and Helen as two of the most contemptible characters of Greek mythology conveys this idea. Helen is shown to be ‘a dangerous woman’ who tries to ‘disguise [her] own wickedness’ (p.45) by creating a ‘smokescreen of self-importance’ (p.48) through sophistry. Perhaps even worse, Odysseus, described by Hecuba as ‘a man without morality, a liar, a deceiver, to whom laws of gods and men mean nothing’ (p.16), makes the speech which ‘carried the whole Council’ to the decision to murder Astyanax, even though it is ‘an indecent thing’ (p.35).

### Key point

Euripides highlights the powerful capacity for language to be used to manipulate truth and thus deceive others into believing or doing the wrong thing. This is an important lesson in democracy for his audience, alerting them to the dangers of being persuaded into misguided and immoral courses of action.

## Critical viewpoints

Different interpretations arise from different responses to a text. Over time, a text will evoke a wide range of responses from its readers, who may come from various social or cultural groups and live in very different places and historical periods. Responses by critics and reviewers can be published in newspapers, journals and books, both online and in print. They can also be expressed in discussions among readers in the media, classrooms, book groups and so on.

While there is no single correct reading or interpretation of a text, it is important to understand that an interpretation is more than a personal opinion – it is the justification of a point of view on the text. To present an interpretation of a text based on your point of view, you must use a logical argument and support it with relevant evidence from the text.

## DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Since first being performed almost 2500 years ago, Euripides’ *The Women of Troy* has received much critical attention. Early criticism of the play was often concerned with its structure, as analysis of the text in accordance with Aristotle’s *Poetics* suggests that it is episodic and without plot or action, and that it generally lacks any of the qualities that Aristotle deemed essential for an effective tragedy. For example, in 1896 Arthur Haigh wrote in *The Tragic Drama of the Greeks* that ‘The Troades, produced in 415 [BC], is perhaps the least interesting of the extant tragedies. The plot consists merely of unconnected scenes, depicting the miserable fate of the Trojan captives’ (Haigh 1896, p.300).

However, in more recent years significant critical consideration has been given to how the unity of *The Women of Troy* can be expressed, either through live performance, or by reading the play as part of a trilogy or a tetralogy. This debate around unity can be found in the work of Ruth Scodel, whose book *The Trojan Trilogy of Euripides* (1979) argues that the