CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Hecuba

Key quotes

'... to see the true face of misery you need to look no further than the poor creature lying there ...' (Poseidon, p.6)

'Look at me now, throned in the dust ... an old woman, dragged as a slave from my home, all hope plundered from my god-cursed ravaged grey head, with no reprieve from my punishment of everlasting sorrow.' (p.10)

Hecuba is 'the true face of misery' (p.6) in *The Women of Troy*. The play opens with her 'lying face down and quite still' amid 'the ruins of Troy' (p.5), and she remains on the stage until Talthybius escorts her to the waiting Achaean (Greek) fleet. This stasis indicates Hecuba's great fall: she was 'royal by birth' and 'married a King' (p.24) but is now 'a slave' (p.10) who has no agency and whose movements are determined by the conquering Greeks.

Hecuba has seen her sons 'slaughtered by the swords and spears of the Greeks' and her husband, Priam, 'hacked down on the altar steps of our holiest temple' (p.25). In the *parados*, the women of Troy still look to Hecuba as their leader, asking 'who'll be master of my grief?' (p.12); this forces Hecuba to confront her first loss of status: she is now a powerless slave. Hecuba's opening monody reveals the pathos of her situation and highlights how her circumstances have changed. Describing herself as 'the mother bird at her plundered nest' (p.10), she reveals her frustration at not being able to protect her city: her 'song has become a scream' (p.10). Hecuba joins the Chorus at various stages in the play as they lament their circumstances, highlighting that they are all equal now, in suffering and in status.

Hecuba initially maintains some optimism, declaring that wherever there is life there is hope. Her greatest hope is that Andromache will bring up Astyanax to become 'the saviour of Troy', who will 'build a new city from the ashes' (p.34). Yet when Astyanax is killed and Talthybius orders his commanders to 'burn everything down' (p.57), Hecuba questions her faith, asking why she should 'bother to call' upon the gods for 'we called before, and they didn't hear us' (p.58). Her decision to run into the flames can be considered an assertion of control over her own destiny, which until now she has allowed the gods to determine.

Similarly, Hecuba's hopes for vengeance against Helen, whom she blames for Troy's sufferings, are dashed. Hecuba calls upon Menelaus to 'consummate the Greek victory by killing your wife' (p.47), but she fears he will not do this, for 'once a lover, always besotted' (p.48), a maxim that the audience knows to be true for Menelaus. Thus, Hecuba's two great hopes – for a legacy and for revenge – are thwarted. Yet Hecuba claims that she and the people of Troy would have been 'nonentities' if not for their defeat, and that songs would be written 'in memory of our suffering' (p.56). In this, she perhaps claims a small form of victory for the Trojan women.

Key point

Hecuba epitomises the fate that awaits any woman who suffers the misfortune of her land being conquered by the Greek army. She is an important vehicle for Euripides to prompt his Athenian audience to reflect on their actions towards the vanquished.

The Chorus

Key quotes

'What words, what howling, can give tongue to a pain no animal could endure!' (p.13)

'Let the dead hear our pain.' (p.59)

The choric odes of the Trojan women maintain the mood of pity and sorrow that pervades the entire play. These women stand with Hecuba, Cassandra and Andromache, tragic victims of circumstance who have had to endure the loss of their families, their status and their homes, and for whom 'time will bring no relief' (p.56). Throughout the play, the

Chorus engage in ancient rituals of communal storytelling, ensuring that the horrors of war are conveyed to the audience. They look to the past and thus bring to life the moment the Trojans were 'cut down in their homes, in sanctuary, beheaded where they lay' (p.27). Importantly, by the end of the play, the Chorus, like Hecuba, not only believe that 'the gods hate Troy', but that the gods have abandoned them, and that Poseidon 'sees, and does nothing' (p.58).

Cassandra

Key quotes

> '... the frenzied visionary whom even the god Apollo left untouched as a virgin.' (Poseidon, p.6)
>
> 'Where is the General's flagship? Which way must I go? Who could wait for the wind that fills her sails more eagerly than I do?' (pp.23–4)

A 'consecrated virgin' and 'Apollo's nun' (p.15), Cassandra is the 'god-crazed daughter' (p.11) of Priam and Hecuba, a prophetess who can accurately see the future. Cassandra's fate is revealed before she sets foot upon the stage, first by Poseidon and then by Talthybius – she is to become the concubine of the Greek commander, Agamemnon, who is 'shot through with lust' for her (p.15).

When Cassandra appears, she waves a torch and calls upon Hymen, the god of marriage, to bless her, performing a 'grotesque parody' of a wedding song (p.18) as she embraces her fate as Agamemnon's concubine. Hecuba is unable to understand her daughter's behaviour, believing her to be 'just as much a poor mad thing as you ever were' (p.19). Yet Cassandra is driven by a desire for vengeance, and she views her fate – to be a slave to Agamemnon's desire – as a chance for divine retribution. The gift of prophecy allows Cassandra to see that Agamemnon's choice will bring about not only his own demise but also suffering for the Greeks as they seek to return home. Cassandra is the only one who can offer the Trojan women solace, through the promise of vengeance, but the cruel irony is that no-one will believe her. The Chorus claims, 'the disasters you prophesy are fantasies' (p.21).

Like her mother and her sister-in-law, who also question the reasoning behind the Greeks' actions, Cassandra takes the opportunity to point out the Greek army's folly in starting a war 'for the sake of one woman', which in turn 'cost them tens of thousands dead' (p.19). Cassandra challenges the audience to question the honour of a war fought in foreign lands, pointing out that the Greeks were so long away from home that they 'had forgotten what their children looked like' and that the bodies of those who died 'lie forgotten in a foreign country' (p.20). By recasting the narrative surrounding the Greek victory, she denies the conquerors the status of heroes, instead attributing this status to the Trojans, who 'won the greatest of all glories', for they 'died fighting for their fatherland' (p.20).

Key point

There are various stories surrounding Cassandra in ancient Greek mythology. For this play, it is important to understand that Apollo fell in love with Cassandra and granted her the gift of prophecy, but because Cassandra rejected his affections, he placed a curse on her: that no-one would believe her predictions. During the fall of Troy, Cassandra tried to find a shelter in Athene's temple, but she was abducted by Ajax and brought to Agamemnon as a concubine. It is this action that draws Athene's ire and becomes the catalyst for the events of *The Odyssey*.

Andromache

Key quotes

> 'To be dead is the same as never to have been born. But to die is better than a life of agony.' (p.32)
>
> 'I aimed at the highest a woman could wish for, and I hit the mark. And now I have lost everything.' (p.32)

As the loyal wife of Hector, the loving mother of Astyanax and the dutiful daughter-in-law of Hecuba, Andromache epitomises the perfect woman according to Athenian standards. Yet her loyalty and obedience have been 'all for nothing' (p.37) as she is symbolically '*wheeled in on top*

of a baggage wagon loaded with spoils' (p.28), indicating her status as a trophy of war. In contrast to Cassandra, Andromache does not share the consolation of clairvoyance, and thus sees no hope of relief from her present circumstances. The despair of her situation is made obvious when she cries, 'My husband! Where are you? I need you now. Save me!' (p.29) – she knows Hector is dead, and that he cannot save her.

Andromache rails against her fate, angered that she will be reduced to a 'slave in the very house of the man who murdered my husband' (p.33). She considers the harrowing circumstances of her situation: she must either succumb to Neoptolemus, and in so doing 'betray the love of a dead man', or refuse his advances, and thus provoke the 'hatred' (p.33) of a man who has dominion over her life. Her despair can be seen when she challenges Hecuba's suggestion that hope is possible: 'I'm not stupid enough to delude myself with false expectations' (p.33). Andromache's suffering is heightened by the death sentence for her son, Astyanax, whose 'innocence' (p.37) she takes pains to point out. Already bereft, this final blow prompts Andromache to view her marriage to Hector as 'unlucky' (p.36), as her present circumstances render past happiness meaningless. A life of virtue and honour has not spared her from a cruel fate, and she is unable to even 'save my own child from death' (p.37).

Key point

Andromache is presented as undeserving of the cruelties she suffers, because she 'made it my business to be the perfect wife' and was 'joyfully fulfilled at home' (p.32). Her experiences echo those of the women of Melos only one year before the play was performed. It is possible that, by showing Andromache in such a pitiable state, Euripides wanted his Athenian audience to reflect on how many of the women they had enslaved were as undeserving of their fate as Andromache.

Helen

Key quotes

'... who was not dragged away from her home by force, but ran away and was unfaithful, because she wanted to!' (Cassandra, p.20).

'With one look she makes men's eyes her prisoners, she sacks whole cities, burns houses to the ground with that bewitching smile!' (Hecuba, p.41)

Helen of Sparta, reputedly the most beautiful woman in the world, is blamed by the Greeks and Trojans alike for the sufferings that her elopement with Paris has occasioned. Cassandra accuses Helen of being 'unfaithful' (p.20), Andromache calls upon her to 'die in agony' for bringing 'this famous country of Phrygia to complete destruction' (p.37) and Hecuba accuses her of always keeping 'a very beady eye on the main chance' (p.46) and shifting her affections accordingly. Even Helen's estranged husband Menelaus clearly blames her (rather than his bruised ego) for the Trojan War, arguing that she is metaphorically 'sticky with dead men's blood' (p.41).

While the Trojan women are unable to exact their revenge on Helen, Menelaus, as the 'wronged husband' (p.42), has the power to kill her, and in recognition of this Helen asks that she be allowed to 'speak in my own defence' (p.43). Whether this request is viewed as the action of a wily and cunning woman who knows she has the power to sway men's opinions, or a plea for justice by a desperate wife who has been a victim of men's desires, depends on how an actor portrays her in a particular production. Regardless, Helen proves to be an expert in sophistry, abdicating responsibility for events and instead blaming Priam, Hecuba, Aphrodite and even the Trojan guards. Helen paints herself as a martyr, claiming that her 'marriage to Paris' was 'a blessing' to Greece (p.43) and describing herself as a victim whose 'life in Troy was the most abject slavery' (p.44). Although Hecuba's rebuttal of Helen's arguments appears successful, with Menelaus declaring that Helen 'will endure a terrible death that will be a warning to all women in the future' (p.49), Greek mythology tells us that Helen will resume her life in Sparta at Menelaus' side, thus rendering Hecuba's victory Pyrrhic (coming at too great a cost).

Key point

Although in many ways Helen seems the opposite of the Trojan women, her fate, like that of all the women in the play, rests in the hands of men.

Menelaus

Key quotes

'That'll teach you what it costs to humiliate me.' (Menelaus to Helen, p.48)

'A sensible man loves someone worthy of his love.' (Menelaus, p.48)

From the moment he enters the play, Menelaus' anger at Helen for her adultery is clear. In his command that the guards 'drag her out by the hair' (p.41) and into his presence, he makes a deliberate move to assert control over 'the woman who was my wife' (p.40) and claim her as his property. Hecuba recognises that Menelaus is at risk of 'becoming a slave of [his] lust again' (p.41), but Menelaus is too blinded by a belief in his own power to recognise the danger. This almost comic lack of self-awareness undermines Menelaus' claims of power and command.

Talthybius

Key quotes

'What a clever fellow he is, this underling! Officers of your kind are always hated by everyone, lackeys. Slaves yourselves, doing great men's dirty work.' (Cassandra, p.22)

'Someone tough and unthinking they need for this job, without pity and no scruples. I'm not half hard enough.' (p.38)

Talthybius appears three times in the course of the play: to fetch Cassandra, to execute Astyanax, and to return the body of Astyanax to Hecuba and set fire to the remains of Troy. Although he is the voice of the Greek generals, Talthybius seems sympathetic to the women's plight, often expressing discomfort with the commands he must give. In particular, Talthybius recognises that the murder of Astyanax is 'an

indecent thing' (p.35). Yet while he acknowledges that he is 'not half hard enough' (p.38) to carry out the murder of the child, he still gives the order for it to occur.

This is the pattern throughout the play: Talthbyius expresses compassion for the women, but continues to carry out orders that bring them further suffering. In revealing Cassandra's fate, he acknowledges that she is 'sacred' but unfeelingly states that 'to be a King's mistress is no bad thing' (p.15). And while he considers Hecuba a 'poor woman' who has 'suffered so much' when she tries to kill herself, he still orders his men to 'hang on to her' because 'she belongs to Odysseus now' (p.58).

Key point

Euripides characterises Talthybius as a man who obeys orders without question, regardless of how much he disagrees with them. The intended effect of this characterisation upon the Athenian audience should be considered in light of the atrocities at Melos a year earlier.

Astyanax

Key quotes

'Why are you killing this child? What has he done in his innocence? He's guilty of nothing!' (Andromache, p.37)

'"This child was murdered by the Greeks because they were afraid of him!" May all Hellas for ever be ashamed of such an epitaph!' (Hecuba, p.54)

The death of Astyanax, the young son of Andromache and Hector, marks the tragic climax of the play. Although he does not utter a word, the presence of this child on the stage provides an essential vehicle for Euripides to criticise the brutalities that are committed in the name of war. Great effort is taken to highlight Astyanax's innocence; 'the softness of [his] breath, the baby smell of [his] skin' (p.37) suggest he is too young to have even held a sword, as is the description of him 'like a bird creeping under his mother's wing' (p.36). Both Andromache and Hecuba

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).

THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

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