

EURIPIDES

THE WOMEN OF TROY

Contents

A translation by Don Taylor 5

An introduction by Don Taylor 51

A postscript by Don Taylor 57

A translation by Don Taylor

- POSEIDON, god of the sea
- ATHENE, goddess of wisdom
- HECUBA, widow of Priam, King of Troy
- CASSANDRA, their daughter, a prophetess
- ANDROMACHE, their daughter-in-law, widow of Hector
- TALTHYBIUS, a Greek officer
- MENELAUS, King of Sparta
- HELEN, his wife
- CHORUS of Trojan women, captured, and soon to be enslaved
- ASTYANAX, a small boy, Hector's son (non-speaking)
- GREEK SOLDIERS

The ruins of Troy¹. HECUBA is lying face down and quite still.
Enter the god POSEIDON.

POSEIDON

I have come here from the bottom of the sea,
The salt waters of the Aegean², where the daughters
Of Nereus, fifty sea-nymphs in chorus,
Circle in their intricate and beautiful dance.
My name is Poseidon. I am a god.
I built this city — with Apollo³ I built it —
Every stone we laid, every tower,
Even the walls we dressed and levelled
With plumb line and mason's square.
So I've always had a particular love
For this city of the Phrygians⁴: and look at it now:
A smoking ruin, devastated by the power
Of the Greek war machine. A Phocian inventor
By the name of Epeios⁵, who lived on Parnassus,
With skills he learned from Athene⁶, and probably
With her help, designed and built
A horse, whose capacious belly was pregnant

¹ City in northwestern Asia Minor near the Hellespont (today, Dardanneles), site of the Trojan War. Its inhabitants are barbarians (non-Greeks), although they are regularly depicted as being practically indistinguishable from Greeks in language, customs, and religion.

page 5

² Sea that divides Greece from Asia Minor

³ Prophetic god of Delphi, leader of the Muses, god of healing and purification, among other powers. The son of Zeus and Leto, he also appears under the names Phoebus ("bright one") and Loxias ("crooked one," explained as referring either to the oblique orbit of the sun, with which he is often identified, or to the obscurity of his oracles).

⁴ Alternate names for Troy, Trojans.

⁵ A Greek from Phocis who devised the Trojan Horse as the means to end the war at last.

⁶ Virgin goddess born full grown and armed from the head of Zeus, associated with arts and handicrafts, especially weaving, but also a warrior goddess. She sided with the Greeks at Troy but turned against them because of their sacrilegious behaviour in victory.

With armed commandos, and managed to get it —
 Together with its murderous payload —
 Inside the walls; so that no one
 In the future will ever forget the stratagem
 That goes by the name of the Wooden Horse,
 Nor the ferocious strike force it concealed.
 And now, the temple garden are deserted,
 And puddles of blood smear the sanctuaries
 Of all the gods. King Priam lies dead
 On the steps of the temple of Zeus⁷ protector
 Of the city. More gold than can be counted
 And anything soldiers can loot finds its way
 Down to the Greek ships; and all
 They're waiting for now is a following wind,
 So that after ten years, and ten sowing seasons,
 They can joyfully set eyes on their wives and children,
 These Greeks, who brought an army to sack Troy!
 As for me, I have been defeated
 Too, by Athene, and Hera⁸, goddesses
 Who supported the Greeks, and who, between them,
 Have utterly devastated this city of the Phrygians.
 So now I too shall desert famous Troy,
 And all those altars and temples raised
 In my name. For when a town
 Is destroyed, and becomes a wilderness,
 All worship ceases, and there's no longer
 Anything left worth a god's consideration.
 Now the riverbank of the Scamander⁹ echoes
 With the screams and moans of captured women,
 As various Greek lords draw lots for them
 And they become their slaves. Arcadian¹⁰
 Princes draw some, Thessalians others,
 And the Princes of Athens, Theseus'¹¹ descendants,
 Get their share. All the women
 Of Troy who've not yet been allocated
 Are in this building here. They've been reserved
 For the leaders of the Greek army. And with them,
 A prisoner, like the rest — and quite right too —
 Is the Spartan¹² daughter of Tyndareus¹³, Helen.
 But to see the true face of misery
 You need to look no further than the poor creature
 Lying here, in front of the gate, Hecuba,
 Whose unnumbered tears match the numberless dead
 Has been secretly and brutally murdered
 At the tomb of Achilles¹⁴, in payment for his death.
 Priam is dead too, and her sons by him:
 And her daughter Cassandra¹⁵, the frenzied visionary
 Whom even the god Apollo left
 Untouched as a virgin, Agamenon

⁷ Chief and most powerful of the gods, father of many deities and mortals, including Apollo, Athena, Heracles, and Helen.

⁸ Goddess of marriage, wife and sister of Zeus, she sides against Troy when Paris awards Aphrodite the prize for being the most beautiful. Hera is called the Argive goddess because of her famous sanctuary and cult at Argos.

page 6

⁹ River at Troy.

¹⁰ Inhabitants of Arcadia, a mountainous region of the central Peloponnese.

¹¹ King of Athens in the generation prior to the Trojan War.

¹² Principal city of the southern Peloponnese, ruled by Menelaus; original home of Helen of Troy. In the fifth century, Athens's chief enemy in the Peloponnesian War.

¹³ King of Sparta, husband of Leda; the mortal father of Helen and other children said to have been sired by Zeus.

¹⁴ Greatest of the Greek warriors at Troy, son of Peleus and the goddess Thetis, father of Neoptolemus; his killing by Hector is the culminating event of the *Iliad*. He is killed by an arrow from Paris's bow, and Polyxena is sacrificed at his tomb as an offering to his shade.

¹⁵ Daughter of Priam and Hecuba allotted to Agamemnon after the fall of Troy. Apollo gave her the gift of prophecy, but when she refused his sexual advances, he punished her with the curse that her prophecies would

Intends to make his concubine —
 A dangerous business, best kept in the dark,
 That flouts all religious feeling.
 Well then, most prosperous of cities, home
 Of the rich and fortunate, time to say goodbye!
 Shining towers and citadels, farewell for ever.
 If Pallas Athene, daughter of Zeus,
 Had not determined to destroy you, your foundations
 Would be as firm and solid as ever they were.

page 7

Enter ATHENE.

ATHENE

May our old antagonism be forgotten?
 I have something to say to you, brother of my father,
 Great god as you are, whom other gods honour.

POSEIDON

Certainly it may. We are blood relations,
 Queen Athene, and that warms my heart.

ATHENE

You are generous to say so. The question at issue
 Is a matter of equal concern to us both.

POSEIDON

What is it? Some new dispensation from the gods?
 From Zeus himself? Or some other divinity?

ATHENE

No, it concerns Troy, on whose ground we now stand.
 I want to make a pact: join your power to mine.

POSEIDON

Is that so? You pity your ancient enemy now,
 You see her a smoke blackened ruin, do you?

ATHENE

That's not the point. First, give me your answer.
 Will you join me, and help to carry out my plan?

POSEIDON

By all means. Though I'd be glad to know what it is.
 Are you helping the Greeks now, or the Trojans?

ATHENE

My former enemies, the Trojans, will be comforted.
 I shall make the Greeks' return home a disaster.

POSEIDON

A somewhat cavalier change of mind, surely?
Are you usually so casual whom you love or hate?

page 8

ATHENE

Haven't you heard. I've been insulted, my temple desecrated!

POSEIDON

Yes, I know. When Ajax¹⁶ dragged Cassandra from sanctuary.

ATHENE

The Greeks didn't punish him. Not even a reprimand.

POSEIDON

When your power had enabled them to bring Troy to its knees!

ATHENE

I shall punish them for that. With your help.

POSEIDON

I'm entirely at your service. What can I do?

ATHENE

I want their voyage home to be complete disaster.

POSEIDON

Before they set sail? Or out at sea?

ATHENE

When they've left Troy and are nearing home.
Zeus has promised me a savage hail storm,
Torrential rain and gale force winds
In the middle of the night. And he's given me
The use of his thunderbolts, to strike the Greek ships
With lightning, and burn them at sea.
Your task will be to make the Aegean
Heave with mountainous waves, every third wave even higher
Than the rest, and swirl and eddy the salt waters
With dangerous whirlpools, and fill
The whole bay of Euboea¹⁷ with floating corpses
So thick you could walk on them. So that the Greeks
Will learn their lesson, and in future, respect
My temples, and fear the power of the gods.

¹⁶ Son of Oileus, from Locri, sometimes referred to as the "lesser Ajax," to distinguish him from Ajax, son of Telamon and leader of the troops from Salamis at Troy. This Ajax, though depicted in the *Iliad* as a valid fighter, is best known for a sacrilege that caused the death of much of the Greek army on its voyage back from Troy. Ajax seized Cassandra by force from the statue of Athena, to which she clung as a suppliant after the fall of her city. In retribution, Athena sent a terrible storm that wrecked a large number of Greek ships, including the one on which Ajax was sailing.

¹⁷ The island that stretches alongside the Greek mainland from Attica to Thessaly.

page 9

POSEIDON

Athene, you need not waste more words,
I shall do that with pleasure. The whole Aegean
From the shores of Mykonos¹⁸ and the rocks of Delos
To Skyros¹⁹ and Lemnos²⁰ and the headlands of Capheria²¹

¹⁸ Island in the Aegean Sea.

¹⁹ River at Troy.

²⁰ Island in the northeast Aegean.

²¹ A promontory on the southeastern coast of Euboea, where the rocky coast was dangerous for ships.

And the open salt sea, I shall whip up to a foam,
 So that the number of the drowned will be beyond counting.
 You get off to Olympus²² now, get hold
 Of the thunderbolts, and watch your opportunity
 When the Greek fleet casts off for home.
 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.

²² Mountain in northeastern Thessaly;
 home of the Olympian gods.

Exeunt ATHENE and POSEIDON.

HECUBA²³

Lift up your head from the dust,
 Heave up from the earth
 The weight of your misery, you whom the gods have cursed.
 Troy has ceased to exist: and we, by birth
 Troy's kings and Queens, rule nothing now.
 The old life is gone, old gods, old hearth
 And home, destroyed. We must endure it, flow
 With the stream, let the new wind fill our sail,
 Not breast a running tide with our fragile prow.
 Oh, weep, weep, for my burning home, howl
 For my children dead, for my husband dead, the boast
 Of my noble family, empty as a sail when the winds fall.

²³ Queen of Troy, wife of Priam and
 mother of, among others, Hector, Paris,
 Polyxena, and Cassandra.

Some agonies are beyond telling,
 And some must be told.
 Let my stretched limbs shake with it then, this keening,
 On my rack of pain, my bed of cold
 Stone. My temples are throbbing, my head
 Will burst, my heart shatters the walled
 Prison of my breast. Oh to sway, flow, lifted
 By the gentle rocking of a boat, to keep time
 With the dirge I must sing now, the song of the dead,
 My threnody of tears. This is the only theme
 For the black clad Muse of the destroyed, no dancing
 Can express it, dissonant music, harsh rhyme.
 Oh you ships, whose sharp prows
 Cut the purple sea
 As your oars pulled in a cloud of spray
 From the sanctuary
 Of the harbours of Greece, till your bows
 Grounded in the bay of Troy, sad Troy,
 Ominous your flutes' bleak song,
 Your pipes' deathlike cry
 As on taut Egyptian cables you swung
 At your moorings at Troy, sad Troy,
 Like hunters on the scent

page 10

Of Menelaus'²⁴ Helen²⁵, born to dismay
 Her brother Castor²⁶, and to bring
 Shame to the banks of Eurotas²⁷, you brought
 Death to Priam whose seed bred fifty sons, a headlong
 Fall to suffering Hecuba, and a broken heart.

Look at me now, throned in the dust
 By Agamemnon's²⁸ tentflap,
 And 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.
 Weep, wives of the bronze armoured Trojans, grieve
 For your heroes dead, daughters, harrow
 The clouds with your tears for husbands lost!
 Troy is burning.
 Like the mother bird at her plundered nest,
 My song has become a scream, no music can I borrow
 From the stately dance or the solemn psalming
 To the gods of Troy I sang among the women, nor the slow
 Rhythm I began, Priam's sceptre in my hand, when I led the
 dancing.

Enter the CHORUS.

CHORUS

Hecuba, did you shout aloud,
 Or was it a howl of agony?
 How far did it carry? Through the walls we heard
 A sound that made us shiver in our misery
 As we hid in the ruins, wretched women of Troy,
 Facing a life of slavery.

HECUBA

My women, my girls, already the Greeks deploy
 Their ships, their hands reach for the oars!

CHORUS

No, no! Will they really drag us away
 From our homes, and ship us overseas to theirs?

HECUBA

I know nothing: but sense that the worst will come.

CHORUS

I can't bear it! Soon we will hear them shout,
 'Get moving, you Trojan women, hey, slave,
 Kiss your home goodbye, and now, move out

²⁴ King of Sparta, brother of Agamemnon, and husband of Helen.

²⁵ Daughter of Leda and Zeus (or Tyndareus), wife of Menelaus. Her legendary beauty led to her abduction (or seduction) by Paris, which led in turn to the Trojan War.

²⁶ Castor and Pollux are the twin sons of Zeus and Leda, known collectively as the Dioscuri. After their deaths, they were taken to the heavens as gods and became known for rescuing those in danger, especially mariners at sea.

²⁷ River of Sparta; used metonymically to refer to Sparta

²⁸ King of Mycenae, supreme leader of the Greek forces at Troy, murdered upon his return home by his wife Clytemnestra and his cousin Aegistheus, her love.

And get on board. We're sailing for home!'

HECUBA

But not Cassandra, not her, dear heaven, leave
That child inside, my god-crazed daughter
In her visionary ecstasy.
Don't let the Greek soldiers deport her,
Not a poor mad girl. How can I grieve
More than I do, is there more pain for me?
Oh Troy, you are lost.
We all leave you now. And whose misery
Is greater, the dead, whose day is passed,
Or the living, who must live in slavery?

page 12

CHORUS

I'm so frightened, look, I'm shaking with terror!
I crept from Agamemnon's tents, dear Queen,
When I heard you cry out. What new horror
Must I suffer? Surely the Greeks don't mean
To kill me here? Are they mustering at their ships,
Getting ready to row, in groups by the stern?

HECUBA

My children, a blasted mind never sleeps.
I came out here at dawn. But there's no relief.

CHORUS

Is there any decision? No message from the Greeks
About the slave allocation? Who'll be master of my grief?

HECUBA

It won't be long now till you hear the worst.

CHORUS

I can't bear it. Who will it be, which lord
Of the Greeks will carry me over the sea
To Argos²⁹, or Phthia³⁰, or some bleak island
Far, far from Troy, one of the accursed!

²⁹ Major city of the Argive plain in the Peloponnese, often conflated with Mycenae as the royal seat of Agamemnon.

³⁰ Region of Thessaly over which Peleus and his descendants ruled.

HECUBA

Oh you gods, where in my misery
Shall I go, what corner of the earth
Shall I burden with my old age,
Like a drone in the hive, or an image of death
Still in the flesh: a shadow from the country
Of forgotten shadows? I'll be a concierge,
They'll sit me at the outer gate,
Or in the nursery with the children, in the entourage
Of some Greek Princeling: I, who in Troy held my state

As a Queen, half divine, with Kings to pay me homage!

CHORUS

Oh the pity of it, the pity! What words,
 What howling, can give tongue to a pain
 No animal could endure! Never again in the shadow
 Of Mount Ida³¹ will these hands of mine
 Pass the shuttle back and forth between the threads
 As I sit at my loom. For the last time I harrow
 My heart with the sight of my dead sons,
 The last time, before greater sorrow
 Overwhelms me, and my slavery begins:
 Perhaps forced into the bed of some loathsome Greek,
 - Gods curse such a night, and the evil
 Powers that bring me to it! — Or maybe my slave's back
 Will break drawing holy water from Peirene³². O, Athens³³,
 God-favoured city of Theseus, may I come to you, not grovel
 By the turbulent Eurotas, at Menelaus' mercy, part of Helen's
 Loathed household, under the Troy-sacker's heel!

I have heard men say that the foothills
 Of Peneius, beneath Olympus, are famous for their wealth
 And the fertility of their green fields.
 There, of all places on earth,
 Would be my second choice, after the sacred halls
 Of Athens. And the land of Mount Etna³⁴, which scalds
 Its slopes with Hephaestos'³⁵ fire, the mountain homeland
 Of Sicily, across the strait from Tunis³⁶, holds
 Pride of place for integrity, and is renowned
 For its brave men. And there is a secluded valley
 They tell me, watered by a beautiful river
 Named Crathis³⁷, close to the Ionian³⁸ sea,
 Whose dark streams, like hair, as they flow become reddened
 Into the richest gold. Its springs are sacred, and for ever
 Blessed with plenty is that valley, breeding heroes hardened
 For War. I'd be happy enough to live there.

But look: a staff office of the Greek army
 Has some news for us. I can see him hurrying
 At a brisk march in our direction.
 What will he tell us? What more worth saying?
 The Dorian Greeks have reduced us to slavery.

Enter TALTHYBIUS³⁹ with guards.

TALTHYBIUS

Hecuba... you are ot unaware that on many occasions
 As officer in charge of negotiations, or outlining our proposals,
 I have come here from the Greek camp. So I'm no stranger —
 Talthybius, you may remember me — I have some news for you.

page 13

³¹ A mountain near Troy, site of the Judgment of Paris.

³² Fountain at Corinth, famous for the clarity of its waters.

³³ Chief city of Attica, where Greek tragedy was performed at the festivals of Dionysus.

³⁴ Volcano still active in Sicily. Etna is the stronghold of Hephaestus because of the tradition that its eruptions were caused by the god's work in his forge under the mountain.

³⁵ Son fo Zeus and Hera, god of fire and the forge.

³⁶ Carthage is a Phoenician city on the African coast.

³⁷ River in the instep of Italy's boot that flows into the Ionian Sea near the eighth-century Greek colony of Sybaris, which became a byword for luxury. Athens had a direct connection to this area: Sybaris was destroyed in 510 and refounded as Thurii by Athenians in 443.

³⁸ The sea that lies between the Balkan peninsula and Italy, today usually called the Adriatic.
 page 14

³⁹ Herald of the Greek army.

HECUBA

This is it my dears, what we've feared for so long. . .

TALTHYBIUS

You've been allocated to your masters. . . if that's what you're afraid of.

HECUBA

Aieeeee. . . ! Where then? Phthia? Somewhere else in Thessaly⁴⁰?
Or is it to be Thebes⁴¹, Cadmus' city?

⁴⁰ A large region in northern Greece.

⁴¹ Chief city of Boeotia; in the fifth century, an important opponent of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.

TALTHYBIUS

You are allocated separately: not all together.

HECUBA

So who goes to whom? Which of the women of Troy
Has been lucky, and will dance for joy?

TALTHYBIUS

The fact is. . . ask one at a time, not all at once. . .

HECUBA

My poor child, who has won her, Cassandra,
My god-stricken daughter?

TALTHYBIUS

Agamemnon made a special note of her, and took her for himself.

page 15

HECUBA

Ah God! — Must she be slave to his Spartan wife,
Her bondservant for life?

TALTHYBIUS

Not at all, she's for him. In darkness. In his bed.

HECUBA

What! She is a consecrated virgin, Apollo's nun.
Lifelong virginity she was promised, by Zeus' golden-haired son!

TALTHYBIUS

He wants her *because* she's sacred. He's shot through with lust.

HECUBA

Throw away the keys of the temple, my child,
Strip off your sacred habit,
Trample the flowers on the ground!

TALTHYBIUS

Now look her, to be a King's mistress is no bad thing.

HECUBA

And my youngest child, where's she? You tore her from my arms.

TALTHYBIUS

Polyxena⁴², you mean... or is it someone else?

⁴² Unmarried daughter of Priam and Hecuba, sacrificed at Achilles' tomb to appease his shade.

HECUBA

Yes. Who gets her by the luck of the draw?

TALTHYBIUS

She is to serve Achilles, at his tomb.

HECUBA

Dear heavens, must a child I bore

Be a servant at a tomb?

Is this a custom among you Greeks, my friend, or some new law?

page 16

TALTHYBIUS

Consider your child fortunate. All's well with her.

HECUBA

What does that mean? She is alive? Is she?

TALTHYBIUS

Her fate is settled. All her troubles are over.

HECUBA

And the wife of Hector, the incomparable warrior?

What happens to Andromache⁴³? What Greek draws her?

⁴³ Wife of Hector, the greatest of the Trojan warriors, daughter-in-law of Hecuba, mother of Astyanax; allotted as a war prize to Neoptolemus, son of Achilles (who killed her husband), to be his concubine.

TALTHYBIUS

She was chosen specially, by the son of Achilles.

HECUBA

And whose slave am I? Grey-haired Hecuba.

Who needs a stick as a third foot to support her?

TALTHYBIUS

Odysseus, King of Ithaca, drew you, as his slave.

HECUBA

Ah... pain, and still more pain...!

Let me tear the hair in handfuls from my head,

Plough my face with my nails, till the wrinkles run red,

Still agony, and greater agony...!

I've drawn the shortest straw, even worse than I feared —
 To be the slave of a man without morality,
 A liar, a deceiver, to whom laws of gods and men
 Mean nothing, whose animal appetite
 Savages all decency, and whose double tongue
 Twists truth into lies, friendship to enmity!
 Weep for me, women of Troy, this last lottery of fate
 Will be the end of me. Veil me in shadows, I belong
 In the deepest pit of misery.

CHORUS

We know the worst now for you, dear Queen,
 But which of the Greeks has my future in his power?

page 17

TALTHYBIUS

All right you men, guard detachment,
 Go in there and bring Cassandra out.
 And move it! When I've handed her over
 To the Commander-in-Chief, I can take the rest
 Of you enslaved women to your masters,
 According to the allocation. Hey...! What's that?
 Have they got lighted torches in there?
 Are they setting fire to the place, or what?
 These Trojan women, just because we're taking them
 From their homes across to Argos... dear God,
 Are they trying to commit suicide in there,
 Setting light to themselves? To tell the truth,
 These are a proud people. In circumstances like these
 They don't take kindly to humiliation.
 All right, open up, open up in there!
 It may suit their dignity to insult the Greeks
 Like this, but I shall have to carry the can.

HECUBA

No, no one's setting fire to anything. It's my poor
 Manic daughter, Cassandra, she's running out here...!

Enter CASSANDRA.

CASSANDRA

Hold it up, the torch, take it, let it flame
 Higher, oh hold it higher!
 Let it burn everything sacred to Apollo!
 Hymen⁴⁴, god of marriage, hallow
 The bridegroom and his desire,
 And bless me, the bride, and my new home,
 The royal bedroom of Argos! Hymen, bless my wedding,
 As I glorify you with my singing!

You, Mother, you sing

⁴⁴ A god, or in some explanations, a particularly handsome man who married happily, invoked for good fortune in chants accompanying the bridal procession.

For my father murdered, our city
 Destroyed, a sad keening song,
 Dirge for our country!
 But I fired these torches, illuminating
 My holy wedding feast, a blazing light
 To celebrate the marriage of virginity,
 And Hymen, god of lust, and the dark night
 Of Hecate⁴⁵, the consecrated virgin's deflowering!

page 18

⁴⁵ Goddess of the underworld, cross-roads, and magic; also (like Artemis) worshipped as a nurturer of children and thus connected to marriage

Begin the dance then, let our feet take wing, float higher
 In ecstasy, ah, ecstasy,
 As if this were a feast in celebration
 Of my father's good luck, the zenith of his fortune!
 This ritual dance is holy,
 God Apollo, lead us to your altar
 Under the laurel tree, where I dedicated my life.
 Now, Hymen, god of marriage, make me a good wife!
 Dance, Mother, dance with me!
 You should be laughing. Let your flying feet
 Keep time with mine, whirling in ecstasy
 Faster and faster, and shout,
 Shout, Mother, the old songs of matrimony!
 Sing, sing, women of Troy,
 Put on your most glittering dresses, celebrate
 The Virgin's lucky marriage! I shall enjoy
 A husband bedded by the hand of destiny!

CHORUS

Dear Queen, your daughter's possessed! Hold on to her,
 Or she'll dance her way right down to the Greek camp.

HECUBA

Oh Hephaestos, you gave flaming torches
 To mortal men, to carry in honour of marriage.
 But these torches are a grotesque parody
 Of everything I hoped for my daughter.
 Oh my dear child, when I dreamed of your marriage
 I never imagined it would be like this, thrust
 At spear-point into some Greek's bed
 As a slave of his lust! Give me the torch,
 Poor child, you're not fit to carry anything burning
 In your half-crazed state. All this suffering
 Hasn't brought you to your senses, has it,
 You're just as much a poor mad thing
 As you ever were. Here, women of Troy,
 Take these torches back inside,
 And let her dreadful parody of a wedding song
 Be drowned by the sound of your tears.

page 19

CASSANDRA

Mother, you must cover my hair with flowers,
 A victory crown to celebrate my triumph,
 Marrying a King.
 You must lead me to him,
 And if I don't seem overwhelmed at the prospect,
 Take no notice, give me a good shove,
 Force me, by violence, if you have to!
 Because, if the god Apollo exists
 At all, then Agamemnon, the world famous leader
 Of the Greeks, will find me more destructive
 As a wife than ever Helen was!
 Because I'll kill him, and destroy his whole family
 In return for my father and brothers destroyed.
 But that's enough. No more now. Some things
 Are best passed over in silence. Why should I sing
 Prophetic songs about the axe that will sever my neck,
 And some other necks too? Or the son
 Murdering the mother, or the total annihilation
 Of the House of Atreus⁴⁶, all the rich fruit
 Which the tree of my marriage will bear!
 Look! Let me tell you. This city of Troy
 Is far happier than the whole nation of the Greeks:
 And I'll prove it to you. Yes, I'm possessed,
 For one moment, let me stand outside
 This god-drunken ecstasy, and speak
 As though my voice were my own. These Greeks,
 For the sake of one woman, and one moment
 Of uncontrollable lust, sent a hunting party
 To track down Helen, to smoke her out,
 And it cost them tens of thousands dead!
 And their oh-so-wise Commander, to achieve
 What he hated most, lose what he loved most,
 Giving up the pleasure of his family and children
 For the sake of his brother Menelaus' wife
 Who was not dragged away from her home by force,
 But ran away and was unfaithful, because she wanted to!
 And when they came here, to the banks of Scamander,
 These Greeks, then they began to die,
 And they kept on dying. And for what reason?
 They weren't being robbed, they weren't being invaded,
 They didn't see the towers and battlements
 Of their homeland being occupied.
 And those who became the war god's victims
 Had forgotten what their children looked like.
 They weren't washed and shrouded and laid to rest
 By their wives' loving hands: and now
 Their bodies lie forgotten in a foreign country.
 And things were no better at home. Their women

⁴⁶ Son of Pelops, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, he murdered his brother's children and served them to their father Thyestes at a horrendous feast, giving his name to a house torn apart by deceit, murder and revenge.

Died in the loneliness of widowhood,
 Their fathers became childless old men,
 Who had bred up their sons... for nothing,
 To lie in a distant country, with no relatives
 To honour them and make sacrifices at their graves.
 Oh yes, the whole Greek nation
 Has a great deal to thank their army for!
 There were other things too, terrible things,
 Things better left unsaid, not fit
 To be spoken by the tongue of a consecrated virgin.
 But our Trojans! What a contrast there! They won
 The greatest of all glories. They died
 Fighting for their fatherland! And if an enemy spear
 Found its target, and in a moment made a living man
 Into a corpse, that man was carried from the field
 By his own platoon, the earth that covered him
 Was the sacred soil of the land of his fathers.
 The hands that wrapped him in his shroud
 Were the right hands, according to the customs
 Of burial in our country. And those Trojan soldiers
 Who didn't die in battle, lived at home,
 Spending every day with their wives and children,
 The simplest of pleasures, denied to the Greeks.
 And when you drive for Hector⁴⁷, remember this.
 Listen to me now, because this is the truth.
 He proved, in action, he was the greatest of men.
 And now he is gone. Dead. And all this
 Has been the direct result of the coming of the Greeks.
 Supposing they had stayed at home? We would never
 Have seen Hector's glory, all that brightness
 Would have remained hidden! And Paris⁴⁸. He married
 The daughter of Zeus. If he hadn't married her
 Who would have sung songs in his honour in our palaces?
 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. The really shameful thing
 Is to die dishonourably, ignobly, without pride.
 So you see, Mother, you need not pity our country,
 Nor weep for my 'marriage'. Think of those
 We hate the most, you and I,
 And be sure, that by means of this marriage of mine
 I shall destroy them.

page 21

⁴⁷ Son of Priam and Hecuba, husband of Andromache, father of Astyanax. The greatest of the Trojan warriors, he was killed by Achilles, the greatest warrior of the Greeks.

⁴⁸ Son of Priam and Hecuba, also known as Alexander. Exposed at birth because of a prophecy that he would destroy Troy, he was rescued by a shepherd. He returned to Troy as a young man and was recognized. Paris's abduction of Helen while a guest of Menelaus in Sparta brought about the Trojan War and the eventual death of his city.

CHORUS

You make light of all these horrors, and laugh at your own pain,
 The disasters you prophesy are fantasies. They won't happen.

TALTHYBIUS

If it weren't for the fact that your devotion
 To Apollo has left you mentally disturbed,
 You would be severely punished for cursing our Generals
 Like that, just as they are about to set sail.
 It's surprising how often those that seem the wisest
 And of the highest regard, do things which show them
 To be something a good deal less. The greatest,
 The most powerful General in the Greek army,
 The son of Atreus himself, has let uncontrollable lust
 For this madwoman get the better of him.
 I'm a poor man. But there's no way
 I'd let her anywhere near my bed!
 And as for you. Since you're out of your mind,
 We'll let your insults to the Greeks, and ridiculously
 Overblown compliments to your own side, float away
 On the breeze, with the breath that uttered them.
 Come on then, follow me, it's time
 You were getting on board. What a lovely bride
 For my Commander-in-Chief! And you, Hecuba,
 You can follow us down where Laerte's⁴⁹ son
 Comes to get you. You'll be his wife's slave,
 Penelope. She's a decent, sensible woman.
 You won't find a Greek at Troy to say otherwise.

page 22

⁴⁹ father of Odysseus

CASSANDRA

What a clever fellow he is,
 This underling! Offices of your kind
 Are always hated by everyone, lackeys.
 Slaves yourselves, doing great men's dirty work.
 You say my mother will be taken from here
 To Odysseus' place. But what about the words
 Of Apollo, spoken through my mouth?
 They say that she will die here,
 And other things, about her death,
 Too terrible to be spoken. And as for Odysseus,
 What can I say about his sufferings,
 Except that what I suffer, and what Troy suffers
 Will one day seem like a golden age
 To him? He will add ten further years
 To the ten years he has spent here
 Before he reaches his fatherland,
 And he'll reach it alone. He will have endured
 The terrifying passage through the rocky gorge
 Of Charybdis⁵⁰, and the mountain pastures
 Of the Cyclops⁵¹, who eats human flesh.
 On the Ligurian⁵² coast he will meet the witch Circe, who turns
 men into pigs;
 He will be shipwrecked more than once

⁵⁰ A sea monster whose swallowing and disgorging of great quantities of water, producing the effect of a whirlpool, made it dangerous to sail near her. Odysseus, when first passing between her and Scylla, another monstrous creature, escapes unharmed; returning, he is caught up in the whirlpool and only saves himself by clinging to a fig tree at the mouth of Charybdis's cave.

⁵¹ Gigantic one-eyed beings. In the *Odyssey*, they appear to belong to a pastoral but savage race; in Hesiod's *Theogony*, they are splendid craftsmen

In the open sea, and have to face
 The seductive desire for oblivion
 In the drugged land of the Lotus eaters,
 And the sacred oxen of the sun god,
 Whose slaughtered and jointed flesh will moan
 Like a human being in pain, a sound
 To strike terror into Odysseus' breast.
 Finally, to cut short this catalogue of horrors,
 He will pass through Hell, while still alive,
 And after crossing the marshes of the lake of the dead,
 When he reaches Ithaca, he will find his old home
 Torn apart by troubles, ten thousand of them!
 But why should we waste our breath on the sorrows that lie in
 wait

For Odysseus? That arrow has left the string, but not yet
 Hit the bull. Take me then, to marry my bridegroom
 In the very doorway of Hell! In the dead of night they'll come
 To bury you, vilest, filthiest of men, as though
 The daylight were ashamed to see you, the great Greek leader
 brought low

Who dreamed of mounting so high! Me too, my naked flesh
 Will be thrown into a rocky gulley, where the storm waters rush
 Close by my bridegroom's grave! Wild animals will eat
 Apollo's consecrated priestess. My crown of flowers, my white
 Robe of the most beautiful of the gods, and all the ritual of
 Dionysus,

Goodbye to all of it, the feasting and celebrations, so precious
 To me! Tear them all off, and my skin too in strips, let the wind
 Carry them back to the god of prophecy, while my flesh is still
 untouched.

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?

page 24

One of the avenging furies, dragged from the ruins of Troy!
 Goodbye Mother. No tears. Oh land of my fathers, dead brothers
 who lie

Under this earth, Father who sired me, soon, soon we'll meet,
 Short, oh short my journey, in the house of the dead, and you'll
 greet

Me with joy for the victory I bring: the family at whose hands
 Troy died

And all her people perished, the House of Atreus, destroyed!

Exit CASSANDRA with the guards.

CHORUS

Where are Hecuba's women? Your venerable Queen
 Has fainted, she's collapsed, and lies speechless on the ground.
 Don't let her just lie there, you bitches, an old woman

Fallen flat on her face. Get her up on her feet!

HECUBA

No, leave me alone. Your kindness, my girls,
Is no kindness to me. Let me lie here
Just as I fell. 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. Oh you gods,
What good were you to us? Betrayers!
And yet people still call upon gods
When bad luck, or history, has flattened them
And the whole of their world has collapsed.
So let me tell you how fortunate I was,
Born lucky, to heighten the tragedy
Of what has happened to me now. I was royal
By birth, and I married a King. My sons
Excelled, not merely because I bore so many,
But because they were the best among the Phrygians.
What's more, they were Trojans, and such Trojans
As no Greek woman or barbarian
Could ever boast of bearing. And I saw
Every one of them slaughtered by the swords
And spears of the Greeks! By their open graves
I have stood, and cut my hair in mourning
To cast upon their bodies; and so many bitter tears
I have wept for their father, Priam. No one
Told me of his death, no one
Brought me the news. With my own eyes
I saw him hacked down on the altar steps
Of our holiest temple, and the whole city sacked
As the Greeks ran riot; all the daughters I brought up
With such care, to make them fit brides for Princes,
I saw them snatched from my arms, their good breeding
Wasted on brutal soldiery and foreigners.
There's no hope they'll ever see me again
Or that I will ever see them. And now,
Like the keystone to my arch of misery,
In my old age I must go to Greece
To finish my life as a slave. And what work
They will give me, a woman of my years,
To be a gatekeeper, looking after the keys,
Me, the mother of Hector, or a kitchen skivvy
Kneading the bread dough. I won't sleep
On a royal mattress any more, the floor
Will be good enough for my bony back
And wasted flesh; worn out, second hand
Dresses will do for me, rags even,
The sort that well bred women never see

page 25

Let alone wear, they will have to make do
 For my worn out, second hand body.
 Dear gods, what a terrible retribution,
 All that has happened to me, and will happen,
 Because of that one woman and her love affair!
 Cassandra, my child, what violation will end
 Your consecrated virginity, that mystic ecstasy
 You shared with Dionysus, and all the gods?
 And you, my poor girl, Polyxena,
 Where are you now? None of my children
 Neither sons nor daughters — and there were so many of them

page 26

Can give me so much as a helping hand
 In my misery. They are all gone.
 So why try to help me up? What for?
 What have I to look forward to? Well. Take my hand
 And lead me step by step — these feet of mine —
 So used to deep carpets, all the luxury of Troy,
 They belong to a slave now. Bring me to my bed,
 My straw palliasse and stone pillow,
 Throw me down there on my face
 And let these tears, my torturers, whip me senseless.
 Wealth, good fortune, it's all worth nothing.
 There is no happiness. The lucky ones are dead.

CHORUS

Teach me, gods of song, some harsh lament
 Dissonant with tears and howls
 Help me to sing Troy's sorrows, invent
 New sounds for my grief: the Greek horse on wheels
 Has ruined me, brought me to the edge of the grave
 Made me a slave.
 Unguarded they left it, by the main gate,
 Its gold check pieces gleaming,
 And from its belly the clash of armour plate
 Rumbled like thunder, muffled and threatening.
 So we ran to the rock of the citadel
 The whole population, shouting,
 'Come out everybody, all
 Our troubles are over, wheel
 This wooden offering for Zeus' daughter,
 Athene of Troy, inside the wall!'
 And who ran from their houses the faster,
 The young men or the old? All high
 On the singing and the joy, as they laid hands on the monster
 That was more than it seemed, and would doom them all to die.
 Then it seemed the whole nation of the Phrygians ran
 To the gates, eager to bring
 That smooth planned icon of mountain pine

page 27

And the Greek ambush within it, as an offering
 To the virgin who drives the immortal horses of heaven —
 For the Trojans, destruction.
 Roped with cables of twisted flax
 They heaved it, like a black ship,
 To the stone shrine at the heart of the temple complex
 Of Pallas⁵³ Athene — altars soon to drip
 And smooth floors run slippery with Trojan blood.
 Then the melodious African pipe
 Honeyed the air, as the dark hood
 Of night enfolded Troy. In celebration
 After the day's exhaustion, the whole city was singing,
 Dancing feet stamping in exhilaration
 To the rhythm of young girls' voices, flickering
 Torches casting puddles of light
 In the darkened palaces, and on the faces sleeping,
 And in eyes wide awake and glittering in the pitch dark night.
 At that time in our great hall
 With the others, I was singing
 All our favourite songs to Artemis⁵⁴, Zeus' daughter,
 Virgin of the mountains, and joining in the dancing;
 When suddenly I heard a terrible howl,
 The unmistakable sound of murder,
 A terrified scream rising from the streets of the whole
 City. Children grabbed hold of their mothers'
 Skirts, their pale hands plucked at her gown,
 Fluttering with fear. The god of war
 Had sprung his trap, the ambush strategy
 Worked perfectly, thanks to Pallas Athene, whose power
 Secretly inspired it. The Trojans were cut down
 In their own homes, in sanctuary, beheaded where they lay
 Sleeping, a whole generation of women raped in their own
 Bedrooms, breeding bastards for the Greeks, desolation for Troy.
 Look, Hecuba, they're bringing Andromache
 In a Greek baggage wagon. Her bosom is heaving
 With sobs, as she grasps Hector's son, Astyanax⁵⁵, clinging
 To her breasts, as they rise and fall like a bank of oars in the sea.

⁵³ Alternate name or title of Athena.

⁵⁴ Sister of Apollo, virgin goddess who presides over childbirth and is pictured both as hunter and protector of wild animals.

page 28

⁵⁵ Son of Hector and Andromache, who does not live to fulfill the meaning of his name, "ruler of the city."

Enter ANDROMACHE and her young son, ASTYANAX, wheeled in on top of a baggage wagon loaded with spoils.

The son of Achilles will hang up Troy's plundered splendour
 As a trophy under some Phthian temple roof!
 Andromache
 My Greek masters are only taking what's theirs

HECUBA

Aiee, Aiee!

ANDROMACHE

Don't sing *my* victory song!

HECUBA

Agony!

ANDROMACHE

The agonies are all mine.

HECUBA

Oh Zeus!

ANDROMACHE

Hard learned, to be suffered long.

HECUBA

My children!

ANDROMACHE

No longer. Grown old in tears.

HECUBA

All our happiness. Troy, our city. Gone.

page 29

ANDROMACHE

Into misery.

HECUBA

My children, my heroic sons!

ANDROMACHE

All gone, all gone.

HECUBA

What grief is like mine?

ANDROMACHE

My suffering.

HECUBA

The sobbing, the moans.

ANDROMACHE

Of our city.

HECUBA

Ruined. Smoke blackened stone.

ANDROMACHE

My husband! Where are you? I need you now. Save me!

HECUBA

You're calling for a dead man. My firstborn son
Is in Hades, and I am in misery.

ANDROMACHE

Protect me now, as you've always done.

HECUBA

Oh my Priam, whom the Greeks barbarously killed!

ANDROMACHE

Old man, great King, princely father,
Your sons were famous throughout the world.

HECUBA

Let me sleep in the arms of death for ever.

ANDROMACHE

So bitter, these longings.

page 30

HECUBA

Sharp pains now, and sorrows unceasing.

ANDROMACHE

For the city we have lost.

HECUBA

And miseries ever increasing.

ANDROMACHE

The gods always hated us. Their malice spared your son.
So that his contemptible marriage should bring ruin
To the citadel of Troy! Now in bloody pieces he's lying
For the vultures, in Pallas' temple. Our slavery is his doing!

HECUBA

Troy, mother of us all!

ANDROMACHE

Tears blind me. Deserted. A ruin.

HECUBA

This pitiful end.

ANDROMACHE

The house my children were born in.

HECUBA

I've lost my home. I've lost my children. Everything.

No grief can encompass what I feel. No funeral song.
Flow, tears, for a city, and family, shattered past hoping.
Only the dead shed no tears. They are beyond weeping.

CHORUS

Suffering people find some comfort in tears.
To give voice to grief is a kind of pleasure.

ANDROMACHE

Oh Hecuba, mother of the son who speared
So many of these Greeks, do you see what they are doing?

HECUBA

I see what the gods are doing, making monuments
Of worthless men, and demolishing the good.

page 31

ANDROMACHE

We are loot, my son and I, soldiers' plunder,
Born royal, and made slaves! The whole world's overturned.

HECUBA

We are loot, my son and I, soldiers' plunder,
Born royal, and made slaves! The whole world's overturned.

HECUBA

Necessity is logical, and merciless. Cassandra
Has just been torn from my arms by force.

ANDROMACHE

No, no more. I can't bear it. . .
So some second Ajax flatters his masculinity
By dragging off your daughter. But. . . there's worse pain to
come.

HECUBA

Of course there is. There's no end to pain.
The next horror will always be worse than the last.

ANDROMACHE

She's dead. Your daughter, Polyxena. Murdered
At Achilles' tomb, as a sacrifice to the dead.

HECUBA

And it is. . . So that's what Talthybius meant,
The truth his diplomatic evasion concealed.

ANDROMACHE

I saw it with my own eyes. I got down from the cart,
Cut down the body, covered it with her dress.

HECUBA

My poor child... ritually murdered, filthy,
Sacrilege... oh my poor girl, butchered like an animal...!

ANDROMACHE

Anyway she's dead, however it happened,
And she's happier dead than I am living.

HECUBA

page 32

No, no one is happier dead. The living
At least have hope. To be dead is to be nothing.

ANDROMACHE

Dear Mother, listen. You are my mother too,
Even though you didn't give me birth; listen
And draw some comfort from what I'm saying.
To be dead is the same as never to have been born.
But to die is better than a life of agony,
Because the dead feel nothing, and no pain
Can touch them any more. Whereas someone whose life
Has been prosperous and lucky, and is then overwhelmed
By disasters, knows what it's like to have been happy,
And is heartbroken to be excluded from that paradise...
For your child, it's as though she had never seen
The light of day, she's dead, and knows nothing
Of her suffering now. It's different for me.
Being Hector's wife, I aimed at the highest
A woman could wish for, and I hit the mark.
And now I have lost everything. Living with Hector
I made it my business to be the perfect wife,
Never wanted even to leave his house,
Because that's the certain way to compromise
A woman's reputation, gave up all desire
To go anywhere and was joyfully fulfilled at home.
And even at home, I admitted no fashionable
Gossip or women's chatter, but used my intelligence
To improve my own mind, and was content with that.
I lived quietly with my husband, my happiness was obvious
Whenever our eyes met. I knew what things
Were my prerogative, and how to give in gracefully
To his authority in matters that were his.
But my reputation as the ideal wife
Reached the Greek camp, and that ruined me.
As soon as I was captured, Achilles' son
Asked for me as his wife, meaning his whore,
To be a slave in the very house
Of the man who murdered my husband...
If I drive the memory of my beloved Hector
Out of my mind, and open the doors

page 33

Of my heart to the man who owns me now,
 I shall betray the love of the dead man,
 And mine to him. And 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. They say one night
 In bed with a man will convince any woman
 And pleasure away her hatred. I spite in the face
 Of any woman who forgets her dead husband
 To jump into bed with the next one. Dear God,
 Not even a mare, uncoupled from her old yokefellow
 And stablemate will pull in harness willingly!
 And animals are supposed to be inferior to men,
 With no power to reason or speak their thoughts!
 But you, Hector, my love, you had everything
 I dreamed of in a husband, in intelligence, good family,
 Wealth and courage the greatest of men!
 You took me as a virgin from my father's house,
 And I gave my body for the first time to you
 In our marriage bed. Now you are dead,
 And I am to be transported across the sea
 To Greece as a prisoner, to be yoked as a slave.
 And Polyxena, whom you groan and weep for,
 Isn't her suffering far less than mine?
 You say everyone living has hope. What hope
 Have I? I'm not stupid enough to delude
 Myself with false expectations, pleasant
 Though such comforting daydreams might be...

CHORUS

Your suffering is like mine. Your anguished words
 Give voice to my deepest agonies and fears.

HECUBA

I've never been on board ship in my life,
 But I've seen pictures of them, and heard men talking,
 So I know that if the storm is not too violent,
 And there's some chance of survival, the sailors
 Will do everything they can to come through it, hanging on
 To the tiller, scrambling aloft to the sails,
 And bailing out the water for dear life.
 But if the waves run higher, and towering rollers
 Overwhelm them, they accept the inevitable
 And give themselves to the sea. And so do I too.
 The gods have drowned me in an ocean of misery.
 After so many sorrows, and in such despair,
 Words mean nothing. There's nothing left to say.
 But you, dear daughter, dry your eyes.
 No more grieving for Hector now.

You must forget him. Even your tears
 Can't help him now. My advice to you
 Is to make much of your new master.
 Be pleasant, make yourself attractive to him.
 That way you will make everyone's captivity
 Easier to bear, and your own life more pleasant.
 With luck, you may bring up this grandson of mine
 To be the saviour of Troy. Sons of yours
 May return to the ruins of Ilium⁵⁶ one day
 And build a new city from the ashes. . .
 But look. . . the next chapter is already beginning.
 The Greek minion is coming back,
 To tell us, no doubt, what the Greek Council
 Has finally decided to do with us all.

⁵⁶ An alternate name for Troy.

TALTHYBIUS returns, with the guards.

TALTHYBIUS

Hector's wife, widow of the greatest of the Trojans. . .
 I ask you not to hate me. With the greatest reluctance
 I must tell you the news, the joint decision
 Of the Council of the Greeks and two sons of Pelops⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ king of Argos who gave his name to
 the Peloponnese ("island of Pelops");
 grandfather of Agamemnon and
 Menelaus

ANDROMACHE

What is it? That sounds like a prelude to disaster.

TALTHYBIUS

This child. They have decided. . . i don't know how to say it.

page 35

ANDROMACHE

No, don't take him away. . . ! We have different masters. . . ?

TALTHYBIUS

No Greek will ever be his master.

ANDROMACHE

How. . . ? Is he to be the last of the Trojans? Left here?

TALTHYBIUS

There is no decent way to say an indecent thing.

ANDROMACHE

Thank you for your decency. . . but no more bad news. . .

TALTHYBIUS

They mean to kill him. That's the worst. Now you know.

ANDROMACHE

Oh my God. . . ! That sentence is worse than my marriage. . .

TALTHYBIUS

Odysseus' speech carried the whole Council. . .

ANDROMACHE

Aieeee, Aieeee, I can't bear it, I can't. . . !

TALTHYBIUS

That the son of such a father must not be allowed to grow up. . .

ANDROMACHE

May those arguments condemn his own son!

TALTHYBIUS

And that he should be thrown from the battlements of Troy.

This has to be. So please be sensible.

Don't hang on to him like that, but bear this pain

Like the Queen you are. There's nothing you can do.

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,

Or kick or struggle, or curse the Greeks.

If you say anything to anger the army

Your child may not be properly buried

And no tears be shed at his grave. But if

You keep quiet, and resign yourself to what must happen,

They might allow you to bury your child

Decently, and treat you with more consideration.

page 36

ANDROMACHE

My darling, my precious, too dangerous to live,

Your enemies will kill you, and leave your mother in misery,

Your father's courage, that saved so many,

Is a death sentence for you. Everything

That made him great for you proves fatal.

Ah, God, when I came into Hector's palace

On that unlucky wedding day,

And that unluckier wedding night,

I thought I would conceive a son to rule

Over the whole of Asia, not a victim

To be callously murdered, butchered by the Greeks!

My dear little boy, are you crying too?

Do you understand what's happening? Why else

Do you hang on to my hand like that, and bury

Your timid face in the folds of my dress

Like a bird creeping under his mother's wing?

There is no Hector rising from the grave

With his spear in his hand, coming to save you,
 Nor any of your father's brothers, no army
 Of Trojans. You must jump from that terrifying height,
 Fall, and break your neck, smash the breath in your mouth
 Without pity from anyone! My sweet baby,
 So tender in your arms, dearer than all the world
 To your mother, the softness of your breath,
 The baby smell of your skin...! All for nothing,
 My labour pains when you were born, all for nothing
 When I gave you my breast, and dressed you so tenderly
 In your baby clothes, all nothing, all for nothing.
 Hold me tight now, hang on to me, for the last time.
 I gave you birth, put your arms round my shoulders
 And hang on to me, hard, and kiss me, my boy...
 You Greeks! You have dreamed up such cruelties
 Even the barbarians would flinch at! Why
 Are you killing this child? What has he done
 In his innocence? He's guilty of nothing!
 Helen! Your Daughter of Tyndareus! You
 Are not Zeus' daughter! More fathers than one
 You had, and I know their names too!
 Destruction, first of all, and Envy and Murder
 And Death, and evil thing
 That crawls on the face of the earth! Zeus could never
 Have fathered you to bring ruin and slaughter
 On Greeks and barbarians alike, by thousands!
 Die in agony, and be damned for ever,
 You and your beautiful eyes, whose inviting looks
 Have brought this famous country of Phrygia
 To complete destruction! Come on then! Take him!
 Carry him away. Throw him down from the walls
 If that's what your Generals have decided, and then
 Make a banquet of his dead body! The gods
 Are destroying us all. I can't save
 My own child from death! Parcel up
 My disgraced body, and throw it on board ship.
 It's a fine wedding I'm sailing to
 With my poor son left dead at my back!

page 37

CHORUS

Poor Troy. Ten thousand men are dead
 For one woman, and her hated marriage bed.

page 38

TALTHYBIUS

Come on boy. You must break that embrace
 Now, in spite of your mother's agony,
 And climb the walls to the highest bluff
 That crowns ancestral Troy. At that place.
 According to the vote of the Army Committee,

You must give up your life. Take him then. Someone tough
And unthinking they need for this job, without pity
And no scruples. I'm not half hard enough.

HECUBA

Poor child, son of my dead son,
To tear you like that from your mother and from me
Is wicked. How can I suffer
This, and learn to bear it? What can be done
To help you now, enduring this? We can only
Beat our breasts in anguish, tear our hair,
And that's all we can do. Our city is gone,
And soon you will be gone too. There is no agony
We don't already feel, no abyss of pain to discover.

ANDROMACHE is dragged out by the guards one way as ASTYANAX
is taken the other.

CHORUS

From the sea-fringed shores of Salamis⁵⁸, the island of beehives
That faces the sacred slopes where the first bough
Of the blue-grey olive was unveiled by Pallas, ancestor of the
groves

That sit like a wreath of honour on the shining brow
Of Athens, came Telamon⁵⁹, Salamis' founder, across the waves
Of the Aegean to destroy
The ancient city of Troy,
With the archer Heracles⁶⁰, in the distant past
Whence Greece first came to Ilium, to bring it to the dust.
The flower of Hellas he led in his rage for the immortal horses
Of Zeus, first promised, then denied. In the calm
Shallows of Simois⁶¹ they rested their sea-going oars, cast

hawsers

To make fast the sterns, while Heracles' mighty arm
Took the bow from his ship and killed Laomedon⁶², and with
flashes

Of fire like a whirlwind
Shattered and burned

The very stones of Apollo's city. Once in the past
And now again, Greek arms have brought Dardanus⁶³ city to
the dust.

Oh Ganymede, son of Laomedon,
As you step so delicately among the golden
Wine cups, pouring the vintage
For Zeus, enjoying a favourite's privileges,
What use are you to your city, as it rages
In flames, and the Greeks bring carnage
To the land of your birth? Is that the cry

⁵⁸ Island near Athens; Telamon's realm.

⁵⁹ King of Salamis who with Heracles destroyed the walls of Troy a generation before the Trojan War. Father of Ajax, the greatest Greek warrior at Troy after Achilles.

⁶⁰ Son of Zeus and Alcmena, a mighty fighter of the generation before the Trojan War whose preferred weapon was the bow. He destroyed the earlier walls of Troy after he had been denied the horses promised as a reward for rescuing Hesione, daughter of King Laomedon, from a monster. After his death, this godliest of heroes, in both accomplishments and appetites, became a god.

page 39

⁶¹ River at Troy.

⁶² King of Troy, and, in Euripides' genealogy, father of Ganymede, Tithonus, and Priam.

⁶³ Founder of Troy and ancestor of Priam.

Of seagulls screaming for their young
 On the sea shore? No. Women of Troy,
 Wives for their husbands screaming,
 For their dead sons, daughters weeping desperately
 For mothers too old to live slaves for long.
 Your pools for freshwater swimming, that trackway
 Where you always loved to go running,
 All obliterated now. While you were reclining
 Serene in your youthful beauty
 By the throne of Zeus, the Greeks were destroying
 Troy's people and Priam's city.

Love, consuming love, once came
 To the palace of Dardanus, Laomedon's home.
 The gods themselves were trembling
 With the excitement of it, and Troy
 Seemed promised an immortal destiny
 At the Olympian wedding
 Of Tithonus with Aurora, goddess of the dawn.
 No further reproach will pass my lips
 Against Zeus or his doings. What's done is done.
 But the pure light of morning
 That cheers everyone, saw destruction
 Dawn on our city, saw our citadels collapse;
 And yet, Aurora herself had a Trojan
 Husband in her bed, was breeding
 Children by him, after abducting
 Him in her four-horsed chariot, to enjoy
 Her love among the stars. For us, vain dreaming,
 False hopes. The gods hate Troy.

page 40

Enter MENELAUS.

MENELAUS

Even the sun shines brighter today,
 This most glorious of days when I shall finally
 Get my hands on the wife of mine, Helen.
 Yes, I am the man, Menelaus,
 Who for ten years have endured this terrible war —
 Together with the Greek army. But it wasn't only
 For my wife's sake that I came to Troy.
 People say that, I know. My real motive
 Was to get my hands on the man who stole
 My wife, violated the sanctity
 Of my much loved home, treacherously
 Deceived me, his host, and thumbed his nose
 At every known principle of hospitality!
 Well. I've certainly made him pay for that —
 With the gods' help of course — him,

And all his people — the Greeks have butchered
 The lot, and turned his great city
 Into a wilderness. But certainly, too,
 I have come to fetch the Spartan woman —
 It gives me no pleasure to speak her name —
 The woman who was my wife. She's been counted
 Into this temporary prison with the rest
 Of the Trojan women. The Greek soldiers,
 Whose blood and guts have been tested and spent
 In so many battles to get her back
 Have handed her over to me, to kill her
 Here on the spot — unless I decide
 To take her back to our Argive⁶⁴ homeland.
 That's up to me. In fact, I've decided
 To pass up the opportunity of killing Helen
 Here in Troy, and to row her home
 To Greece, where she will be handed over
 To the relatives of all those who died at Troy
 To be executed in payment for their blood.
 Get in there, you guards, into that building,
 And bring her out here, drag her out
 By the hair, sticky with dead men's blood,
 The murderess! And as soon as the wind's
 In the right quarter, we'll ship her off to Greece.

page 41

⁶⁴ Inhabitant or attribute of Argos.

HECUBA

Oh Zeus, you who at the same time
 Support the earth like a great pillar
 And sit throned upon it, unknown, unknowable,
 Whether we call you a force of nature
 Or an image in the mind of man, hear
 The prayer I offer, as mysteriously, unheard,
 You lead men's footsteps in the paths of Justice!

MENE LAUS

That's a new way to pray to the gods!

HECUBA

If you mean to kill your wife, Menelaus,
 You'll have my support. But don't see her,
 Don't risk becoming a slave
 Of your lust again. With one look
 She makes men's eyes her prisoners, she sacks
 Whole cities, burn houses to the ground
 With that bewitching smile! I know her,
 And so do you, everyone who's met her
 And suffered for it knows her well enough!

Enter HELEN, guarded.

HELEN

page 42

Menelaus... if this is just the start
 I'm terrified of what may come next...! Your guards
 Have dragged me out here in front of the building
 With such violence and contempt... You hate me, I know.
 I'm almost sure you do. But this one question
 I must ask you nevertheless. What have the Greeks
 Decided — what have you decided...
 To do with me? Am I to live or die?

MENELAUS

Nothing definite was decided. But the army unanimously
 Gave you to me, your wronged husband, to kill you.

HELEN

Can I speak in my own defence, and show
 How unjust it would be to kill me — if you do?

MENELAUS

I've come for an execution, not an argument.

HECUBA

Hear her Menelaus, let her speak,
 Don't let her die without a word
 In her own defence! And then let me
 Make the case against her! What do you know
 Of the havoc she has caused in Troy? Nothing.
 When I've had my say, read the whole indictment,
 There'll be no room for any doubt that she's guilty.

MENELAUS

You're asking a favour, and that will take time.
 But if she wants to speak, that can be allowed.
 It's for your sake, be quite clear, that I allow it, not hers.

HELEN

It probably doesn't matter if I speak well
 Or badly, if you've already decided
 Against me. You won't even bother to answer.
 But if your accusations against me
 Are what I think they will be, I shall answer
 Your arguments with arguments of my own.
 First of all, this woman, Hecuba,
 She gave birth to all the trouble by giving birth
 To Paris. Secondly, *he* destroyed Troy,
 Priam did, the old King, and he destroyed me too,
 When he failed to strangle his brat at birth,
 Paris Alexander, seeing him, as he did,
 An image of that firebrand that would burn Troy.

page 43

And then what happened? Listen, and I'll tell you.
 Paris had three goddesses in one harness,
 And sat in judgement on their beauty. Pallas
 Offered him leadership
 Of a Trojan expeditionary force
 That would take out the whole of Greece! Hera
 Promised that if he gave her the prize
 He would become the master of Europe
 And the whole of Asia. But Aphrodite
 Simply and rapturously described how beautiful
 I was, promised him he should have me
 If he chose her as the most beautiful
 Of the three goddesses. Think carefully
 About what happened next. Aphrodite won the prize,
 And think what a blessing my marriage to Paris
 Was to Greece! You are not under the heel
 Of a barbarian conqueror, not defeated in battle,
 No totalitarian dictator has you at his mercy.
 But Hellas' good fortune was my ruin,
 Exported, I was, sold off abroad,
 My exceptional beauty was a saleable asset
 For Greece! And now all I get is vulgar abuse
 Instead of the respect and honour I deserve!
 You will say, no doubt, that I have ignored
 The main point, the reason why
 I ran away from your home in secret.
 He came, call him Paris, or Alexander,
 Whichever of his names you like, that genius
 Of destruction Hecuba gave birth to, and with him
 Came a goddess, well, not exactly a weakling
 As goddesses go. . . And you, spineless idiot,
 You chose that moment of all moments
 To leave your home and take ship for Crete!
 Are you beginning to understand? The next question
 Is the crucial one, and I ask it of myself,
 Not you. What, if anything at all,
 Was I thinking of when I tamely followed
 This foreigner, whom I hardly knew,
 Betraying my country, and my home, and my family
 In the process? Ask the goddess, not me,
 Punish her, punish the destructive power
 Of love; and in doing so, proclaim yourself
 Superior to Zeus, who is the master
 Of all the gods, but the slave of that one,
 Aphrodite! That being the case,
 What can you honestly do but forgive me?
 There is, I suppose, one further accusation
 You might make against me. Once Paris was dead
 And in his grave, since my marriage was no longer

The direct responsibility of the goddess, I should
 Have left his house and made my escape
 To the Greek ships. God knows, I wanted to,
 And God knows how I tried! Ask the guard commanders
 At the great tower posterns, and ask the sentries
 On the walls, ask them how many times
 They caught me lowering my clumsy body
 In secret from the battlements of Troy,
 Or shinning down ropes to reach the ground!
 But my new husband Diephobus — he's dead too —
 Took me by force, made me be his wife!
 All the Trojans were against it. Well then.
 Husband. Can you still think it right to kill me?
 Could you do such a thing with any justice?
 I had no choice. I was raped, not married.
 My life in Troy was the most abject slavery,
 Nothing glorious about it. And I have destroyed them.
 The gods have acted. Will you oppose them?
 Only a fool would dare to do that.

CHORUS

page 45

Speak up for your children now, dear Queen,
 Speak for your country! Show her arguments for what they are,
 Fluent, but wicked. She's a dangerous woman!

HECUBA

First I shall speak for the goddesses, and expose
 This woman's slanders for the rubbish they are!
 The gods are not fools. Hera and the virgin
 Pallas would never have perpetrated
 Such acts of brainless stupidity. Would Hera
 Ever sell her own city of Argos
 To the barbarians? Or could Pallas conceivably
 Allow Athens to come under foreign domination
 Simply for the sake of a game? If they went
 To Mount Ida at all, for mere childish amusement,
 And the vanity of beautiful women!
 Why should Hera so suddenly fall victim
 To an insatiable craving to be thought beautiful?
 To get a more aristocratic husband
 For herself than Zeus? And is Athene
 Now on the lookout for a husband among the gods?
 Her hatred of marriage is well known, she pleaded
 With her father for eternal virginity,
 And he granted it. Don't attempt to disguise
 Your own wickedness by accusing the Immortals
 Of such stupidity. No sensible person
 Will be taken in. And Aphrodite herself,
 You say — this is ludicrous, laughable —

Came with my son to Menelaus' house!
 Is it likely? She could have stayed at home
 On Olympus, and taken you, the Royal Palace
 At Amyclae⁶⁵, the whole lot, to Ilium,
 With the merest gesture, if she'd wanted to.
 Of good looks women run mad for,
 You were wet with lust the moment you saw him!
 That was your Aphrodite!
 And doesn't everyone
 Dignify their appetite and stupidity
 By invoking the goddess' name, blaming her?
 Sensuality and senselessness have more in common
 Than a first syllable. The moment you saw him
 In his exotic oriental dress
 And dripping with gold, you lost your head
 Completely. Life in Sparta was austere
 By comparison; but once Sparta was behind you
 You saw yourself drowning in an ever flowing river
 Of Phrygian gold, submerging the whole city
 Under a tidal wave of riotous expense!
 They were too bleak a stage for you, the bare
 Rooms of Menelaus' palace, to overplay
 Your fantasies of luxury and indulgence!
 And then, my son, you say, dragged you off
 By force, that's your version of the story!
 Which one of the Spartans saw this happen?
 Were there no witnesses? How loudly did you scream?
 Your brother Castor was a young man, still alive,
 Still living there with his twin, neither of them
 Had yet been transformed into heavenly bodies
 And taken their place among the stars.
 And when you arrived in Troy, with the Greek army
 Hot on your heels, and the battles began,
 If news reached you that this man's divisions
 Had fought a successful engagement, O Menelaus,
 No praise was too good for him, so that my son
 Ran mad with jealousy and despair
 That his rival in love had the upper hand.
 But if the Trojans won the day, Menelaus,
 Pooh, what was he, he was nothing!
 Yes, you always kept a very beady eye
 On the main chance, you would make sure
 You were on the winning side! Loyalty, duty,
 Love? Not worth that much to you, any of it!
 And as for this story of yours, how desperate
 You were to escape, how you lowered yourself
 By rope from the city walls, as if we
 Kept you here against your will —
 Well, how many times, may I ask, were you caught

⁶⁵ A city celebrated for its connections to heroes of the Heroic Age, situated on the banks of the Eurotas just south of Sparta

page 46

page 47

In the act of hanging yourself, or sharpening
 A knife to cut your own throat, things
 Any woman of breeding or nobility
 Would be expected at least to attempt, if she were truly
 Grieving for her former husband? Not you.
 I've lost count of the times I said to you,
 'Listen, Daughter, you should get out of here.
 My son can find other women
 Easily enough. I'll help you to escape
 In secret, I'll arrange an escort for you
 To the Greek ships, and so we'll make an end
 Of this pointless slaughter of Greeks and Trojans.'
 But that was not all the kind of thing
 You had in mind. In Alexander's palace
 Your most arrogant whim could be indulged,
 You loved nothing better than seeing Asiatics
 Prostrating themselves at your feet! And how
 That mattered to you, how important it made you feel!
 And even now, you dare to parade yourself
 Like this, wearing make-up, your hair brushed,
 With your best dress on, brazenly confronting
 Your husband in the open air
 Under the eye of heaven! You're worthless.
 Respectable women spit at you in contempt.
 If you had any decency in you at all
 You would have come here on your knees in rags,
 Shaven headed, and shivering with fear,
 Prepared to humiliate yourself
 With every kind of self-abasement and shame
 For the wicked things you have done. Menelaus,
 You can see what I'm getting at. My arguments
 All point the same way. Consummate
 The Greek victory by killing your wife!
 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.

CHORUS

page 48

Menelaus, punish your wife in a way
 Worthy of the traditions of your family. Rescue
 The reputation of Greek womanhood by the nobility of your
 revenge!

MENELAUS

Your conclusions are exactly the same as my own,
 That this woman left my house of her own free will
 To go to bed with a foreigner.
 To drag in Aphrodite is a mere smokescreen
 Of pretentious self-importance! Take her away.

Let her face death in the stoning pit.
 You can atone for the ten year suffering of the Greeks
 With an hour of dying: or however long it takes.
 That'll teach you what it costs to humiliate me.

HELEN

I beg you on my knees, I implore you,
 Don't kill because the gods are diseased!

HECUBA

Remember all your friends who are dead, murdered
 By this woman! ON my knees, I beg you, remember!

MENELAUS

All right old woman, that'll do! I'm not listening
 To her. I'm speaking to my staff... Take her
 To where the ships are moored. We're sending her back home.

HECUBA

Don't travel in the same ship with her!

MENELAUS

Why? Has she put on weight? Will she sink it?

HECUBA

Once a lover, always besotted.

MENELAUS

No. A sensible man loves someone worthy of his love.
 However, I shall do as you say. We won't
 Go on board the same ship. A reasonable precaution.
 When we arrive in Argos she will be punished
 As she deserves. She's a wicked woman,
 And she will endure a terrible death
 That will be a warning to all women in the future
 To be chaste and moral in their behaviour.
 That's by no means an easy lesson to teach,
 But the manner of her death will terrify
 The most frivolous of females, or others who might be tempted
 To be even more degraded than she is.

page 49

Exeunt HELEN, MENELAUS and guards.

CHORUS

O Zeus, our eyes are open now!
 You have betrayed us to the Greeks — the great
 Temple of Ilium, the flames that glow
 Eternally on the altar of offerings, the sweet
 Pillars of myrrh smoke that rise to heaven,

The incense thick in the air, even
 The sanctuary of Pergamon⁶⁶, the sacred mountain
 Of Ida, where the melted snow leaps
 In torrents down the ivy covered slopes,
 And first light flushes the eastern crest of dawn's handmaiden.
 The beauty of ritual is destroyed, all the sacrifices
 Are over, no more hushed singing
 Of sacred psalms, watch night services,
 Vigils from first dark till dawn, no carrying
 Of images cast in gold to the festivals
 Of the twelve full moons of Troy. A shadow falls
 Like ice in my heart. Do you care, on your radiant throne
 In the heavens, do you even remember, King of gods,
 That we exist, while the very air explodes
 Around us, and fire reduces our city to ashes and stone?
 Oh my love, my husband, you are dead!
 You are out there somewhere — unwashed, unburied
 Your poor ghost wanders aimlessly in the dark.
 And ships will carry me over the sea,
 Their fast oars beating like wings, to the city
 Of the horse breeders, Argos, whose great stone walls are the
 work
 Of the Cyclops, and seem to touch the sky.
 But our children, a great crowd of them, weep and moan
 Down by the gates, clinging desperately to their mothers, all
 their pain,
 Screaming and tears to no avail.
 'Mother,' they sob, 'the Greeks will haul
 Me away to their black ships, I shall be all
 Alone, and the sea-going oars
 Will sweep me across to sacred Salamis,
 Or to where between two seas the Acropolis
 Of Corinth guards Pelops' doors!'
 I have one wish: that when Menelaus' ship
 Is in the open sea, with a terrifying thunderclap
 From the hand of Zeus it will be struck by lightning
 Amidships, right between the oars,
 And far out in the Aegean! I shall be in tears
 Then, exiled from Troy, dehumanised, reduced to a thing
 That slaves for the Greeks: while Helen peers
 Like a self-regarding schoolgirl in her mirrors of gold
 Admiring her good looks. My wish for her's soon told.
 Dear gods, let her never come same home
 To Sparta, never repossess that bedroom
 In her house and hearth, never come
 Again to the village of Pitana⁶⁷, as once she could,
 Nor re-enter Athene's temple with the great bronze door,
 This woman whose promiscuity shamed Greece, and stained the
 pure

⁶⁶ Alternate name for Troy, from a word meaning "citadel."

⁶⁷ A district in the city of Sparta.

Waters of Simois with blood.
 No, no, no more agony!
 Our land is under the whip, the next
 Stroke falls while we still bleed from the last.
 Yes, yes, you may weep, women of Troy! But the worst
 Is still to come. They are bringing Astyanax' body, cast
 Like a stone by the Greeks from the towers of Troy.

page 51

Enter TALTHYBIUS and guards with ASTYANAX' body, carried in
 HECTOR's battle shield.

TALTHYBIUS

Hecuba. . . there's only one ship
 Of Neoptolemus⁶⁸ squadron still her. The crew
 Are currently loading his share of the booty
 Before sailing for Phthia. Neoptolemus himself
 Has already set sail, having heard bad news
 From home — his grandfather Peleus⁶⁹, apparently,
 Has been the victim of a military coup,
 Organised by Acastus⁷⁰, the son of Pelias,
 And has had to flee the country. Time
 Is of the essence, so he left at once,
 Taking Andromache with him, whose heartbroken
 Tears as she left her native land,
 And grief-stricken outbursts over the tomb
 Of Hector, brought tears to my eyes too.
 She begged the Prince that you should be allowed
 To bury the body, the son of your son Hector,
 Who gave up his life, as ordered, thrown down
 From the walls of Troy. She begged too, that this shield
 With its bronze back, which has terrified
 The Greeks so many times in the hands
 Of the boy's father, when he advanced protecting
 The whole of his body behind it, should not
 Be sent across the sea to Peleus' house,
 Nor stand as a mute reminder in the same chamber
 Where the boy's mother, Andromache, to her grief,
 Must give herself a second time as a bride,
 But be used instead of a coffin and cairn
 Of stones, and that the boy should be buried
 Lying beneath it. She asked me to make sure
 That the body came into your hands, so that you
 Could shroud it with some of your own clothes
 And garland it with flowers — insofar as you can
 In your present difficult circumstances.
 She, because of her master's great haste,
 Is robbed of the opportunity of burying her child
 Herself, and is already gone. We, let me emphasise,
 As soon as you have laid out the body,

⁶⁸ Son of Achilles, who fought at Troy after his father's death and killed Priam during the sack of Troy; awarded Andromache as a war prize.

⁶⁹ King of phthia in Thessaly, mortal husband of the Nereid Thetis, who bore their son Achilles, and grandfather of Neoptolemus.

⁷⁰ King of Iolcus, son of Pelias; at his father's funeral games, he purified Peleus from the accidental killing of a companion at the Calydonian boar hunt, in *Women of Troy*, he is said to have subsequently exiled Peleus from Iolcus.

page 52

Buried him, and heaped up the earth on his grae,
 Must step the mast, make sail, and away.
 So you must do what you have to do
 As quickly as possible. One thing
 I have done for you. As we came back
 Across the Scamander, I took the opportunity
 To wash the body, and wipe away
 The dirt and blood from his wounds. Well then. . .
 I shall now make it my business to dig
 A grave for the boy, so that my work will end
 As quickly as yours must; and then, with the greatest
 Possible expedition, we can all go home.

HECUBA

Oh, the great arc of Hector's shield! Here,
 Put it on the ground. . . My eyes
 Are stabbed to the brain. I never dreamed
 They would see such a sigh. O you Greeks,
 You are so proud of yourselves as fighting men
 And thinkers! Are you proud of this too?
 Why him? Were you so frightened of a child
 You had to invent this unheard of savagery?
 Did you think he would rebuild fallen Troy
 From this rubble on his own? You're nothing,
 You're worth nothing, we could all see that
 When Hector was riding his good fortune,
 With ten thousand men fighting at his side,
 Destroying you beneath his spear. But now,
 When the city is taken, and every Trojan
 Fighting man lies dead, you have become terrified
 Of a little child. What cowards you are,
 How I despise blind panic,
 Unreasoning terror in rational men!
 My little darling. . . what a wretched, meaningless death
 Has been meted out to you! If you had died
 On your feet, defending your city,
 In the full glory of your young manhood,
 Having tasted the pleasures of marriage,
 One of the god-Kings of Troy, everyone
 Would have called you a happy man — if
 Any of these things is worth the name
 Of happiness. But though your child's soul
 May have glimpsed or sensed the glories
 You were born to, they have slipped from your grasp.
 Before you were old enough to enjoy them.
 My poor little boy, how dreadfully your head
 Has been shaved the walls of your own city,
 Built by the prophetic god Apollo
 From your ancestors. These beautiful curls

Your mother so much has loved to stroke and kiss
 And bury her face in, torn out, shorn to stubble.
 The blood's still oozing from the broken bones
 Laughing at us in its mockery of life...
 No... no more of that. It degrades the decency
 Of speech to put such things into words...
 Sweet little hands, the image of your father's,
 So limp and lifeless now, mere appendages
 Flopping at the end of your arms. And your lips,
 So delicious in all their childish chattering,
 And now so cold and dead!
 What lies you told me
 When you snuggled down among my bedclothes.
 'Grandmother,' you used to say, 'I shall cut
 The biggest curl you ever saw from my head
 For you when you are dead, and I'll bring
 All my friends to your tomb, to make speeches
 And sing songs of farewell.' But now,
 That promise will never be kept. And I
 An old woman, with her city destroyed
 And all her children dead, must bury you,
 So much younger than I am, such a tender corpse.
 My dear little sweetheart, what use were all
 Those cuddles I gave you, the times I nursed you,
 Fed you, and got you off to sleep,
 All my love wasted when it comes to this,
 With you dead in my arms. What memorial verses
 Would a poet write to be carved on your tombstone?
 'This child was murdered by the Greeks
 Because they were afraid of him!' May all Hellas
 For ever be ashamed of such an epitaph!
 Well, little grandson, everything
 You should have inherited from your father you have lost,
 Except this shield with its curved bronze back,
 And that, my dear, you will keep for ever
 As it covers you in the earth. Women,
 Do you see? This is the shield that protected
 Hector's magnificent arm! He for sure
 Was this shield's best protector, and now he is dead.
 Look, you can clearly see the imprint
 Of his powerful hand on the grip, and here
 On the brass facing and the smooth rim
 You can see how his beard has burnished it
 As he held it up to his chin, and where
 The sweat, pouring down from his forehead and temples
 In so many hot fought afternoons of battle
 Has left its dark stain. Come now, my women,
 See what you can find, some robe, if you can,
 Or some flowers somewhere, to dress his poor body

For burial. It's little enough, child,
 We can give you, in this time of disaster.
 But what we can find, you shall have. Anyone
 Born mortal and living in this world, who thinks
 Himself prosperous and secure, is a fool.
 Historical necessity, or whatever else you call
 The force that governs our lives, what else is it
 But a madman dancing, leaping one way then the next
 Without pattern or meaning? What's certain
 Is that luck always runs out, and that no happy man
 Ever stays happy or lucky for long.

CHORUS

page 55

Look Hecuba, we found these things among the ruins.
 They'll do to prepare the body for burial.

HECUBA

Dear child, it's not after some victory
 At horse racing with fellows your own age,
 Or archery, that I, your father's mother,
 Award you these meagre prizes. We Trojans
 Esteem such achievements, and honour them as they deserve.
 These poor things are the only remnants
 Of the legendary wealth of Troy, your inheritance,
 Of which Helen, whom all the gods hate,
 Has robbed you. And more than that, she has taken
 Your life, and utterly destroyed your family.

CHORUS

Let your tears flow!
 My heart is breaking, weep and sing
 For the dead child who was born to be King!

HECUBA

This magnificent robe the height of Trojan fashion!
 You should have worn it at your wedding
 To the most aristocratic Princess of Asia.
 Now I can only use it as a shroud
 Or winding sheet to wrap round your body.
 And for you, great shield, who protected Hector
 Beyond number, a garland of flowers.
 You are not dead, nor will ever be,
 Though you lie with the dead in the earth: an honour
 Greater than the Greeks can pay to the armour
 Of that black-hearted politician, Odysseus!⁷¹

⁷¹ King of Ithaca, son of Laertes; known for cunning wiles and persuasive speech.

CHORUS

Howl then, howl!
 Now, if ever, tear the tears from your breast.

As the earth receives this child to rest.
Mother, you must share our pain.

HECUBA

Howl...

page 56

CHORUS

Lead our song for the dead.

HECUBA

For grief!

CHORUS

Who can forget these sufferings? Time will bring no relief.

HECUBA

With these strips of linen, as if I could heal them
Let me bind up your wounds. The mere shadow of a doctor
Without the substance. My fingers are skilful
But have no art to cure. Your father's hand
Must care for you now, among the dead.

CHORUS

Beat your temples, tear out your hair
Let your nails rake your face like a bank of oars.

HECUBA

My daughters, listen, women of Troy...

CHORUS

We're still here. Say what you want to say.

HECUBA

Everything I have done in my life has meant nothing
To the vindictive gods — and Troy, of all cities,
They have persecuted with a particular hatred.
All our sacrifices, all our offerings
Have been quite worthless, a waste of time.
Ad yet... if the god had not decided
To make the greatest suffer most
And trample us all in the mud, what nonentities
We would all have been! No one would ever
Have heard of us, no songs would have been written
In memory of our suffering, nor would the poets
A hundred generations hence have taken us
As their great theme. So take up the body,
And let us bring it to its dishonoured grave.
We have given it all we can of the flowers
And offerings customary for the dead —

page 57

And what difference does it make to them
 If they are buried in luxury, loaded with gifts.
 None at all, I think. Funerals are for the living,
 An empty show to impress their friends.

The body of ASTYANAX is removed.

CHORUS

Weep and sing
 For your suffering mother, who teased out the cloth
 Of your life with such care, all torn and rumpled in death.
 And for the child, a hero's son, no family could be greater
 Than his, born to be King.
 His terrible death men will remember with horror. But look.
 What are they doing?
 These are men with torches, will they destroy
 Even these ruins? On Ilium's surviving towers
 In many hands the bud of flame flowers.
 What more can they do to Troy?

TALTHYBIUS

All company commanders with orders
 To fire the city, there's no need to wait
 Any longer, till your torches burn out
 In your hands. Burn everything down!
 When we have reduced the whole lot to ashes
 Then we can celebrate, leave Troy, and go home!
 My other orders concern you women.
 As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet
 Follow these officers along that path.
 They will lead you to the Greek ships.
 You, old woman, you're the unluckiest
 Of the lot. You must go too, with these
 Officers of Odysseus' regiment. You must leave
 Your old home. You're designated one of his slaves.

page 58

HECUBA

So this is how it ends. My crown of pain,
 All my sufferings, each ew loss
 Worse than the last, till it comes to this:
 To leave my homeland, to leave my city,
 To watch them burning it to the ground.
 Come on then, old worn out feet,
 Make one last effort, so that I can say
 My last goodbyes to my poor city
 In its death agony. . .
 Troy! While you lived, you were the greatest
 And most glorious of all the cities of Asia.
 Now they are destroying even your name.

They are burning you to the ground, and taking us
 Into exile to be slaves. O, you gods!
 But why bother to call on them? We called before,
 And they didn't hear us. They ignored our prayers.
 Well then. Why not run into the flames?
 What could be better for me, the Queen
 Of this burning city, than to die in its embrace
 And make its funeral pyre my own!

TALTHYBIUS

Poor woman. You've suffered so much
 It's unbalanced you, like an ecstasy of pain.
 Hang on to her! You need not treat her with kid gloves!
 She belongs to Odysseus now, and your orders
 Are to deliver her personally into his hands.

HECUBA

Howl! Howl! Howl!
 Son of Cronos⁷², god of Troy,
 Father of our fatherland, do you see?
 Dardanus' children don't deserve such a fall

⁷² Youngest son of Heaven and Earth, who overcame his father to become leader of the Titans. He in turn was defeated and supplanted as chief of the gods by Zeus, youngest of his six children by his sister Rhea.

CHORUS

He sees, and does nothing. Troy, our beautiful city,
 No longer exists. They are burning, burning it all.

HECUBA

Howl! Howl! Howl!
 Troy is burning, every house is in flames
 Even the citadel, walls and domes,
 The hungry flames are consuming it all!

page 59

CHORUS

The black wing of heaven shadows the dying houses
 Of the murdered Trojans. Smoke is their funeral pall.

HECUBA

My beloved city, my children's nurse.

CHORUS

Weep louder, weep long.

HECUBA

My children, do you hear your mother's voice?

CHORUS

Cry to the dead. Can they hear your song?

HECUBA

Let me kneel, lay my old legs on the ground,
And my old woman's hands, let them beat the earth!

CHORUS

Let me kneel beside you, let my voice sound
In the dark halls of Hades, the Kingdom of Death!
Husband, can you hear me underground?

HECUBA

Like loot they are stealing us.

CHORUS

Let the dead hear our pain.

HECUBA

To live in their slave huts, to be a slave.

CHORUS

Home gone, country gone.

HECUBA

Priam, you are dead, but you have no grave,
No friend to weep or keen,
Can you hear my anguished moan?

page 60

CHORUS

He hears nothing. The black veil of death
Has darkened his sacred eyes with the desecration of earth.

HECUBA

My beloved country, temples of the gods...

CHORUS

Weep louder, weep long.

HECUBA

The fire consumes, and the spear invades.

CHORUS

Soon anonymous earth, like a forgotten song.

HECUBA

A cloud of dust darkens the sky
Like a shadowy wing, blots out my old home.

CHORUS

Soon no one will remember this city,
Everything is dying, even the name:
There is no place on earth called Troy.

HECUBA

Do you hear that sound?

CHORUS

Troy has fallen!

HECUBA

It's like an earthquake. Everything's shaking!

CHORUS

The city sinks, we all drown!

HECUBA

Into the abyss. My legs are trembling,
But I won't fall. Old limbs, strengthen
Yourselves. Your slavery is beginning.

CHORUS

Troy is finished. We must turn our weary feet

To the harbour. The oars are waiting. March down to the Achaeans⁷³

Exeunt HECUBA, TALITHYBIUS and CHORUS.

page 61

⁷³ Synonym for "Greek," "Greeks" in Homer and later literature. In historical times, Achaea was the name of a region in the northern Peloponnese fleet!

An introduction by Don Taylor

There has scarcely been any doubt what sort of play *The Women of Troy* is, nor of its central place in the repertoire as one of the masterpieces of Mediterranean civilisation. There are moments in the play which are almost unendurable to read, and must in the playing touch on emotions and levels of experience we would all rather not contemplate. One is reminded at times of the memoirs, on film and in print, of Auschwitz survivors, and the strangely compelled sense of horror that keeps us watching and reading.

The play's performance history is precise. Aelian, in *Varia Historia*, written at the beginning of the third century AD, says 'In the first year of the ninety-first Olympiad [415 BC] Xenocles and Euripides competed against each other. Xenocles, whoever he may have been, won the first prize, with *Oedipus*, *Lycaon*, *Bacchae* and a satyr play *Athanas*. Euripides was second with *Alexander*, *Palamedes*, *The Women of Troy* and the satyr play *Sisphus*.'

In the winter of 416-15, a few months before the play was presented, the Athenians had committed one of the many atrocities which disfigured the Peloponnesian War. They had laid siege to the Island of Melos, which had refused to join the Athenian alliance, and when the defenders capitulated, the Athenians murdered all the men of military age, down to boys of fifteen, and enslaved all the women. It has always been assumed that *The Women of Troy* is Euripides' attack on his fellow citizens for that dreadful act, and no doubt the assumption is correct. Certainly it must have been a subversive work, not only for its comment on the Melian massacre, but also for its implied criticism of the Sicilian invasion. The great fleet was assembling as Euripides' play was presented, and the prophecy of disaster on the Greek fleet returning from Troy, because they had dishonoured the gods' temples in sacking the city, must have seemed the worst possible omen for the Sicilian expedition. Everybody knew the Homeric story, that the returning Greek fleet was scattered in a storm, that most were drowned and many of the rest never reached their homes for many years, and in his opening scene Euripides strongly emphasises this aspect of the story. It really isn't surprising that he came second to Xenocles in those circumstances. We might be tempted to think it even more surprising that his play was accepted at all. Of course, there is no way of knowing where the Archon's sympathies lay when he accepted Euripides' trilogy, nor that he saw politically relevant the piece might seem in per-

formance: though the Chorus' praise of the men of Sicily for their bravery and their integrity can hardly have been misinterpreted. It is as clear a warning as the Athenians were likely to get from one of their tragedians.

But the fact is that it didn't need the Melian massacre to inspire the play. The history of the war had been full of such atrocities: the execution of the Plataean conspirators after they had surrendered on terms in 431 at the very beginning of the conflict; the slaughter of the whole male population of Scione in 421; the list goes on and on. It was a war conducted with little mercy on either side, and considering the small forces involved, with much bloodshed. Thucydides makes it clear Euripides' warning voice was not heard. In 413, a party of Thracians arriving too late to join the reinforcement convoy for Sicily were sent back home under an Athenian commander, with instructions to do as much damage as possible. They sailed up the Euripes, murdering and laying waste to Euboea as they went, and then crossed over into Boeotia to the city of Mycalessus where they 'sacked the house and temples, and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither the young nor the old, but methodically killing everyone they met, women and children alike, and even the farm animals, and every living thing they saw. . . Among other things they broke into a boys' school, the largest in the place, into which the children had just entered, and killed every one of them.' No doubt the Melos massacre was in the front of Euripides' mind, but what he was describing was behaviour that was commonplace, not exceptional.

Without the other two tragedies that comprised the trilogy we can't be sure, but it seems likely that Euripides composed a powerful protest cycle, probably with a quite clear political purpose. There was an impassioned debate in Athens about the wisdom of the Sicilian expedition, which was not only foolhardy in itself, but a stepping-up of the war, which had lain mostly dormant for about five years. What could be more likely than that Euripides was one of those Athenians who were against restarting the war, and against the Sicilian expedition, and that he used the horror and guilt that must have existed in some men's minds about the recent slaughter on Melos as a powerful reminder of what war really meant in human terms? There is no evidence at all as to what part political influence played in the presentation of plays at the City Dionysia, but the plays deal so regularly with the ethical questions that are the basis of political decisions that it must have been considerable. The comedies of Aristophanes are openly political, even naming names, and it seems likely that the tragedies too, in their serious manner, considered political issues and perhaps even glanced at political personalities. More than one scholar has suggested that Sophocles' Oedipus might be a portrait of Pericles, and other similar attributions have been guessed at from time to time. Certainly it is inconceivable that Euripides could have presented such a subversive play, one likely to cause such fury among the supporters of

a renewed war, off his own bat. He must have had powerful friends, beyond the producer who financed him, who were able to get the Archon's ear to ensure that Euripides' project was selected out of the doubtless many others presented. And the debate in Athens must have been reasonably evenly balanced too. If the anti-war party were in a small minority, would the play have been allowed, when the likelihood was that it would offend the majority of the audience? As with so many fascinating questions about Greek drama, we simply don't know. All we do know is that it was presented, so the Archon must have thought it, for whatever reasons, suitable material for the Dionysiac festival; and that it didn't win.

Whatever the truth of that, I suspect a good many people got more than they bargained for. There is a relentless quality, a harshness in *The Women of Troy* that leaves no room for compromise. The play's principal subject is the agony of war, the fact that it causes mass death, separation of loved ones, slavery and suffering. Euripides confronts us mercilessly anywhere in the play about the glories of war, the manliness of conquest, still a genuine ideal in the Classical Age, only a eulogy of the dead Hector, as an attempt by the defeated Trojans to grasp some shred of dignity out of their disaster. Beyond that, the whole play is a heightened lament, the death song of a city, a culture a whole population. Troy clearly stands in for all of us. It is a civilisation that is going down in blood and fire, not just a city.

It is significant that the play has no messenger speech: but what is there to report? The catastrophe is being enacted in front of our eyes, not offstage. For a great master at the height of his powers, form is a servant not a master, a way of structure that liberates rather than restricts.

Within the general picture of the horrors of war, there are three moments of unflinching precision, things which we know are part of human experience when men get weapons in their hands, but which in the normal run of things we prefer not to confront. The first is the dragging out of the incoherent prophetess Cassandra, the sanctified virgin whom even the god Apollo won't touch, to be Agamemnon's whore. Euripides spares us nothing here, not even the sexual perversity that we might think is our particular modern subject. Agamemnon is hot for Cassandra because she is a sanctified virgin. It is the very fact that she is forbidden that makes him desperate to have her, liberating the dark sexual fantasy that makes men want to rape nuns. In Greek classical culture the symbol is even more powerful, a blasphemy that dares to sully what the gods have decreed pure. It stands in for all the shameful desires that are unloosened when men let their savage fantasies usurp reason, and become creatures of appetite. We already know what this will cost Agamemnon. The two gods at the beginning of the play have sworn vengeance on the Greeks for precisely this reason, the dishonouring of their temples, and all the varieties of degraded behaviour that symbol represents. The inspired, raving

Cassandra, after her grotesque parody of a marriage hymn, prophesies the horrors that will fall on the House of Atreus as a result of Agamemnon's blasphemy, but in truth we hardly need to be told that no good will come of it. An action beyond the bounds of decent human behaviour is being enacted before our eyes, and we are in no doubt that retribution will follow.

The second precisely delineated moment of horror is the tearing of the child Astyanax from his mother's bosom. In production, this almost goes beyond the bounds of the bearable, and a passionate actress playing Andromache can create a moment of horror as powerful as the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, or the stoning of the baby in *Saved*. As we might expect, the officer in charge is a decent enough fellow, disgusted by the job he has been given to do. Talthybius is a very recognisable chap, with a suburban semi, no doubt, and two point five children, kind to his friends, who wouldn't hurt a fly. They always are. He hates what he has to do, he says so, and we believe him. But he does it. Talthybius is a very modern-seeming character, and in a sense, without thinking too deeply about it, we have come to assume men like him are our age's particular creation. The family man who runs a concentration camp, the state torturer who goes home at six and plays with his children, the policeman who beats up his victims to extract false confessions and then goes for a relaxing pint in the local, all these figures we claim as our own, together with the murderers who defend themselves by saying that they were only obeying the orders of their superior. But Euripides was there a long way before us. It is his very decency that makes Talthybius such a powerful creation. He is like us, he knows these things are wrong and should not be happening. Yet it is he who commands the party that seizes Cassandra and drags her off to Agamemnon, shaking his head in disapproval all the while; it is he who orders his head in disapproval all the while; it is he who orders his guards to tear the boy Astyanax by force from his mother's arms, and supervises his killing; and it is he who brings the dead boy back on Hector's shield, having washed the blood from his shattered body. He is a kind-hearted fellow, does everything he can to ease the women's grief for the boy, arranges a decent burial, no doubt wipes away a tear or two himself. But what he actually does is to allow himself to be the instrument that enacts the play's two principal atrocities. He truly is the man who wipes away the blood, who tries to make the crime look decent, who hides the wounds.

When he leaves Hecuba with her dead grandson, cradled in her dead son's shield, the play lifts off into immortality. Hecuba's lament is the greatest speech in the whole canon of Greek tragedy, its power surviving every kind of translation, from the most clumsy or old-fashioned to the most prosaically modern. Confronting it, every translator feels the presence of its author very near and is tempted to say, 'Dear old friend, I'll do the best I can for you, but I need to be Shakespeare!' The part is one of the great peaks of

the female repertoire. Any actress who can get anywhere near the summit of Hecuba is by definition one of the mistresses of her craft, and it is this heartrending speech, this third moment of horror precisely delineated, that is the greatest test and the greatest opportunity. In it, Hecuba speaks for every woman in history who has ever lost a loved one in war, and particularly for the unnatural sorrow of an old woman grieving for a young life destroyed before it has had the opportunity to live. Even beyond that, she speaks for all of us, regardless of sex, as Lear does, protesting against the pain and injustice of existence, and the agony of the suffering that human beings inflict upon their own kind. Reading her grief is like standing at the Nations' memorial at Auschwitz, confronting the grave slabs all carrying the same message in so many languages, listening to the wind jangling the ropes on the metal flagpole. It is to bear witness at the graveyard of the human spirit, head bowed in apology.

The play is a sustained lyrical poem of grief, a dark cloud heightened by stabs of terrifying lightning; but as you would expect with Euripides, savage irony is present too. In the debate that invariably constitutes the central section of a play by Euripides, Menelaus comes to seize Helen, the woman who caused the war, and who is in that sense the author of all the suffering we are witnessing. Euripides gives us a masterly character-study as well as an exercise in forensic rhetoric, as Helen argues for her life. When Menelaus enters, he intends to kill her on the spot. Helen too is scared, seeing summary execution very close at hand. By the end of the scene Helen has not only managed to persuade him to put off all punishment till they arrive in Sparta, she has gone half way to convincing him of her own innocence. Menelaus, prompted by Hecuba, who has seen Helen at work many times before, has at least agreed that they shall sail back to Sparta in different ships, but how long do we believe that arrangement will last? Between the ruins and the beach Helen will surely wheedle him into letting her share his vessel, and eventually his bed. Even before the scene has ended it is clear that he is lost, as much as her sexual slave as he was ten years before, when he called up his Greek compatriots and launched a war for her sake. The power of Helen verges on the awesome, the divine. She is destructive Aphrodite in human form, and men will kill, torture, destroy and abase themselves for the chance to kiss her skirt hem.

The destructive power of instinct is one of Euripides' central themes. In the rational Greek world, he was the great affirmer of the power of the irrational, and he wrote two of his greatest plays, *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*, to dramatise its destructive force. In this play too, it is clear that the goddess Helen/Aphrodite is going to have her way, but that is not the central matter being considered here. Euripides did not need to include a scene with Helen, or any of this material. He chose to do so, not simply to dramatise the irrational power of sexual love, but to demonstrate the essen-

tial pointlessness of all the suffering we have seen enacted and heard described in the play. Helen will not be punished, she and Menelaus will live in Sparta as before. So the war's great end has apparently been accomplished. But was it worth it? Is that why all those men, a whole civilisation, died? So that Helen can twist Menelaus round her little finger, just as she has done before our eyes? Euripides not only confronts us with the suffering, but also with a question. If this is what we do to each other, and for this reason, can it possibly be worth it?

It is a question that must have echoed in a good many Athenian minds as they went down between the Long Walls to Piraeus and saw the great Sicilian task force assembling in the bay.

Don Taylor from *The War Plays*

A postscript by Don Taylor

Reunion in Sarajevo

They meet regularly, the dark-robed women.
The time and place
Of the next meeting is never known,
Only that there will be one.
The ancient disgrace
Will be re-enacted, the old moan
By the fresh earth, the white face
That says everything and nothing: and always a boy
Broken on the stones of Troy.

It was the Athenians who first troubled the graves
Of the dark-robed dead.
Tiremes cut the unprotected waves
To Melos: the decree leaves
Nothing male living: the boys bleed
With the men, the women rostered as slaves.
And Hecuba stirs in her dark bed,
Andromache's ashes gather, Cassandra's lust
For prophecy is born again in the dust.

They have lost count now, the dark-robed mourners,
Of the many times they have met.
Fresh blood draws them, injustice gathers
These shadowy ladies, so that whatever suffers
Shares the remembrance of suffering, the wet
Cheeks, the torn hair, the terrors
Repeated again and again. They meet
Always in the hope that this will be the last
Reunion, that they may return in peace to the past:

Always disappointed. In her mortared market-place
Andromache shovels her son
Into a bag. Raped Cassandra's crazed face
Stares from the TV screen. No trace
Of Polyxena's tomb. Dog-like, Hecuba digs alone
In the shelled graveyard. No peace
For the mutilated child-body, thrown
Into a cellar and burned. No identification:

An unknown daughter of a murdered nation.

They stand silently, the dark-robed women,
Heads leaning together in mourning.
No words can express their centuries of pain,
Only brushing of hands and cheeks, the fallen
Beauty of having seen too much, sensing
Too keenly that it will happen again.
They depart to their temporary graves, knowing
The next reunion is pencilled: only who will destroy
Is still uncertain, and what particular Troy.

Written in response to The Women of Troy,
by Don Taylor, June 1994