

The Women of Troy

Euripides

FortunaGrosphus

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1 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.

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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,

¹City 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.

²Sea that divides Greece from Asia Minor

³Prophetic 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).

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
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,

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⁴Alternate names for Troy, Trojans.

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

⁶Virgin 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.

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

⁸Goddess 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.

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
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

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⁹River at Troy.

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

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

¹²Principal 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.

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

¹⁴Greatest 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.

¹⁵Daughter 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 never be believed.

Would be as firm and solid as ever they were.

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?

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

¹⁶Son 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.

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

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.

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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
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.

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.
Some agonies are beyond telling,

And some must be told.
Let my stretched limbs shake with it then, this keening,

¹⁸Island in the Aegean Sea.

¹⁹River at Troy.

²⁰Island in the northeast Aegean.

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

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

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

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
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!

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

²⁵Daughter 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.

²⁶Castor 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.

²⁷River of Sparta; used metonymically to refer to Sparta

²⁸King 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.

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.

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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
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,

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Or the living, who must live in slavery?

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!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁴Volcano 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.

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

³⁶Carthage is a Phoenician city on the African coast.

³⁷River 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.

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

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.

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?

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.

³⁹Herald of the Greek army.

⁴⁰A large region in northern Greece.

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

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?

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?

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TALTHYBIUS

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

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

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?

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?

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TALTHYBIUS

All right you men, guard detachment,

⁴³Wife 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.

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

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

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

Of Hecate⁴⁵, the consecrated virgin's deflowering!
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.

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

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?

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⁴⁶Son 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.

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
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

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⁴⁷Son 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.

⁴⁸Son 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

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.

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,

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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.

⁴⁹father of Odysseus

Penelope. She's a decent, sensible woman.
You won't find a Greek at Troy to say otherwise.

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
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,

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⁵⁰A 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.

⁵¹Gigantic one-eyed beings. In the *Odyssey*, they appear to belong to a pastoral but savage race; in Hesiod's *Theogony*, they are splendid craftsmen who make Zeus's thunderbolts. In line with this second tradition, they are credited with building the walls of cities like Mycenae, built from huge, beautifully fitted boulders

⁵²Inhabitant of Liguria, an area on the northwest coast of Italy.

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?
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!

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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
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 —
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
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.

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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!

⁵³Alternate name or title of Athena.

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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

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,

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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
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,

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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

⁵⁶An alternate name for Troy.

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.

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.

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.

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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...

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

TALTHYBIUS

Odysseus' speech carried the whole Council. . .

ANDROMACHE

Aieee, Aieee, 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.

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?

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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

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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!

CHORUS

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

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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

⁵⁸Island near Athens; Telamon's realm.

⁵⁹King 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.

⁶⁰Son 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.

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 Dardanus'⁶³ city to the dust.
Oh Ganymede, son of Laomedon,

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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
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

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⁶¹River at Troy.

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

⁶³Founder of Troy and ancestor of Priam.

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.

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

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⁶⁴Inhabitant or attribute of Argos.

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.

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!

MENELAUS

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

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?

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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.
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

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

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
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

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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

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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.

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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

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

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
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.

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

TALTHYBIUS
Hecuba. . . there's only one ship
Of Neoptolemus'⁶⁸ squadron still her. The crew

⁶⁷A district in the city of Sparta.

⁶⁸Son 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.

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,
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

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

⁷⁰King 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.

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

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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

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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

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...

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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.

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

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 —
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.

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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.

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HECUBA

So this is how it ends. My crown of pain,
All my sufferings, each new 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,

⁷²Youngest 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

Father of our fatherland, do you see?
Dardanus' children don't deserve such a fall

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!

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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

sister Rhea.

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?

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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.

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Exeunt HECUBA, TALTHYBIUS and CHORUS.

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

2 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 performance: 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 essential 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*

3 A postscript by Don Taylor

3.1 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.
Triremes 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

3 A postscript by Don Taylor

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