Trojan Women is a Greek tragedy centring on the horror of war and its aftermath. Trojan is an adjective referring to persons, places, and things in the ancient city of Troy; the action of the play takes place before the walls of Troy, which is near the western coast of present-day Turkey.

Trojan Women was first presented at the City Dionysia of 415 BCE, along with two other unconnected tragedies, Alexandros and Palamedes, and the comedic satyr play Sisyphos, all of which have since been lost to antiquity. It follows the fates of Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra and the other women of Troy after their city has been sacked, their husbands killed and their remaining families about to be taken away as slaves. The action runs parallel to the events in Euripides' play Hecuba.

Trojan Women is a masterpiece of pathos and a timeless and chilling indictment of the brutality of war. It is often considered one of Euripides’ greatest works and as among the best anti-war plays ever written. Euripides wrote Trojan Women a short time after an army from Athens, Greece, attacked Melos, an island in the Aegean Sea, during the Peloponnesian War. They did this in order to force its inhabitants to become members of an alliance against the Greek city state of Sparta and they also demanded tribute. After the island residents refused to yield to the Athenian demands, the Athenians overran the city, killing male defenders who stood their ground and capturing women and children to serve as slaves. Many consider this to be the principle influence on the writing of the play and cite the raging moral indignation contained within it as evidence that Euripides wrote Trojan Women to protest the incursion against Melos.

Euripides also based the play on the myths and legends about the Trojan War. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the war actually took place, approximately between 1350 and 1100 BC. However, ancient storytellers mythologised the events before, during and after the war, saying gods and goddesses took sides and even intervened in battles to affect the
outcome of the war and the fates of heroes.

It is also suggested the storytellers exaggerated or fabricated the deeds of Greek and Trojan warriors.

PROLOGUE

The prologue, or introduction, of the play begins when Poseidon laments the fall of Troy. It continues when Athena tells Poseidon that she has turned against the Greeks, whom she supported during the war, because the Greek warrior Aias the Less raped the Trojan prophetess Cassandra in a temple dedicated to Athena. The prologue ends after Hecuba, who had been queen of the city, speaks her first lines, bemoaning the fall of her city and the fate of the Trojan women.

PARODE, EPISODE, STASIMON

The lines that chorus members sing when they first appear make up what is called a parode (or parados). The parode takes place when the chorus of Trojan women enters and asks Hecuba about the lines she spoke in the prologue. Her despairing tone has unnerved the women. The parode ends when the chorus women mourn their losses and express anxiety about the future. Speaking in the first-person singular, they say, in part:

“\tI look my last and latest on my children’s bodies; henceforth shall I endure surpassing misery; it may be as the unwilling bride of some Hellene—perish the night and fortune that brings me to this!; it may be as a wretched slave.”

The lines that the characters speak as the plot unfolds make up what are called episodes. For example, the first episode begins with the dialogue between Talthybius and Hecuba, with a short comment by the chorus. It continues when Cassandra speaks her mind, and it ends with dialogue involving Cassandra, Hecuba, Talthybius and the chorus.
EXODOS

The lines making up the final events of the play—from the death of Astyanax and the burning of Troy to Hecuba’s exit as the slave of Odysseus—are called the exodos.

The structure of Trojan Women is episodic. That is to say, it does not so much tell a continuous story as depict a series of individual and discrete scenes. The sum total of the episodes is not a plot, as in standard narrative tragedy, but an impression. The impression that Euripides sought to convey in Trojan Women is that war is unspeakably horrible. In the various scenes of this tragedy, the playwright has attempted to depict the suffering that war causes even for those innocents who do not fight in it, innocents such as women, children and the elderly.

A sense of unity is provided in the drama by the continual presence of Hecuba. She represents all wives who have lost their husbands in war and all mothers who have lost their children. Each successive episode brings word of new sorrows to Hecuba. When she first appears to the audience, she is aware that she has lost her city, her position and most members of her family. That seems tragic enough, but Euripides wanted to illustrate that war spares nothing for the innocent, not even their hopes. Hecuba must also endure seeing her daughter Cassandra apparently afflicted with madness. The audience, however, which knew that the curse of Cassandra was to prophesy the truth but never to be believed, would have realized that her “madness” was really an accurate prediction of the future. In the following episode, Hecuba learns that another daughter, Polyxena, had been sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles. Finally, Hecuba must endure the slaughter of Andromache’s infant son, Astyanax, who is flung from the walls of Troy. Hecuba concludes (lines 1280-1283) that it is futile even to call upon the gods for help; the prayers of the innocent go unanswered.

The only consolation available to Hecuba is that her sufferings, and those of the other Trojans, were so severe that they will always be remembered (lines 1240-1250). Hecuba knows that, if it were not for their many sorrows, the Trojans would not become the subject of songs for generations yet unborn. This realization is cold comfort, indeed, but it is the only consolation that Euripides was willing to admit in this play. His goal was to see that later ages never forgot what the Trojans, like the Meians, had endured.
POSEIDON

Poseidon the god of the sea and patron of Troy. He appears, at the beginning of the drama, to take official leave of the city; he had favoured it, but the gods aiding the Greeks had proved too strong, especially Pallas Athena. His monologue also gives the necessary background for the play.

ATHENA

Athena the goddess of wisdom. She confronts Poseidon as he bids farewell to Troy and proposes a common vengeance against the Greeks, though she had favoured them earlier. Because their impious behaviour at the capture of Troy has alienated the gods, the Greeks are to be punished as they go to sea. This threat of retribution looms over the entire play.
ACHILLES

Achilles was the greatest Greek warrior. He was Pyrrhus’ father. Menelaus was an important Greek king and the husband of Helen.

PYRRHUS (NEOPTOLEMUS)

Pyrrhus (Neoptolemus) was a son of Achilles. He killed King Priam and took Andromache as his slave.

MENELAUS

Menelaus, the king of Sparta and the husband of Helen, who has been returned to him, the man she wronged, to kill. It is evident that he will not do so. His eagerness to assure others that Helen has no control over him and that he intends to kill her becomes almost comic.

HELEN

Helen, the beautiful and insolent queen of Sparta abducted by Paris. Her pleading before Menelaus is an attempt to place the blame for her actions on others: on Priam and Hecuba because they had refused to kill Paris at the oracle’s command, on the goddess Aphrodite because she promised Helen to Paris at the time of the judgment, and on the Trojan guards who had prevented her return to the Greeks. She departs, proud and confident.
AGAMEMNON

Agamemnon was a Greek king who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to the gods to gain good sailing weather. When he returned from the war, he was killed by his wife Clytemnestra.

ODYSSEUS

Odysseus was an important Greek king known for his wiliness and trickery. Because of his part in the destruction of Troy, the gods punished him by forcing him to wander for ten years before returning home.

TALTHYBIUS

Talthybius, a herald of the Greeks. He appears three times: to fetch Cassandra, to execute Astyanax, and to bring back the body of Astyanax for burial and set fire to the remains of Troy. A kindly man, he is unable to carry out the execution of Astyanax personally.
PRIAM

Priam was the King of Troy.

HECUBA

Hecuba, the queen of Troy. Aged and broken by the fall of the city, she is the epitome of all the misfortune resulting from the defeat of the Trojans and the destruction of the city. She is first revealed prostrate before the tents of the captive Trojan women, with the city in the background. Her opening lyrics tell of the pathos of her situation and introduce the impression of hopelessness and the theme of the inevitable doom that war brings.

The Greek herald enters with the news that each of the women has been assigned to a different master. Hecuba asks first about her children, Cassandra and Polyxena; then, when she finds that she has been given to Odysseus, she rouses herself to an outburst of rebellious anger. Cassandra appears and recalls the prophecy that Hecuba will die in Troy. After Cassandra is led away, Andromache, who appears with news of the sacrifice of Polyxena, tries to console Hecuba with the idea that Polyxena is fortunate in death, but Hecuba, in reproach and consolation, points out to Andromache and the younger women of the Chorus the hope of life. Her attempts to console those younger than herself, here and elsewhere, are her most endearing feature. The other important aspect of her character, the desire for vengeance against Helen, who has caused her sorrow, is shown in her reply to Helen’s plea to Menelaus. Hecuba’s reply is vigorous: She points to Helen’s own responsibility for her actions and ends with a plea to Menelaus to kill Helen and vindicate Greek womanhood. Hecuba’s last action is the preparation of the body of Astyanax, the young son of Andromache and Hector killed by the Greeks out of fear, for burial. Her lament over the body is profoundly moving. At the end of the play, she is restrained from throwing herself into the ruins of the burning city.
PARIS ALEXANDER

Paris Alexander was the son of Priam and Hecuba. He abducted/seduced Helen after Aphrodite promised Helen to him.

HECTOR

Hector was the oldest son of Priam and Hecuba and the greatest warrior of Troy. He was married to Andromache.

ANDROMACHE

Andromache, Hector’s wife, allotted to Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. She brings Hecuba news of the sacrifice of Polyxena and compares her fate in accepting a new lord to Polyxena’s escape through death. When she learns of the Greeks’ decision to kill Astyanax, her son by Hector, she gives expression to her tortured love as a mother. Unable to condemn the Greeks because they would refuse Astyanax burial, she curses Helen as the cause of misfortune.

CASSANDRA

Cassandra, the daughter of Hecuba, a prophetess chosen by Agamemnon as a concubine. When she first appears, wild-eyed and waving a torch above her head, she sings a parody of a marriage song in her own honour, but she soon calms down and prophesies the dreadful end of Agamemnon because of his choice and of the suffering of the Greeks. She views aggressive war as a source of unhappiness for the aggressor. As she leaves, she hurls the sacred emblems of her divine office to the ground and looks forward to her triumph in revenge.

ASTYANAX

Astyanax, the infant son of Andromache and Hector. He is flung from the highest battlement of Troy because the Greeks believe that a son of Hector is too dangerous to live.
A CHORUS OF TROJAN WOMEN

A Chorus of Trojan Women, whose odes express a mood of pity and sorrow for the Trojans.

The chorus of Trojan Women is different from their counterparts in Antigone or Oedipus. They are women who have suffered the same tragic losses as Hecuba, Cassandra, and Andromache. Social status is less relevant in a refugee camp, so all of the women are united in their experiences of the Trojan War. The role of the chorus is in this play is to engage in the ancient ritual of communal storytelling so we never forget the horrors of war. They take us back in time to the moment the Trojan Horse arrived on the shores and the moment when the Trojans knew the gods had abandoned them. It’s not unlike when we gather with friends to retell stories from important moments in our lives, whether they are happy or sad: retelling them keeps us from forgetting and helps us process.

THE HORROR OF WAR

The central theme of the play is the horror of war. Troy is in ruins. Corpses lie about the battlefield. Trojan women young and old huddle together as they lament the loss of husbands and children and shudder at the thought of becoming slaves in a land across the sea. Hecuba, once a great queen, is to become a lowly servant in the house of the Greek warrior Odysseus. The rape victim Cassandra, a prophetess of Apollo, is to become the property of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek armies.

One of the most painful moments in the play is the death of Little Astyanax—the son of the dead Trojan leader, Hector, and his wife, Andromache. The Greeks throw him from the walls of Troy in the belief that he would have sought vengeance as an adult.
HOPE

Andromache says she would be better off dead. However, Hecuba says that where there is life there is hope for a better tomorrow. Having lived long enough to know that situations change, she says,

“Fortune, like a madman in her moods, springs towards this man, then towards that; and none ever experiences the same unchanging luck.”

DREAD

The captive Trojan women dread the future. All they know for certain is that ships will carry them across the sea to a strange country, a different culture, unfamiliar faces and a degrading way of life. There will be no family members to comfort them, no pay for the work they do.

REVENGE

Athena turns against the Greeks after Aias the Less rapes Cassandra in Athena’s temple. To gain revenge, Athena persuades Poseidon to help her sabotage the Greek ships. Cassandra herself later speaks of retribution when she says, “I will slay [Agamemnon] and lay waste his home to avenge my father’s and my brethren’s death.” Meanwhile, the Greek king Menelaus plans to kill Helen, his wife, for having run off before the war with Paris, a prince of Troy. “My purpose is . . . to carry her to Hellas in my seaborne ship, and then surrender her to death, a recompense to all whose friends were slain in Ilion.” The Trojan women agree with his decision to kill her, for they regard her as the source of all their troubles.
The Greek theatre was an open-air stone structure with tiered seating, a stage, and a ground-level orchestra. It was an outgrowth of festivals honouring the god Dionysus. In these festivals, called Dionysia, the Greeks danced and sang hymns called dithyrambs that sometimes told stories. One day, Thespis, a choral director in Athens, used spoken words, or dialogue, to accompany the singing and dancing in imitation of poets who had done so before. Soon, the dialogues of Thespis became plays, and he began staging them in a theatre.

**MAJOR SECTIONS OF THE THEATRE**

- A tiered, horse-shaped seating area called a *theatron*. The theatron faced the east to allow the audience to view plays—usually staged later in the day—without squinting.
- A stage called a *proscenium*. The stage faced the west to allow the midday sun to illuminate the faces of the actors.
- An orchestra in front of the proscenium to accommodate the chorus.

**OTHER THEATRE SECTIONS**

*Skene*: Building behind the stage. First used as a dressing area for actors (and sometimes an entrance or exit area for actors), the skene eventually became a background showing appropriate scenery.

*Paraskenia*: Extensions or annexes on the sides of the skene.

*Parados*: Passage on the left or right through which the chorus entered the orchestra.

*Thymele*: Altar in the centre of the orchestra used to make sacrifices to Dionysus.

*Machine*: Armlike device on the skene that could lower a “god” onto the stage from the heavens.
An important and significant interpretation of Euripides’ text is the 2008 Katie Mitchell production. Firmly located in the naturalistic setting of a bulky iron holding bay, Mitchell’s reimagining of *Trojan Women* is brutally effective as a visual translation of a classic text. Mitchell does not simply place the text in a contemporary situation; she immerses it so fully in modern warfare that almost every carefully considered image hits its target with a destructive poignancy.

In this production, particular focus lands upon the hoarse wailing madness of Cassandra (Sinead Matthews) and the tear-stained loss of Andromache (Anastasia Hille) as her child is torn from her arms, all overseen by Kate Duchêne’s Hecuba.

Mitchell’s direction never once lets us lose sight of the impropriety of these women’s unfitting situation. Within the hollow hulk of Bunny Christie’s set, the women, wearing ball gowns and high heels, seem totally out of place and unequipped to cope. These are the tottering women of Troy, torn from their victory ball: they dance, at times softly and at others manically, their arms embracing absent husbands. Despite appearances, their coping mechanisms emerge. With every metallic clunk warning of male intrusion into their space, the women shelter, pack-like, behind their queen. They smoke, they pace, they reminisce. Together they throw themselves into tasks, such as the preparation for burial of Andromache’s son, thrown from the city’s walls by the Greek victors. The diligence and determination with which the women conjure dignity from the horrific is beautifully crafted in this production. It is through such contrasts that Mitchell exposes the desolation of war. There is a solid emphasis here, though this never becomes an overwhelming pity. Perhaps this is the result of the text sitting somewhat uncomfortably on top of the action, leaving the women entrenched in the present at the expense of their bleaker futures. Perhaps it is due to the metaphorical raising of the fourth wall for the choral odes, which draws attention to the oddity of its reinstatement for most of the action that delivers a powerful performance.

When interpreting the play, students should consider different settings - locations and periods – in which they could engage a contemporary audience.
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