

TROJAN WOMEN IN CONTEXT

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In the twentieth century *Trojan Women* has carried a stark message for audiences, as a single-issue play about the human cost of war and/or imperialism. In 1915 a production sponsored by the Woman's Peace Party toured the United States, and in the 1920s it was the play chosen to celebrate the formation of the League of Nations Union. Sybil Thorndike recalls the gala event at the Alhambra Theatre:

"The performance itself was one of the most moving I can remember. Audience and actors alike were caught up and united in spirit and intention performing a great religious rite. All the misery and awfulness of the 1914 war was symbolized in that play and we all felt here was the beginning of a new era of peace and brotherhood between nations (alas! the nations fell a long way from that inspiration and ideal a few years later). There were shouts and cries at the end for 'Author' louder than I have ever heard, and Gilbert Murray rose and said 'The author is not here, he has been dead for many centuries, but I am sure he will be gratified by your reception of his great tragedy.'"

In the sixties Sartre used *Trojan Women* as a metaphor for the crisis in Algeria; since then it has been claimed for Hiroshima, Vietnam, Bosnia, and this month's audiences in Cambridge will surely find - irrespective of the Director's intentions - that it 'says something' about events in Kosovo.

But putting on the play in ancient Greek is a stimulus to thinking about the longer process of reception. How did Euripides' contemporaries take this profoundly unsettling play? What range of meanings may it have had for later spectators and readers in the ancient world?

As usual with the Greek plays that have survived, there is next to no hard evidence for contemporary reactions, but at least there are a few things to be said about the context. *Trojan Women* was one of many hundreds of new plays produced in the fifth century at Athens; it was put on in 415 in a group with two other tragedies, *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*, and the satyr play, *Sisyphos*; the group as a whole won the second prize in the competition, but none of the plays by that year's winner, Xenocles, has survived. That it won second prize may not tell us much: so did the group that included *Oedipus the King*. By this time Euripides was in his sixties, long established as a famous and controversial competitor in the dramatic festivals, with a reputation that extended far outside Athens. He had used stories from the Trojan cycle often enough before in his plots, particularly for Hecuba a few years earlier, but this set of plays was probably his most ambitious attempt to explore the fall of Troy. The production took place a few months after the Athenians destroyed their former ally Melos, massacring its male inhabitants of military age and enslaving the women and children, an event which Thucydides later turned into one of the great dramatic episodes of his *History*. Some scholars have wanted to see the play as a warning parable to the Athenians: just as the victorious Greeks are seen in a bad light, so the Athenians should reflect on the horror and futility of what they did to the Melians. But for all we know the details of *Trojan Women* and the other two tragedies had already been worked out before the fall of Melos; the most we can say for certain is that spectators seeing the play in the spring of 415 would have had it fresh in their consciousness.

But for those first spectators, the destruction of Melos was not a unique event (there had been grisly precedents at Plataea and Scione in earlier phases of the Peloponnesian War), and *Trojan Women* was not a single play put on in isolation. It was part of a dramatic sequence which started in *Alexandros*, at a time before the Trojan War, when the long-lost Paris (Alexandros) was recognised by his parents and reinstated at Troy, to become, as Cassandra prophesied, an agent of the city's destruction. Then in the next play there was an exploration of betrayal on the Greek side - Odysseus' framing of the loyal Palamedes - and probably a prophecy that the Greeks would suffer for what Odysseus had done, a theme elaborated in the prologue of *Trojan Women*,

when Poseidon and Athena reveal their own reasons for abandoning the Greeks and planning their shipwreck on the return home. Like Sophocles and probably every other dramatist by that time, Euripides normally entered the competition with a group of plays unrelated in plot and *dramatis personae*; here he may have been making a radical claim to artistic innovation (no doubt with an ironic backward glance at Aeschylus) in offering a thematically linked set which gave scope for complex representation of the historical process: how events are read (or more often misread) by participants, how all parties constantly try to manipulate them, and how the distinction between winners and losers never stays stable for long.

So at the first performance the three linked tragedies might have been as striking for their dazzling experimentalism as for direct topical comment: the text of *Trojan Women* certainly draws attention to its own distinctiveness and novelty. When, for instance, the Chorus begin an ode on the sack of the city with the words 'Sing, Muse, of Ilion - a new kind of song, a dirge accompanied by tears' (511-14) they are marking the play's originality.

Here and elsewhere the text articulated a need for the right kind of song to match the terrible events at Troy, and the power of song (song as ritual, song as poetry) is one of the play's great themes. Can lamentation, the only thing that cannot be taken from the women, do them or their loved ones any good? Can the telling of stories by poets have any function when the story is one of annihilation? These questions are left open, but tragedy, the medium in which they are expressed, is itself 'song'.

Other dramatists, too, had dealt with the outcome of a city's fall: Aeschylus made his Theban women fearfully imagine its horrors in *Seven Against Thebes*; and Euripides himself had dealt with the aftermath of the sack of Troy in *Andromache* and *Hecuba*; but this play enacts the total experience of the city's destruction and abandonment - by gods as well as human beings. The sacred places are desolate and the rituals associated with them are made meaningless; the possibility of a future, in the shape of the child Astyanax, is briefly glimpsed but then brutally destroyed; the buildings are fired; the women go to the ships. Set in the context of two previous plays in which first the fall of the city and then the shipwreck of the victorious Greeks was prophesied, *Trojan Women* can claim to be an extraordinarily comprehensive exploration of loss, from the ruin of a family to the collapse of a civilisation.

What makes it entrancing as well as grim is the intensity with which every detail of structure and language concentrates on the inherent contradictions in this dramatic situation. The role of Hecuba, who suffers extremes of loss, pain, humiliation and despair, is what dominates the play: she speaks or sings almost a quarter of the lines, and her attempts to understand her suffering provide one of the main clues to interpretation. She is repeatedly shown at the mercy of events (with Cassandra, Talthybius, the unseen Odysseus, who had instigated the murder of Astyanax, and with Menelaus, who is clearly not going to do as he promises and punish Helen, since her allure will prove stronger than any of Hecuba's arguments), but this figure who typifies weakness and defeat is the truly powerful focus of the drama. Troy, the image of the city destroyed, lives in the imaginative world of the play. Contrary to the Chorus's claim as they make their farewell to the city that 'the name of the land will vanish' (l. 322), Troy's name endures, to be read by audiences as an emblem of all valuable - and vulnerable - human institutions.

Thirty years after the first performance of *Trojan Women* the practice of reviving famous plays was made a regular feature of the main Athenian dramatic festival, and access to the 'classic repertoire' became a shaping influence to the way audiences saw tragedy. Perhaps *Trojan Women* was singled out for this kind of treatment precisely because it was so easy for successive generations of actors and audiences (and then teachers and pupils) to find ever-changing relevance in Troy and Hecuba.

EURIPIDES: RHETORIC AND POWER

By Dr Simon Goldhill, King's College, Cambridge

When President Clinton appeared on television with his carefully written speech of apology, it was immediately and relentlessly followed by hours of interpretation and re-interpretation on screen and in print. Typically, much of this commentary focuses on his abilities as a manipulator of the media, as the media with varying degrees of self-awareness talked feverishly about 'spin', 'lies' and 'performance'. For, throughout modern democracy, the role of the media has become a hot topic.

"Democracy", wrote Demosthenes (one of ancient Athens' media stars), "is a constitution dependent on speechmaking". Logos - language, argument, rational debate - is fundamental to all levels of ancient democracy in action in a way which should provide a fascinating historical perspective on modern discussion of the media. The major institutions of the democratic state - Assembly, lawcourts, theatre - each centre on the exchange of formal speeches in the presence of a judging, evaluating audience. The Assembly was where stage policy was debated by the people whom it would directly affect - the citizens. In the law courts, citizens competed for status and position in what was a highly litigious community, before massed juries of citizens. In the theatre, not only do plays show us scene after scene of staged argument and debate for an audience's appreciation and evaluation, but also the playwrights and actors were in competition for prizes. Using language effectively - the performance of rhetoric - is basic to the pursuit of power for the citizens of ancient democracy.

So it is not surprising that rhetoric was a live issue in ancient Athens. There were professional teachers, known as 'sophists', who, like modern media stars, make a great deal of money advising, teaching and performing. Politicians needed to be expert in the performance of speeches. Handbooks teaching the 'art of rhetoric' were written and circulated. And throughout the city, rhetoric was discussed and worried about. Parents were concerned about their children's involvement in the new way of doing things. Citizens who found their lives destroyed in law cases found cause to mistrust the rhetoricians' claims to make the weaker arguments seem stronger. In the Assembly, accusations and counter accusations of 'the spin' of rhetorical manipulation fly. If rhetoric is central to democracy in action, from the beginning rhetoric also evokes deep anxiety in the participants in the democratic process.

Nowhere is this obsession with language in action more evident than in the theatre, and Euripides in particular is fascinated by the way words work. The *Trojan Women* is a fine example of how Euripides dissects the powers of language on the stage before the citizens. At one level, the chorus and characters repeatedly wonder if any words can sum up the horror of their loss of family, city, a whole life. They seek consolation in stories, in comforting each other, in the empty solace of imagining their lost life's happinesses. This refrain of the play is one reason why since the Second World War the *Trojan Women* has been one of the most performed Greek plays: its sense of profound dislocation and the inability of humans to respond adequately to such shock strike many chords with European audiences.

This desperate tension between needing to cry out and feeling the impotence of language frames the three great central scenes of the play, each of which involves a formal debate between Hecuba, queen of the sacked city of Troy, and one of her daughters or daughters-in-law. In the first, the crazed Cassandra rushes in to demand that her mother join her in celebrating her wedding. Since she is about to be taken as a slave for the sexual whim of her master, this wild joyfulness is scarcely shared by the other women of Troy. But Cassandra goes on to 'prove' in a speech of brilliant sophistic logic that it is better to be a sacked and violated Trojan than a victorious Greek and that defeat in war has been better for them than victory has been for the Greeks. This is a fine example of how to make the weaker argument seem the stronger - but with a twist. For Cassandra, we know, always tells the truth and is never believed. So what are the

Greek soldiers in the audience to make of her rhetoric? Can a Greek soldier accept that his great victory is a disaster?

The second great scene is with Andromache, the wife of the dead Hector. She, the very image of the good wife, tries to explain first how death would be better than life for her, since she is without any hope. As Hecuba tries to comfort her and school her to discover hope in the future, the Greek messenger comes in with soldiers to take away her young son for execution. Her careful arguments about hopelessness now become a different scream of hopeless pain. The scene performs the collapse of the language of explanation and control into despair and incomprehension.

The third great scene pits Hecuba against Helen in front of the judge Menelaus, Helen's deserted husband. Hecuba and Helen argue in strongly rhetorical manner about who is to blame for the war and its suffering. Menelaus judges that Hecuba's case is the better and agrees that Helen must be executed when they return to Greece as a lesson for all adulterous wives. Yet we know from Homer and the mythic tradition that Menelaus will in fact live on with Helen in the marital home. He could not - finally - resist the attractions of the world's most beautiful woman. So what persuades? The language of the rational Hecuba, or the physical charms of the seductive Helen? Substance, or image?

Each scene of the *Trojan Women* raises questions about how words relate to the world. Each scene dramatizes the attempt of a highly rhetorically poised language to control a view of things, to explain, persuade, console, reorder. Each scene also dramatizes the clash between such language and the exercise of power: military force, sexual attraction, brutal destruction. Euripides shows us the violent things that happen to language in the violence of war and social collapse. It is a searing image of the precariousness of civilized interaction that remains as powerful an indictment for today's society as it was for imperial Athens.