

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

THE TROJAN WOMEN
by
EURIPIDES

EXTRACT

CONTENTS

	PAGE
BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY AND PLAYWRIGHT	
4	
NECESSARY BACKGROUND TO CHARACTERS AND PLACE	
6	
PRELIMINARY PRACTICAL WORK BEFORE TACKLING THE TEXT	
10	
WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY	
13	
13	THE OPENING STAGE DIRECTIONS
14	POSEIDON AND ATHENA
18	HECUBA'S OPENING SPEECH
19	HECUBA AND THE CHORUS
21	ENTER TALTHYBIUS
23	THE CASSANDRA EPISODE
26	HECUBA'S SPEECH
27	THE CHORUS
28	ANDROMACHE
31	TALTHYBIUS TAKES ASTYANAX
32	TALTHYBIUS, HECUBA AND CHORUS
34	THE HELEN EPISODE
38	THE CHORUS
	TALTHYBIUS AND ASTYANAX' CORPSE

40

THE ENDING. TALTHYBIUS RE-ENTERS

42

FURTHER PRACTICAL WORK ON AND AROUND THE TEXT

44

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY AND PLAYWRIGHT

It is unnecessary to give more than the briefest of backgrounds to this play, since the introduction to the text covers this quite fully enough for any student's purposes. The brief of this guide is in any case to explore the text in as many practical ways as possible.

Sifting through the information there is, it is important to note that Euripides lived the latter part of his life in a time of war - the dreadful Pelopponesian War between Athens and Sparta, which eventually resulted in the downfall of Athens as supreme City-state in this area of Greece. Born in 485 BC, or thereabouts, he would have had traumatic childhood memories of being evacuated as the Persian Army sought to conquer Athens. Being an evacuee, homeless and terrified, is not so much different from being a refugee as are the women in *The Trojan Women*.

By 480 BC [Students in my experience, by the way, have dreadful trouble coping with the years running backwards up to the birth of Christ!] the Persians had been defeated and for fifty years Athens flourished as the most important City-State in Greece. During this time art, theatre, music, philosophy, and, above all, democracy were refined and valued. Of course, Athenian democracy was not quite as we would call it today: only men could vote, for instance, and then only if they were born Athenians. Being such an important centre, Athens attracted large numbers of wealthy and artistic foreigners - these had no voting rights. Nor did slaves have any rights and since slaves were captives in war, many of these would have been high-born in their own lands. Look at what happens to the Trojan Women - queens and princesses who face slavery, the rest of their life in humiliating servitude. Athens, as all nations of this time, relied almost entirely on slavery for all menial tasks.

Nonetheless, despite the lop-sidedness of this democracy, it is extraordinary how this short span of fifty years has been a beacon throughout the centuries, even down to our own time. The influence of the ideas debated during this short period, the art and literature created, the notion of democracy and free-thinking / free speech cannot be under-estimated. And this free speech was quite genuine. Playwrights could satirize and criticise public figures without resking censure or imprisonment, for instance, and

frequently did. Many believe that Euripides wrote *The Trojan Women* as a direct criticism of the Athenian action in subjugating the island of Melos. This island refused to send men to join the Athenian Army in its war against Sparta, stating they wanted to stay neutral. In reprisal, Athens sacked Melos putting the entire male population to death and enslaving the women and children. This event took place only a year before[416] *The Trojan Women* was produced, in 415, and has to be significant.

But by now that fifty-year-old Golden Age of Athens was over. The war with Sparta had begun in 431 and continued throughout the last twenty-six years or so of the playwright's life, only reaching its humiliating conclusion a few years after he had died. Athens as a great power was no more. Though the city rose to prominence again, it never achieved such a flowering as in those fifty years and eventually - many years later - was conquered, with the rest of Greece by the Romans.

Euripides, whose years as a playwright in the golden time had been successful, used his popularity and talents to show the Athenians what war means. He did this in a number of plays written in this last third of his life and it is interesting that nearly all of these plays focus on the plight of women and children - the conquered rather than the jubilant conquerors. Perhaps he remembered the fearful little boy he might have been. In any case he sees all around him, every day, evidence of the subjugation of other peoples in the slaves that are the backbone of Athens. As the Peloponnesian War dragged on and on, more and more of these wretched, homesick, dispossessed people would have been brought back to Athens into servitude. Many of these would have been wealthy or noble in their own lands and it is these that are the particular focus of Euripides' interest. How the mighty have fallen ... how this too could be the fate of Athens and its citizens - prophetic of him, as it happens. And don't blame him too much for centring his interest on the nobility and their fate; slavery was such a fact of life in all of the known world at that time that mostly it was taken for granted. The fate of the common man was not something then to make a song and dance about. But the fate of kings and queens - well, that was food for philosophy and debate. That potentially affected the writers and philosophers of the time, educated men who would have come from the higher echelons of their society. The potential for their own enslavement does not seem very real during the fifty golden years, but with the war against Sparta going badly, all of Athens must have felt uneasy.

His anti-war feelings are not the only areas that Euripides liked to explore. He had a life-long interest in what made people tick, again particularly women. He often examined people in moments of extreme emotion, being particularly drawn to hysteria and madness. Thus, his portrayal of, and interest in, Cassandra is very typical.

Athens at this time worshipped many gods. Critics have suggested that Euripides was atheist or at least agnostic. Whether this is true or not it is impossible to say for certain, but it is worth bearing in mind when you look at the treatment of the two gods figured at the opening of the play.

Euripides spent the last few years of his life in voluntary exile in Macedonia. Could he not bear to see his beloved city fall to the Spartans [who as their name has come down in history to imply, did not value art and literature, but only the 'glory' and prestige of war]? He died in 406. We know that he wrote numerous plays, at least 80 and probably more. Only 19 have survived into modern times. *The Trojan Women* was written in the last period of his life.

Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

In the following pages you will find a welter of suggestions, often contradictory, in an attempt to cover a number of approaches and angles. Students need to experiment to find their own way and this work will I hope open up a number of ideas for them. Gradually, they will start to see ways of presenting the play in a modern context that illuminates either the past or the present state of the world.

THE OPENING STAGE DIRECTIONS

There are a number of ways in which the play could begin. Let us start with the setting, which will be the same throughout the whole play and must therefore give enough interest to sustain an audience.

In the background are the walls and main gates of Troy. These can be already partly demolished, though there must be enough left to accomplish the final destruction written into the end of the play. A suggestion of its grandeur needs to still be there; perhaps the two towers either side of the gate are mostly intact. Elsewhere, large blocks of wall could be littering the stage, splintered planks of wood, broken statuary, piles of rubble. This gives plenty of opportunity for levels. It will also involve decisions, once you have started deciding on what you want to convey through the medium of the play.

Is this play going to be an indictment of all war? Is it going to be specifically this Trojan War? Is it going to be set in Iraq? Israel / Palestine? The debris you litter the stage with will alter, of course, according to your decision. There could be sandbags, part of a blown-up tank, etc. if you are setting it in a modern time. Or you could make the message clearer still, with definite Americanisms, such as a tattered flag planted amongst the debris. This is the first message which the audience will receive so a lot of decisions here.

Amongst this debris are set the tents of the women's camp. They are captives, so the area needs to be fenced - barbed wire or whatever. Whatever the period, the tents should have that makeshift look familiar to us from so many photographs and video footage of modern areas in war zones - or in the aftermath of earthquakes and tsunamis. Pieces of cloth, draped over debris pulled together to form rough shelters. To one side, clearly different from the start could be the 'royal' tent, in the shelter of which the four main women take some rest. Perhaps rich fabrics - these women's own clothes - have been used to create this tent. Perhaps you'd rather differentiate this main tent by size alone, making it blacker, with the others in a variety of

greys, so as not to spoil the uniformity of colour of the whole design. Perhaps you will want to create, even further off maybe, disappearing into the wings, a suggestion of another tent still. In this scenario, the royal women cannot bear to share with Helen, and she has had to establish her own shelter away from everyone else. This could have as part of its 'design' a blood-red cloth - or stark white - [depending on whether you are going for her guilt or her innocence.] So many decisions to make - some of which you will not be able to decide until the end of the play. I put them down here - but revisit the set at the end.

1. For the moment, stick to the 'war in general' idea, leaving your 'particular message' ideas till later. Using such things as you can find littered around your own studio or drama room, create a debris filled landscape, a suggestion of tottering structures in the background. Make sure there is plenty of room at the front for action. Amongst the debris, make a few shelters, using the debris, pieces of cloth lying around or pieces of your own clothing. Decide which shelters will represent where Andromache and her child will be, with Cassandra. Where Helen will be - separate or not.

This is fun! Much like playing houses as a child. Once they have created something of a set, ask them to stand back from it and check it out for space and use-ability. Make any adjustments necessary and then record the decisions onto paper. This 'model' will be used to work with until the time comes to refine and make those final decisions, only possible with an intimate understanding of the play. I am not suggesting that they make this set every time they do any practical work - but if they have a large groundplan of their decisions, they could at least be aware of it. Perhaps they could make the rough shelters each time, if practical.

2. The next decision is about how to bring on the cast. Are they all going to be on from the beginning? Does the light come up on the camp and groups of silent or quietly mourning refugees, perhaps aided by drifts of smoke from a smoke machine, like ash across the stage?

Or, since it is such a short play, would you want to set the scene more clearly by showing the cluster of dispossessed women pushed and shouted on, amidst abuse and wailing, in the brutal and mocking hands of the male victors? Do some of the women get manhandled by the men - is there potential for suggestions of their helplessness against rape and abuse of all kinds? This would be so for the women of low status, not the royal family. Once left alone in their temporary home, we could see them set up shelters, establish their places. Some of the work we did as preliminary exercises could be used here.

This latter would allow a more intimate understanding of their trials and allow an audience to see the chorus as human beings. The former might be more appropriate for a clearer focus on just the great ones of the piece.

If possible, try both openings.

3. Whatever opening you decide, the sounds settle into a background of near silence, punctuated perhaps by the odd sigh, groan or sudden burst of weeping, quickly soothed by another. Try this soundscape out.

Could this be carried through the first part of Poseidon's speech, to remind us of their presence, their continual suffering?

'Hecuba lies on the ground.' Unless you have a playing space with raked seating down to an arena style stage, as the Greeks had, Hecuba laying on the ground [from where

she is supposed to address her first speeches too] is not very practical. She could be raised somewhat, lying on some debris perhaps.

POSEIDON AND ATHENA

The first paragraph of Poseidon's speech mainly uses him as a narrator. We are told that Poseidon, because he had a hand in building the city, has been on the Trojan side, whilst Athena has been on the side of the Greeks. He reminds the audience of the wooden horse and how Troy fell by this trick. He tells us that we are now at that moment when the Greeks are loading up their ships with the spoil they have won, preparatory to returning home.

The second paragraph tells us that he is now abandoning Troy because people in times of defeat neglect to honour the gods as they ought. Then he goes back to narration mode: relating how the women, like the other spoils of war, are being divided up amongst the conquerors. Most have already been allocated a master and will be scattered all over Greece; only the higher borne women have yet to learn of their fate. This brings us right up to the 'present' place and time - clearly telling the audience where we are, at what precise moment, and who are in these tents.

Still narrating, Poseidon points Hecuba out, as she lies grieving. He tells us that another daughter of hers, Polyxena, has been killed as a sacrifice on the tomb of the Greek hero Achilles; Hecuba, he says, does not yet know of this. Moving forward in time, he tells how Cassandra will be raped by Agamemnon, despite being a virgin sacred to the god Apollo himself.

The speech finishes with the statement that Troy would still be standing if powerful Athena had not been on the side of the Greeks.

1. Hidden within this speech, there are many clues as to attitude and tone. Look carefully first at each of these lines:

'I am Poseidon.'

Try saying this:

**very slowly and with great dignity
aggressively, as if to an audience full of enemies - Greeks perhaps.
coldly
friendly and warm**

'The sacred groves are desolate and the sanctuaries of the gods are awash with blood.'

Try saying this:

**coldly, with little emotion
emotionally, full of pity
with anger
indignantly - this is as if someone has levelled a personal insult at you.**

'And Priam has fallen in death near the steps below the altar of Zeus the Protector of the Hearth.'

Try saying this:

**angrily
bitterly - Zeus should have protected him - why didn't he?
with little real emotion - but with a note of irony 'How ironic and mildly**

interesting that he should die in his own home, where Zeus should most have protected him.'

'They are waiting for a fair wind to blow ... so that after ten long years they can have the joy of looking upon their wives and children - the Greeks who made war upon this city.'

Try this:

**with a heart full of anger and hatred of the Greeks
bitterly - stressing words such as 'they' to emphasise the contrast between the Greeks who can return to their families and the Trojans who have lost their loved ones.
coldly and factually**

'I am abandoning famous Ilium...'

Say this:

**matter-of-factly - little emotion, just stating facts
aggrieved - he is taking the whole thing very personally
with enormous sorrow and regret**

'...and with them is the Spartan daughter of Tyndareus, Helen, rightly classed as a prisoner.'

Try saying this:

**vindictively - you hate her and hold her to blame
coldly - you have no particular feelings about her or anything
wistfully - even you are affected by her beauty
'Agamemnon will abandon piety and the wish of the god and bed her by force in an unlawful marriage.'**

Try:

**with pity for Cassandra
tone of 'how dare he insult the will of a god?'
outrage at such violence**

Now try the whole of the last paragraph as if:

**this was a slightly unpleasant hiccup to your life and you are glad to leave it behind you and move on
with genuine love and regret
with bitterness against Pallas [Athena]
with bewilderment against Pallas**

Working through the speech in this way may wake up some ideas about Poseidon's attitude.

Next we have the dialogue between Poseidon and Athena. They sound like a couple of politicians or business people as they coolly discuss how they will punish the Greeks for not paying enough respect to them. Since their voyage home is long and they must pass by many rocky islands in the Aegean, Poseidon is the obvious one to carry out this revenge. But he would not have thought of it without Athena's instigation. Hearing that it has Zeus' backing might be a consideration too.

2. Read through the dialogue in the following ways:

as if they were two generals on the battlefield, talking matter-of-factly and making decisions as if this were the only sensible course of action to take.

with Poseidon deeply suspicious of Athena's motives; Athena very persuasive and charming, winning him over.

as if they were a couple of exaggeratedly upperclass aristocrats - drawling voices, how-dare-they attitudes, Athena picking her way fastidiously through the debris - taking a hideous delight in the revenge they can mete out to those lowerclass slobs, the humans, who have affronted Athena.

as if they were 'not to be messed with' gangleaders, both tough, vindictive, enjoying wreaking havoc because they can - with the kind of chop and change logic of the underground gangleaders of the 30s and 40s films.

3. Take an extra look at the last paragraph of Poseidon's. This needs emphasis in some way. This is the promised retribution. The Greeks have forgotten honour and religion; they will receive their come-uppance. We need to know this. Perhaps Poseidon needs to come forward from 'The mortal who sacks cities and temples...' onwards. Perhaps he could rake the audience with his eyes, accusing them and making this message memorable. This is a message you could extract and use for any age, any war and the behaviour of those in warzones.

You could experiment with other ways of making this memorable, such as bringing the line in at other times in the play, as a kind of echo, or a whisper that runs round the auditorium. It could be spoken from 'above' or behind the audience, or using surround sound, with Poseidon simply looking out over the audience - as if he is thinking aloud.

The choices you make about this short section will dictate the costumes they wear too. You will need to decide - how important are the gods to the whole play? Are they simply out of the picture once they have left this scene? Or is there a way of suggesting that their vengeance is hanging over the Greeks throughout - and will fall on them when they leave? Will a reminder, perhaps in the form of an echo of Poseidon's last paragraph, need to be given at the end of the play, in that case?

Costume-wise, you can have fun with them. Since they are outside the main action, their otherness can be emphasised by putting them in modern costume, perhaps:

- thugs - 30s gangster hats, or bullyboy chains;
- businesspeople - suits, bowler hat for Poseidon, briefcases - with maps to plot the journeys of the Greek ships;
- aristocrats - bright colours, outrageous bowtie for Poseidon and monocle - tottering heels and extra-long cigarette-holder for Athena - with a suggestion of the war-goddess in her too, such as a little revolver she brings out of her clutchbag to fire at something in the debris.

Or you can dress them as the Greeks saw them - Poseidon with his trident - perhaps with other suggestions of the sea about him, such as a cape of irridiscent blues and greens, fringed with seaweed - or whatever; Athena with her shining golden helmet and breastplate.

Their entrance and movement will of course be dictated by your choice. If they enter as gods can you make the entrances dramatic? Thunder and lightning? Or descending from on high [like the deus ex machina critics of Euripides accused him of using too often.]