# The Trojan Women

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EURIPIDES

Euripides is one of the most famous classical Greek playwrights. Although less popular in his time than Aeschylus or Sophocles, his surviving work has continued to resonate with audiences for almost 2500 years. Little is known about Euripides' life outside of his dramatic writings. He was likely born to a wealthy family, and never went to war or served in the military. He began competing in dramatic competitions in 455 BCE, at the age of 30, and continued submitting plays until his death — in fact, his final tetralogy was produced by his son after he had died.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The *Trojan Women* takes place in the aftermath of the Trojan War. This a central conflict in Greek mythology, likely based on real-life battles between Bronze Age Greek soldiers and the "Trojans," people living in present-day Turkey sometime between 1100 and 1200 BCE. Additionally, Euripides was probably inspired by real-life contemporary conflicts. In the year that he wrote *The Trojan Women*, soldiers from Athens had recently captured a small Greek Island, killing its men and enslaving its women — a situation carefully depicted in his tragedy.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Trojan Women* was originally performed in a tetralogy (a cycle of four plays), and would have been accompanied by *Alexander*, *Palamedes*, and the comedy *Sisyphus*, the texts of which have since been lost. However, Euripides wrote several other surviving plays centered around the events of the Trojan War. The clearest points of comparison are his plays *Hecuba* and *Andromache*, which center the experiences of specific Trojan women, instead of looking at their suffering more broadly as the *Trojan Women* does. The events of the Trojan War itself are most famously described in Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Trojan Women
- **Where Written:** Athens or Salamis
- **When Published:** First performed 415 BCE
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Greek Tragedy
- **Genre:** Dramatic Tragedy
- **Setting:** The city of Troy
- **Climax:** The death of the child Astyanax
- **Antagonist:** The Greeks

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Setting the Scene.** Most surviving Classical Greek plays, including those written by Euripides, Aeschylus (author of the *Oresteia*), and Sophocles (author of the *Oedipus* cycle), were originally written as entries in a yearly Athenian dramatic festival. Each author submitted four related plays (three tragedies and a drama with a happy ending), which formed a "tetralogy." Each play was performed by the same set of actors against the same backdrop. Three men would perform all the speaking roles, and would be backed by a large chorus. Actors would enter from the left or right of the stage onto a dance floor where most of the action took place. Behind them was a "skene," or a wooden building with a single set of large doors, which would occasionally open to show events inside. If the play called for it, actors playing gods could hang above the action suspended by a crane, which is where the term *deus ex machina* (god from a machine) comes from.

**Prolific Writer.** Scholars have attributed over ninety plays to Euripides, though only nineteen full plays have survived to moder times.

## PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins with two gods, Athena and Poseidon, descending from the heavens to discuss the aftermath of the war between the invading Greek armies and the people of the city of Troy. Poseidon has supported the Trojans, whereas Athena has supported the Greeks. However, she has now turned against them. The Greek warrior, Ajax, raped the Trojan princess Cassandra in Athena's temple, which the goddess sees as an act of great disrespect. As a result, she has called on Poseidon, as well as Zeus, to work with her to create stormy seas to punish the Greeks on their journey home.

The gods exit, and the mortal plot unfolds. The stage shows a ruined wall, and in front of it a tent containing the recently enslaved women of Troy. Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, laments the destruction of her city, and the horrible treatment her family has endured. The Chorus, made up of her former handmaidens and other noble Trojan women, joins her, and together they sing, wondering what will become of them and which Greeks will be their masters.

Talthybius, a Greek guard, enters and tries to inform Hecuba of the death of her daughter, Polyxena. He uses euphemistic language, and Hecuba does not initially understand what he is

trying to say. He also announces to the women that they will all be taken as slaves by different Greek men, and so will have to leave their homeland essentially alone.

Cassandra, Hecuba's daughter, who was cursed with the ability to see the future, enters the stage from the tent. She is in a wild, panicked mood — she has seen that Agamemnon will enslave her, and that her enslavement will lead to her death and the death of his entire family. She talks of Agamemnon as her husband, and likens her enslavement to marriage. Because she can see the future, she knows that she cannot fight it, and leaves willingly for Agamemnon's ship.

Next, Andromache, Hecuba's daughter-in-law and husband of the late warrior Hector, enters carrying her baby Astyanax. She and Hecuba sing a song of mourning together. Andromache reveals that Greek soldiers killed Polyxena. She tries to comfort Hecuba by arguing that it is better to be dead than to be alive and suffering.

Andromache is taken away to the ship of her new master, but before she goes Talthybius informs her that she cannot take her baby. A panel of Greek warriors has decided Astyanax must die, because if he were to live and grow into a man he could pose a potential threat to his Greek captors. Devastated, Andromache gives Astyanax to Talthybius, and the two exit the stage.

Menelaus, the Spartan king, comes to claim Helen. Helen was formerly his wife, but she eloped with the Trojan prince, Paris. Menelaus rallied his allies and came after her, thus starting the Trojan War. Menelaus now plans to transport Helen back to Sparta and kill her, as a warning to all unfaithful wives, but first she tries to plead her case. Hecuba, who has been listening, argues that Helen is twisting the truth. While Helen says she was taken to Troy and kept there against her will, Hecuba argues she eloped willingly and is to blame for the destruction of the city. Menelaus is not convinced by Helen, and the two leave together, she as his slave.

In the play's final scene, Talthybius returns with the body of Astyanax. He allows Hecuba to dress him and perform funeral rites, and gives her **Hector's shield**, which will serve as a coffin for the child. Hecuba laments this loss of young life, and reflects upon the destruction of her city and her loved ones. The Greek ships begin to leave, and as they leave the remaining Greek soldiers set Troy on fire. As their home burns, the Trojan women sing a sad song together, and prepare for their new lives.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Hecuba** – The former Queen of Troy. She is arguably the play's protagonist; she never exits the stage, and acts as the *Trojan Women*'s emotional heart. Once a proud noblewoman, a loving wife, and a doting mother, with Troy's defeat Hecuba has been reduced to a slave. However, even as she prepares herself for her bleak future, she holds on to her former values and as much of her former dignity as she can. She remains practical, always thinking about her family and what remains of her legacy. She deeply loves her sons and daughters, and although their safety is out of her control, she exercises what small power she has to try and help them. She has a deep capacity for emotion — love for those who she respects, and hatred for those, like Helen, who she sees as immoral or unethical.

**Cassandra** – A Trojan woman, the daughter of Hecuba and Priam. As a young woman she was cursed by the god Apollo, and given the ability to see the future. However, her curse dictates that no one believes her prophecies, and so she is able to see events before they unfold but is unable to prevent them. Already seen as unwell before the fall of Troy, Cassandra is now considered insane by almost all who know her, her instability heightened by her imminent enslavement. However, even when caught up in fits of foresight, Cassandra remains dedicated to her family and to avenging her murdered father, brothers, and sisters.

**Andromache** – A Trojan woman, the wife of Hector, mother of Astyanax, and daughter-in-law of Hecuba. She deeply loves her child and her murdered husband, and dreads her upcoming pseudo-marriage to the Greek Neoptolemus, who has claimed her as his own. While Hecuba argues that she should go willingly into her enslavement, Andromache remains too proud, and too in love with Hector, to imagine anything but an unhappy future with her captor.

**Talthybius** – A Greek soldier, who acts as a herald and a messenger. He is one of only two mortal men in the play, and the one with the most face time with the women of Troy. Although he represents an enemy state, his relationship with the women is surprisingly sympathetic. He must carry out his orders, and many of his orders will hurt the women either directly or indirectly, but he does his best to mitigate their suffering. He is a complicated figure, but does his best to be a sensitive person, even as he enables the rape and enslavement of the women of Troy.

**Menelaus** – The King of Sparta and the former husband of Helen, who he has fought the Trojan War for, and who he now intends to transport back to Greece and kill for her disloyalty. Although Menelaus is her enemy, Hecuba treats him with respect, and he awards her the same courtesy. The only woman he has no respect for is Helen, who he seems to hate and distrust but also lust after.

**Helen** – The most beautiful mortal woman in the world. Formerly of Sparta and wife of the warrior King Menelaus, Helen eloped to Troy with Paris, causing the Trojan War. Now, at the end of ten years of battle, the other characters, Hecuba and Menelaus especially, blame her for all the lives lost and the destruction wrought. In her own words, Helen was merely a

victim of fortune, first bewitched by Aphrodite who brought Paris to her, and then held in Troy by force. However, it is impossible for the audience to fully trust Helen, as Hecuba and Menelaus are constantly casting doubt on her claims. Still, she can be played as sympathetic, a well-meaning woman swept along by chance, or as self-absorbed, an active agent in her own life who eloped of her own free will and stayed with Paris because she wanted to, caring little for the lives lost on her behalf.

**Athena** – The Greek goddess of wisdom and war. She, along with Hera and Aphrodite, participated in a beauty contest judged by Paris. Because the Trojan Paris did not select her as the winner, she sided with the Greeks in the Trojan War. However, when Greek soldiers desecrated her temple Athena quickly turned against them.

**Astyanax** – The young son of Andromache and Hector. Although a toddler, and old enough to talk, he does not speak during the play. He is murdered by the Greeks for fear that he could grow up to become their enemy. His death and burial (with **Hector's shield** as his coffin) marks the tragic climax of the play.

**Hera** – The Greek goddess of women, marriage, and birth. She is the sister of Poseidon and is both Zeus's sister and wife. Along with Athena and Aphrodite, Hera participated in a beauty contest judged by Paris. Because the Trojan Paris did not select her as the winner, Hera sided with the Greeks in the Trojan War.

**Aphrodite** – The Greek goddess of love, beauty, and desire. Along with Hera and Athena, Aphrodite takes part in a beauty competition judged by Paris. She promises Paris that if he wins he can marry Helen, the most beautiful mortal in the world. Aphrodite wins, and so introduces Paris and Helen, thus starting the Trojan War.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Poseidon** – The Greek god of the ocean, earthquakes, and horses. Poseidon built the city of Troy together with the god Apollo, and therefore remained on the Trojans' side in their fight against the Greeks. He is the brother of Zeus, and the uncle of Athena.

**Zeus** – The Greek god of sky and thunder, and the ruler of the Greek pantheon. His siblings include Hera (who is also his wife) and Poseidon. He has many children, some gods, some demigods, including Apollo, Athena, and Heracles.

**The Chorus** – The chorus is a group of unnamed Trojan women. Now enslaved by the Greeks, they were likely formerly Hecuba's handmaidens.

**Priam** – The King of Troy, husband to Hecuba, and father to Cassandra, Paris, Hector, and many others. Although he has died before the play begins, his memory lives on in Hecuba's lamentations. He remains greatly respected by his living family.

**Ajax** – A Greek soldier, also known as Ajax the Lesser, to distinguish him from the other Greek warrior, Ajax the Great. He does not appear onstage, but is said to have raped Cassandra before the play begins.

**Epeius** – A Greek engineer who created the Trojan horse, an enormous hollow statue used to smuggle Greek soldiers into the city of Troy.

**Theseus** – The mythical founder of Athens. A semi-historical figure respected by both Greeks and Trojans alike.

**Odysseus** – A famously cunning Greek warrior, the protagonist of the *Odyssey*, and the mastermind behind the Trojan horse (and thus the Greek victory over Troy). He claims Hecuba to be his slave. Although Odysseus never appears onstage, Hecuba describes him as "slippery" and a "murderous beast."

**Achilles** – A Greek warrior and demigod, who killed Hector but was later killed by Paris.

**Hymen** – The Greek god of marriage.

**Neoptolemus** – A Greek warrior, and the son of the warrior Achilles. He claims Andromache as his slave.

**Agamemnon** – The king of Argos and leader of the Greek army, and the brother of Menelaus. He claims Cassandra as his slave.

**Apollo** – The Greek god of the sun, music, poetry, and prophecy. He fought on the side of the Trojans during the war. He also cursed the mortal Cassandra, giving her the ability to see the future.

**Paris** – A Trojan prince, the son of Hecuba and Priam, and the husband of Helen. Although he is dead before the events of the play begin, he is described as exceptionally handsome. His elopement with Helen is (according to Greek tradition) the direct cause of the Trojan War.

**Hector** – A famous Trojan warrior, the son of Priam and Hecuba, husband to Andromache, and father to Astyanax. He is killed in battle by Achilles before the play's action begins.

**Deiphobus** – A Trojan, one of Hecuba and Priam's sons. He married Helen after his brother Paris died.

**Heracles** – A legendary Greek warrior and demigod, the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. At one point he saved Troy from a sea monster, but when he was not properly paid for his troubles he raided the city.

# TERMS

Argive – A Greek person.

Ilium – The city of Troy. Located on the Western coast of modern-day Turkey.

Olympus – A real mountain in Greece, where the gods of Greek mythology were believed to live.

Sparta – A Greek city-state, whose area encompassed some of the Southern Coast and the Eurotas River. Sparta was known for its military accomplishments, and its citizens privileged the training of its soldiers above all else.

Argos – A Greek city located inland in the south east of the modern country.

Athens – A Greek city-state, now the capital of modern Greece. Located along the modern country's southeastern coast.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### THE COST OF WAR

*The Trojan Women* is set in the immediate aftermath of the Trojan War. The Trojan War and its fallout are the setting for many of the most famous classical works of literature, including the *Iliad*, the *Aneid*, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, and many of Euripides' surviving plays. Historical accounts of the Trojan War are limited, but in Greek mythology it is described as a ten-year war during which the Greek army laid siege to the city of Troy, after Helen, the wife of Spartan king Menelaus, eloped with the Trojan prince, Paris. There are enough accounts of the Trojan War that it has been examined from nearly every angle. While some works revel in the glory of war, some look at the price paid by the soldiers who fought and died, and others examine the price paid by the soldiers who survived. *The Trojan Women*, meanwhile, approaches the conflict by focusing on the experience of the women of Troy, making it clear that, whatever victory the Greeks will celebrate, they do so knowing there has been a huge sacrifice of human life. The play raises the question of whether the war was worth fighting at all in light of that high cost.

The play primarily focuses on the suffering of the Trojan civilians that survived the war: the city's women and children, who are forced to remain in the city during the siege and are eventually either killed or enslaved after Troy's capture. Because there are few stage directions, much of the suffering is either recollected by the cast of survivors, or else shown in their lamentations. The surviving women often verbalize their grief. Former Queen Hecuba relates, "There is no numbering my losses. Infinitely / misfortune comes to outrace misfortune known before." Later, she recalls past abuses, remembering "None told me the tale / of his death. I saw it, with these eyes. I stood to watch / his throat cut…I saw my city taken. And the girls I nursed, / choice flowers to wear the pride of any husband's eyes, / matured to be dragged by the hands of strangers from my arms." Children are also shown to suffer and die, although the violence inflicted upon them occurs offstage, and others describe their suffering. Astyanax, son of Andromache, is needlessly murdered midway through the play, and is mourned extensively by Hecuba, who delivers his funeral rites. Similarly, the Chorus recalls the destruction wrought by the Trojan horse: "Beside their altars the Trojans / died in their blood. Desolate now, / men murdered, our sleeping rooms gave up / their brides' beauty / to breed sons for Greek men, / sorrow for our own country."

Notably, the play does not focus on the suffering of the now deceased Trojan soldiers who fought in the war. Instead, various characters use their deaths as a comparison to the suffering now endured by the living survivors. Although death is a tragedy, many of the war's female survivors view it as preferable to their current situation, underscoring how horrible life is, and will be, for surviving women. Several living characters speak of the dead as lucky, and look to death as a release from pain. Cassandra, for instance, looks forward to arriving "triumphant to the dead below," dead who include her father, Priam, and all of her brothers. Similarly, Andromache speculates, "Death, I am sure, is like never being born, but death / is better thus by far than to live a life of pain." When Talthybius reveals to Hecuba that her daughter, Polyxena, has died, he speaks euphemistically, telling her, "She lives her destiny, and her cares are over now." At one point Hecuba, seeing a torch inside a tent flicker, wonders whether its source might be other Trojan women who have "set themselves aflame in longing for death." Although her speculation proves incorrect, her lack of surprise or concern demonstrates the direness of her situation. Only in truly dark times would self-immolation seem to be a reasonable course of action.

*The Trojan Women* also describes the suffering of the victorious Greek army. Although they won the war, they too paid high human and emotional tolls. The Trojan men, though now dead, had the relatively good fortune of being able to spend their nights with their own families. Cassandra remarks that at least the Trojans, at the end of a day of battle, "came home to happiness the Achaeans could not know; their wives, their children." Additionally, those Trojans who died were at least "carried home in loving hands," unlike the Greeks who were not "laid to rest / decently in winding sheets by their wives' hands, but lie / buried in alien ground; while all went wrong at home". Poseidon observes that "the men of Greece / who made this expedition and took the city" return "now to greet their wives / and children after ten years' harvests wasted here." Whereas the Trojan men managed their own affairs until their deaths at the hands of the Greeks, the Greek soldiers have spent ten years fighting in a foreign land (and some of them, like Odysseus, will spend ten more years returning home). These are ten years of life wasted to avenge the infidelity of a single

woman, a "crime" hardly proportional to the cost of thousands of lives wasted on the battlefield.

The play takes careful stock of the aftermath of an epic war, one that has been frequently recounted and often glorified. Euripides suggests that war on any scale always has a human cost, and that this human cost is great enough to bring the very nature of war into question. Whereas most stories about conflicts revolve around the lives of men and the soldiers who fight in it, by focusing on the women of Troy instead, the unglamorous reality of the Trojan War is shown in stark relief. The characters in *The Trojan Women* are not defined by their heroic actions or their glory in battle, but instead by the loss and suffering they experience as a consequence of the war. They had no part in the fighting itself, but arguably must pay the highest cost for their country's loss.

## FATE, FORTUNE, AND THE GODS

The world of *The Trojan Women* is unpredictable. Fortunes are in constant flux, and fates are turned upside down in the span of days or even hours. A woman can be queen one day, and a slave the next; children can have long lives ahead of them, and then be sentenced to death; a warrior can expect to take a few months to sail home, but instead spend ten years on his journey because the gods choose to lengthen his journey. From the smallest child to the most powerful king, Euripides again and again argues that fortunes are changeable and tragedy indiscriminate. Even the Greek gods, who are capable of influencing events on earth, and who could be expected to act as a moderating, steadying force, are emotional and unpredictable in their behavior. Although all-powerful, the gods of mythology, like mortals, have egos, emotions, insecurities and power struggles that guarantee their manipulation of mortal lives is biased, capricious, and entirely unforeseeable. As a result, the fate of the humans they watch over is necessarily unpredictable as well. Over and over again, Euripides demonstrates that fate is fickle, out of the hands of even the omnipotent gods and goddesses, who, in fact, use their influence to further upend earthly fortunes.

In the world of *The Trojan Women*, the gods are characters with personal stakes in the outcome of the Trojan War. As a result, their actions on earth reflect their own biases and ego trips, as they use the mortal conflict to prove their own superiority. War, which is already full of twists, turns, and reversals, becomes more full of surprises when immensely powerful figures like Poseidon, Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite are able to reach into the action and supernaturally manipulate events. These gods, who are ostensibly above petty feuds, are in fact more concerned with whether or not their side wins than with the massive loss of human life enabled by the war they've allowed to continue. Poseidon, who backed the Trojans, laments that "The will of Argive Hera and Athena won / its way against my will." Although relative to a mortal he is all-powerful, he is still in conflict against other, more willful or more powerful gods, who successfully backed the Greek army. Later, Menelaus and Helen argue about how much influence the gods had in her elopement with Paris. Helen argues that she was controlled by Aphrodite, and cannot be held accountable for her actions, as the gods themselves are powerless against fate and, in this case, against Aphrodite as well. Like mortals, the gods are locked in constant struggles for power, which color their actions and decisions. Helen illustrates this when she tells Menelaus, "Challenge the goddess then; show your strength greater than Zeus, / who has the other gods in his power, and still is slave / to Aphrodite alone! Shall I not be forgiven?" The gods can influence life and fortunes on earth, but generally choose not to intervene. They let the women suffer although they could prevent it. They seem to only influence the life of mortals when they themselves have been offended. For example, Hera and Athena only sided with the Greeks because they were offended that Paris had chosen Aphrodite over them in a beauty contest. Similarly, Athena turns against the Greeks when she discovers that they have "outraged my temple, and shamed me." As a result, Athena vows to "do some evil to them" so that the "Greeks may learn how to use with fear / my sacred places, and respect all gods beside." She, like the other gods, has no real loyalty to anyone but herself.

*The Trojan Women* shows readers that fortune and status are unpredictable—indeed, it often seems the only predictable aspect of a person's fortune is that it will surely be reversed. From the beginning, Hecuba laments her changing fate. Although all remaining Trojan women are now slaves, Hecuba was once a queen, and therefore her fall from grace is especially tragic. However, as sad as it is, she understands that nothing is permanent, and she could eventually have her former power restored. Hecuba asserts, "The mortal is a fool who, prospering, thinks his life / has any strong foundation; since our fortune's course / of action is the reeling way a madman takes, / and no one person is ever happy all the time." At another point in the play she reminds herself to essentially "go with the flow." Because she understands that nothing is permanent, she believes it is easier to "Stoop to the changing fortune. / Steer for the crossing and your fortune, / hold not life's prow on the course against / wave beat and accident" than to fight against powerful forces, whose motivations and directions she is unable to predict or overcome.

Aside from the gods, Cassandra is the only character who knows and can see her fate, and the fates of those around her. Her fate and fortune fluctuate just like anyone else's, but she has the ability to know in advance. A useful talent in theory, in reality her prophesies are a curse; she is able to see the future but with one caveat — no one will ever believe her. Frequently, she acts as a stand-in for contemporary audiences, who would have known the basic contours of the plot before the play

began. Contemporary audiences, like Cassandra, could essentially see the play's future, but would similarly be powerless to affect it. This only serves to amplify the story's tragedy; when fates prove predictable, they almost always prove to be tragic. A foreknowledge of events is not enough to help characters avoid disaster. For example, Cassandra predicts that Odysseus "will go down to the water of death, and return alive to reach his home and thousand sorrows waiting there." The audience already knows this based on their knowledge of the *Odyssey*, and on the gods' discussion of this curse earlier in the play, but nothing can be done to divert his journey. Similarly, Cassandra recounts the tragedy of Agamemnon, which audiences would know from Aeschylus' play and from mythology. She predicts "great Agamemnon / has won a wife more fatal than ever Helen was. / Since I will kill him, and avenge my brothers' blood / and my father's in the desolation of his house." However, even though Cassandra knows that her enslavement by Agamemnon will end in bloodshed, she knows she cannot escape her fate. There is nothing to do but march forward into disaster.

In the world of the *Trojan Women*, the future is often unknowable, and even those who know or can influence the future, like the prophet Cassandra or the gods themselves, are unable or unwilling to manipulate fortune in any logical way. The audience, too, is left powerless to help, as they watch the play's characters careen towards tragedy. The play is concerned with the bleakness of war, and it also seems to be concerned with the bleakness of fate. In a story told a thousand times, the characters are incapable of escaping their futures, and as slaves they are similarly powerless. As a writer, Euripides has no real way to relieve their suffering. Instead, he emphasizes how full of chance and surprise life can be — although yesterday the women of Troy were princesses and today they are slaves, tomorrow they could be queens again. The Greek victors are heroes today, but tomorrow they could be lost at sea. Even in a play based on stories hundreds of years old, the future is not set in stone.

## DUTY, OBLIGATION, AND INTEGRITY

The characters in *The Trojan Women*, whether Trojan or Greek, are motivated by their bonds to their family and culture. For the Trojans especially, who have lost everything—their city, their husbands, their freedom—a clear moral system gives their lives some structure and regularity. Hecuba, who has arguably fallen the farthest in fortune's favor, clings most tightly to these ideas of family obligation and civic duty. Much of her hatred for Helen comes from a perceived lack of these values, and her interactions with Menelaus are colored by her hopes that he will remain faithful to his personal integrity and pride and kill Helen for her disloyalty. By attempting to honor their families, their friends, their husbands, and their cities, the women of *The Trojan Women* regain a measure of control over their lives even as most of their agency is taken away from them.

*The Trojan Women* emphasizes the importance of a person's service to their family, friends, country, and personal honor. In the play, a person's pride in who they are and where they've come from is the backbone of society itself, and a man or woman's duty to their families, cultures, and religions is frequently used to justify the actions of the characters. Cassandra uses her sense of duty to Agamemnon, who now technically owns her, as a way to cope with her enslavement. She lights a torch "for the bed of virginity as man's custom ordains" continuing and imploring everyone to "dance for my wedding, / for the husband fate appointed to lie beside me." By looking at her predicament as a wedding, she's able to see it as an obligation she must keep and honor, and not as a tragic violation she must endure. Although both Helen and Menelaus are Hecuba's enemies, Hecuba so deeply values social codes and moral obligations that she demands that they abide by them as well. She argues with Menelaus, encouraging him to kill Helen and show the world that "the price of adultery is death." She thinks Menelaus also needs to kill Helen to protect his own honor. She tells him, "Be true to your / high reputation and to Hellas," while the Chorus implores, "Menelaus, keep the ancestral honor of your house." Hecuba also encourages Menelaus to kill Helen because he will be honoring his fallen comrades. She encourages Menelaus to "Be true to the memory of all your friends she murdered," and murder her in return.

Although the gods are shown to be as emotional and changeable as mortals, they are nonetheless afforded great respect throughout the play. Characters see themselves as having a duty to honor and respect the gods, and the gods, in turn, expect to be honored and respected, becoming upset when they feel that a mortal has insulted them. Athena is upset that Ajax assaulted Cassandra in her temple, desecrating it and disrespecting her power. As a result, with Poseidon's help, she decides to disrupt the Greeks' journey home, turning it into a ten-year voyage. Later, when Helen claims that she was too overwhelmed by Paris and Aphrodite's proposal to remain faithful to her husband, and argues that any god would have been affected just as deeply, Hecuba accuses Helen of disrespecting the gods. The Trojan Queen "defend[s] the honor of the gods, and show[s] / that [Helen] is a scandalous liar," clearly seeing duty to, and respect for, the gods to be of utmost importance.

Helen is a clear example of someone the other characters see as having no sense of integrity or honor. From the gods to Hecuba to her ex-husband, everyone around her sees her actions as a betrayal of their society's most basic shared values. Other characters argue that she is purely opportunistic, a fair-weather friend who has brought death to thousands because she is not loyal to anyone but herself. Poseidon, in his very first

speech, remarks that "Helen of Sparta [is] treated—rightly—as a captive slave," implying she deserves harsh treatment. Hecuba accuses Helen of only supporting whichever side was winning the Greek-Trojan conflict. She observes, "When the reports came in that Menelaus' side / was winning, you would praise him, simply to make my son / unhappy at the strength of his love's challenger, / forgetting your husband when the luck went back to Troy. You worked hard: not to make yourself a better woman, / but to make sure to be on the winning side." Hecuba also accuses Helen of not going to extreme enough measures to escape Troy and return to her husband, wondering "when were you never caught in the strangling noose, / or sharpening a dagger? Which any noble wife / would do, desperate with longing for her lord's return." She certainly does not support the Greek side, but Hecuba nonetheless would view Helen's continued support of her home as less despicable than her constantly changing allegiances.

Although Hecuba's home has been destroyed, her husband and sons killed, her title taken from her, and her body claimed by a stranger, she remains stoic and prideful, dedicated to the same principles that governed her life before it fell apart. She values honesty and personal integrity, and remains deeply dedicated to her family, to her city, and to the gods that rule her world. Almost everyone else in the play follows the same principles that she has set out, careful to honor their families (living and dead), the gods above, and their own personal dignity. In a society that has been utterly destroyed, an adherence to tradition allows the women of Troy to maintain some semblance of order and normalcy in the face of utter chaos. Hecuba's hatred of Helen seems to come as much from her perceived lack of loyalty as it does from her role in the Trojan War. Helen, who has already helped destroy a nation, now threatens to destroy a belief system and code of conduct that are the only relics, aside from the women themselves, of their beloved Troy.

## MEN AND WOMEN

Unsurprisingly, given the play's title, the women in *The Trojan Women* are its protagonists, and their experiences and suffering are the play's primary concern. The play was written around 415 BCE, but describes semi-fictional events that supposedly took place 700 years earlier. In Euripides' day, in Ancient Greece, women had few rights. They were first the property of their fathers, and later of their husbands—and, like slaves of any gender, were ineligible for citizenship. This lack of legal and political agency directly affects Euripides' portrayal of the Trojan women, all of whom are deprived even of the protection of husbands and fathers, and are at the mercy of the foreign men who have seized their city. Women and their bodies are seen as objects to win, use, and dispose of, much like the besieged city of Troy itself. However, despite their poor treatment by the men in their story, which strips them of agency, Euripides nonetheless gives them power through his narrative—rendering them as complete, complex people, with strong voices, if not influence over their eventual fates. Although the women of Troy suffer, in giving clear voice to their suffering they are given, at least, the power of expression.

The women of the *Trojan Women* are given less power and agency than their male counterparts. After the fall of Troy they are overwhelmingly forced into sex slavery, a form of enslavement based on power as much as it is based on sexual desire. Men and women see this enslavement differently. Talthybius, one of the play's only mortal, male, speaking characters, doesn't understand the horror of enslavement. Regarding Cassandra, who has been chosen to serve King Agamemnon, he wonders, "Is it not high favor to be brought to a king's bed?" clearly not understanding that enslavement is a violation of a human's dignity and decency regardless of the status of the slave owner. The women, unsurprisingly, see their bondage as debasement. Hecuba exclaims, "I am gone, doomed, undone", expressing emotions experienced by most of the women. Their enslavement at once strips any power they had in their previous life (Helen, a queen, is immediately claimed by Menelaus after the death of Paris and is "numbered among the other women of Troy, a slave."). Hecuba encourages the other women to rebel against their subjugation. She urges Cassandra, especially, to "Dash down, my daughter, / the twigs of your consecration, / break the god's garlands to your throat gathered."

In the aftermath of Greece's victory, in interactions between Greek men and Trojan women, men are in positions of power and women are in positions of explicit subjugation. Moreover, sex (or, more accurately, rape) is the primary means by which men in the play subjugate women. Women's worth is therefore seen as coming from their sexual viability, and their bodies' ability to reproduce. Within the world of the play, women who are not sexual objects have little use. This is evident in Hecuba's warning to Menelaus. She worries that even hatred will not be enough for Menelaus to overcome his desire for his ex-wife Helen, as there is no other relationship a man and a woman could have. She urges, "Kill your wife, Menelaus, and I will bless your name. / But keep your eyes away from her. Desire will win."

The correlation of value with sexual viability is difficult for all the women, but especially Hecuba. Much of a woman's value came from her ability to have children or take care of the household. Hecuba knows that she is past her reproductive prime, and so her enslavement is out of spite. "And I / whose wretched slave / shall I be? Where, in my gray age, / a faint drone, / poor image of a corpse....Shall / I stand and keep guard at their doors, / shall I nurse their children, I who in Troy / held state as a princess?" She understands that her enslavement is primarily an insult to her pride and former status, as she has moved beyond her use as a sex object.

It is only in Astyanax's death that readers/audiences are given an example of what men can and should be. Just as women do not have to exist as sexual objects to be dominated, seen only in relationship to men, men do not have to exist as sexual conquerors ready to dominate, seen only in relationship to women. As she mourns him, Hecuba imagines what Astyanax's future could have looked like — one defined by learning and family as much as by war and violence. Through this fantasy Hecuba criticizes what she sees as simplistic, toxic Greek masculinity. She complains, the Greeks have "all your strength in your spears, not in / the mind," suggesting a vision of manhood that is not founded on war and domination of women.

The destruction of the women's bodies and spirits, and the theft of their agency mirrors the destruction of the city of Troy itself. This comparison reinforces both the tragedy of the siege of Troy, and the scale of violence enacted on the women. It also gives the women a certain power, implying that they themselves are the heart of Troy, all that is left of a fallen empire. Together, Hecuba and Andromache speak in alternating lines, their overlapping speech drawing direct parallels between the loss of their city and their children, the wrecking of their destinies and the wrecking of their home. Together they cry, "Lost, lost, Troy our dominion…unhappy…and my lordly children. Gone, alas! They were mine. Sorrows only. Sad destiny…of our city…a wreck and burning." Hecuba describes how "I am led captive / from my house, an old, unhappy woman, / like my city ruined and pitiful." Hecuba also calls out, "O soil where my children grew," directly describing the city, but conceivably also describing her own body in which her children originated. In the play's final moments, the women prepare to board the Greek ships and shed the last of their agency. As they leave, the city of Troy burns, and they sing, "O Troy, once / so huge over all Asia in the drawn wind of pride, / your very name of glory shall be stripped away," their own glory similarly stripped away, and their own bodies scattered to the wind on various enemy ships.

In the world of *The Trojan Women*, strict gender roles hurt both men and women. The women are treated as objects, valued only for their potential as sexual partners, traded and claimed as property. They are generally not seen as full human beings. Instead, they are seen as unequal and inferior, and as property (to the point where their bodies themselves begin to blend into the ravaged city), and they are passed around like prizes and spoils of war. Unable to control their own destinies, they are instead fated to suffer at the hands of enemy soldiers for however long these men see fit to keep them alive. This designation as a weaker gender obviously hurts these women, but *The Trojan Women* makes it clear that such binaries, which designate women as weak and men as strong, hurt men too. Men, who have the potential to be complex, emotional beings, are instead forced into the role of the sex-seeking aggressor. Menelaus, for example, cannot act in his own self-interest and let go of his ex-wife because of his overwhelming feelings of sexual attraction to Helen. Astyanax, a baby, is killed because as a Trojan "man" he poses a threat to the Greek army. Euripides has no easy fix for the uneven gender dynamics of his play, which likely reflect the uneven gender dynamics of his time as well. Instead, he perceptively outlines the dangers of cleanly splitting society in two, and of too narrowly defining what it means to be a man or a woman.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### HECTOR'S SHIELD

Hector's shield, which once protected him in battle, is repurposed after the war as a coffin for his young son Astyanax. As an instrument of war, the shield symbolizes Hector's masculine power and strength as a warrior. However, when repurposed to hold the body of a dead child, it becomes a symbol of the steep cost of violent conflict. Its use as a coffin reflects the price paid by the man who wielded it, but also by all those he cared about and fought to protect. The shield, in both cases, acts as a defensive object, but in battle it defended Hector against physical, tangible blows, whereas in death it combines with the funeral rites administered by Hecuba to guarantee young Astyanax safe passage to the afterlife.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Chicago Press edition of *Euripides III* published in 2013.

### Line 1-97 Quotes

The will of the Argive Hera and Athena won
its way against my will. Between them they broke Troy.
So I must leave my altars and great Ilium,
since once a city sinks into sad desolation
the gods' state sickens also, and their worship fades.

**Related Characters:** Poseidon (speaker), Athena, Hera

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 23

**Explanation and Analysis**

The god Poseidon descends from the heavens to deliver the first speech of the play. The play opens on the immediate aftermath of the Trojan War, a conflict that divided the gods as well as the mortal combatants. Poseidon chose to support the Trojan cause, whereas Hera and Athena supported the Greeks. Although relative to mortals, gods like Poseidon seem all powerful, this is an early example of the limits of Poseidon's will. Hera and Athena supported the opposing army, and their wills overpowered his. For mortals, this means that praying to a god has no guarantee that the god will listen, or, even if they do listen, that they'll have the power to answer an earthly request. The universe, which one might assume could be influenced by Poseidon, is in fact out of even his control.

Poseidon also gestures to the symbiotic relationship between a god and the people who worship him. With his temples in Troy destroyed, he has no one left to pray to him. Therefore he has no one to give him power, and so he is able to exert no control over the fates of the remaining Trojans.

> Poseidon: You hated Troy once; did you throw your hate away
> and change to pity, now its walls are black with fire?
> Athena: Come back to the question. Will you take counsel with me
> and help me gladly in all that I would bring to pass?
> Poseidon: I will indeed; but tell me what you wish to do.
> Are you here for the Achaeans' or the Phrygians' sake?
> Athena: For the Trojans, whom I hated this short time since, to make the Achaeans' homecoming a thing of sorrow.
> Poseidon: This is a springing change of character. Why must you hate too hard, and love too hard, your loves and hates?
> Athena: Did you not know they outraged my temple, and shamed me?
> Poseidon: I know that Ajax dragged Cassandra thence by force.
> Athena: And the Achaeans did nothing. They did not even speak.

**Related Characters:** Athena, Poseidon (speaker), Cassandra, Ajax

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 59

**Explanation and Analysis**

Athena expects that the Greeks will fulfill their obligation to her—she helped them win the war, and in return they should continue to honor her, respect her, and maintain her temples. Instead, Ajax, a Greek warrior, has raped the Trojan woman Cassandra inside of Athena's sacred temple. Additionally, other Greeks witnessed this desecration, and did nothing. Greek temples were sites of worship and celebration, and Ajax's behavior is a clear violation of acceptable behavior. Because of this, Athena no longer feels an obligation to the Greeks. In fact, she wants to punish them for their disrespect.

The Greek gods, like mortal men and women, are emotional and easily offended. Although Poseidon and Athena had recently been enemies, they have quickly united to address what they see as a grave insult. Poseidon even notes this quick change of heart, but because it benefits him and will hurt those who fought against him, he does not push back. From the perspective of the gods, this change of heart seems like normal, human behavior. From the perspective of the mortals, however, it will likely feel cataclysmic and have wide reaching effects on the lives of hundreds of people.

> The mortal who sacks fallen cities is a fool
> if he gives the temples and the tombs, the hallowed places of the dead, to desolation. His own turn must come.

**Related Characters:** Poseidon (speaker), Athena

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 95

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the aftermath of the Trojan War, Troy is mostly rubble. Still, Greek soldiers have been picking through the debris, looting and destroying, and collecting the remaining Trojan women hiding among the wreckage. From above the stage, the gods Athena and Poseidon observe the Greeks and comment on their behavior.

Even in the aftermath of a bloody conflict, the gods agree that certain protocols must be obeyed. A ruined temple, for example, is still a temple, and mortals are expected to treat it with a certain amount of respect. However, in the aftermath of the war, Greeks have been treating Troy as a kind of debauched playground, disrespecting the city, its people, and its gods. The gods have been watching, though, and they have decided to make the Greeks pay for their disrespectful behavior, and for failing to honor the obligation they have both to the gods who supported them in battle and the gods who opposed them, but invested in the city of Troy itself, where they are causing additional, unnecessary destruction.

## Line 98-294 Quotes

Rise, stricken head, from the dust;
lift up the throat. This is Troy, but Troy
and we, Troy's kings, are perished.
Stoop to the changing fortune.
Steer for the crossing and your fortune,
hold not life's prow on the course against
wave beat and accident.
Ah me,
what need I further for tears' occasion,
state perished, my sons, and my husband?
O massive pride that my fathers heaped
to magnificence, you meant nothing.
Must I be hushed? Were it better thus?

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Priam, Hector

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

These are Hecuba's first lines in the play. Greek forces have recently overtaken Troy, slaughtered its men, and rounded up its women to be allocated as servants or sex slaves to various Greek warriors. Hecuba clearly illustrates the steep cost of war, both by listing its casualties and expressing the emotional cost through her emotional speech. Not only have faceless, nameless men been killed, but her husband and her sons have been taken from her. The cost of war is not abstract to her, but real and painful.

She also compares her body and the body of the other Trojan women to their city. Even though readers understand that the women of Troy suffer in a different way than their beloved city, when Hecuba exclaims, "This is Troy, but Troy and we…are perished," she demonstrates how all of the survivors of the war, the women and the city itself, are continuing to suffer.

I am led captive
from my house, an old, unhappy woman,
like my city ruined and pitiful.
Come then, sad wives of the Trojans
whose spears were bronze,
their daughters, brides of disaster,
let us mourn the smoke of Ilium.
And I, as among winged birds
the mother, lead out
the clashing cry, the song; not that song
wherein once long ago,
where Priam leaned on his scepter,
my feet were queens of the choir and led
the proud dance to the gods of Phrygia.

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Priam

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 140

### Explanation and Analysis

Hecuba explicitly lays out here how she feels about her current status. Once a queen who led dances at court, now she leads songs of mourning. Her fortune has drastically and irrevocably fallen, and she is now no longer noble and proud, but "captive," "old," and "unhappy."

Once again, Hecuba draws a parallel between her body and the city, as she describes both as "ruined and pitiful." This helps strengthen the reader's sense of the destruction and indignity both bodies have been forced to endure; one has endured a literal siege and a metaphorical rape, the other a metaphorical siege, and a literal fear of sexual assault at the hands of her new masters. She draws an additional parallel between the bodies of the young women and the ruined city, mourning the smoke of Ilium, which seems to include within it her daughters, who are "brides of disaster," destined only to marry into death or misery.

And I,
whose wretched slave
shall I be? Where, in my gray age,
a faint drone,
poor image of a corpse,
weak shining among dead men? Shall
I stand and keep guard at their doors,
Shall I nurse their children, I who in Troy
held state as a princess?

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 190

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the aftermath of the Fall of Troy, as she awaits a ship to come and take her away to Greece, Hecuba continues her lamentations. In this post-Trojan War world, the women have few opportunities. All the Trojan women are now property of Greek men, and most of them are expected to serve as "wives" or extramarital sex slaves. These young women are reduced to the most basic functions of their gender—they are become sex objects, and fertile wombs.

Hecuba, who is older, and presumably too old to bear children, wonders where she fits in. Although she does not compare the indignity she must endure to the indignities soon piled upon the younger Trojan women, she voices her outrage and her embarrassment that she, a former queen, will be essentially useless having outlived any reproductive function, a prize of war taken simply to degrade her, as opposed to enrich her captors.

Hecuba: *Who was given my child? Tell me, who shall be lord of my poor abused Cassandra?*
Talthybius: King Agamemnon chose her. She was given to him.
Hecuba: *Slave woman to that Lacedaemonian wife?*
*My unhappy child!*
Talthybius: No. Rather to be joined with him in a dark bed of love.
Hecuba: *She, Apollo's virgin, blessed in the privilege*
*the gold-haired god gave her, a life forever unwed?*
Talthybius: Love's archery and the prophetic maiden struck him hard.
Hecuba: *Dash down, my daughter,*
*the twigs of your consecration,*
*break the god's garland to your throat gathered.*
Talthybius: Is it not high favor to be brought to a king's bed?

**Related Characters:** Talthybius, Hecuba (speaker), Agamemnon, Cassandra

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 247

**Explanation and Analysis**

Talthybius, a Greek herald, has arrived onstage. Hecuba has asked him for news of her daughters. He has already tried to tell her that her daughter, Polyxena, has been killed, and now is delivering the news that the Greek King Agamemnon has claimed another of her daughters, Cassandra, as a slave.

In his reaction to this decree, and in his response to Hecuba's grief, Talthybius demonstrates a key difference in the way that Greek men and Trojan women interpret the women's imminent enslavement. Talthybius considers it "high favor" to be "brought to a king's bed," whether or not the bringing is voluntary. In contrast, Hecuba sees this as a great violation and an injustice to be aggressively resisted. She also sees Cassandra's enslavement as a kind of betrayal by the gods, who had historically taken interest in Cassandra, and who Hecuba has assumed would protect her daughter.

Notably, while Hecuba sings (as denoted by the italics), Talthybius speaks his responses. He chooses to engage with her, but refuses to let her dictate the terms of their engagement, thereby demonstrating the power he holds over her.

## Line 294-461 Quotes

But see! What is the burst of a torch flame inside?
What can it mean? Are the Trojan women setting fire
to their chambers, at point of being torn from their land
to sail for Argos? Have they set themselves aflame
in longing for death? I know it is the way of freedom
in times like these to stiffen the neck against disaster.
Open, there, open; let not the fate desired by these,
dreaded by the Achaeans, hurl their wrath on me.

**Related Characters:** Talthybius (speaker), Cassandra

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 298

**Explanation and Analysis**

Talthybius, standing outside the tent housing the Trojan women, sees flames whirling around inside. He assumes these flames are the women lighting themselves on fire rather than be taken as slaves by Greek men. In fact, in the next line it is revealed that all the flames belong to Cassandra's torch. Cassandra, driven insane by her ability to see the future and the violence inflicted on her since the fall of Troy, has been dancing wildly inside the tent.

Although Talthybius is wrong about the cause of the flames, his immediate, unsurprised reaction reveals how dire the situation of the Trojan women is. Even a Greek man—who

will not suffer any of the degradation these women can expect to endure in the coming days, months, and years, a man on the winning side that has dictated these women's futures—can see how horrible their fates are. Although Talthybius hopes they are not killing themselves for his own sake (he would be punished for a lack of oversight and a loss of Greek property), he can understand how the women would be so upset and disheartened that they would see self-immolation as a viable alternative to lifelong enslavement, the only realistic way to experience "freedom" again.

> O Mother, star my hair with flowers of victory.
> This is a king I marry; then be glad; escort
> the bride—and if she falters, thrust her strongly on.
> If Loxias lives, the Achaeans' pride, great Agamemnon
> has won a wife more fatal than ever Helen was.
> Since I will kill him, and avenge my brothers' blood
> and my father's in desolation of his house.
> But I leave this in silence and sing not now the axe
> to drop against my throat and other throats than mine,
> the agony of the mother murdered, brought to pass
> from our marriage rites, and Atreus' house made desolate.

**Related Characters:** Cassandra (speaker), Helen, Agamemnon, Hecuba

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 354

**Explanation and Analysis**

Cassandra is able to see the future. However, she has been cursed, and therefore no one will ever believe her prophecies. In this speech, she is looking ahead to see how her enslavement to Agamemnon will play out. She sees that she will marry Agamemnon, but their union will lead to her death, his death, and the death of his entire family (the house of Atreus). She compares this fatal marriage to Helen's marriages to Menelaus and Paris, which famously led to the Trojan War and thousands of casualties. Because Hecuba cannot see the future, and is doomed not to believe her daughter, she sees Cassandra's marriage as an unequivocal tragedy. Cassandra, however, is able to see a bleak, but silver lining.

Even though her marriage will lead to her death, Cassandra believes it is her duty to follow through with it. Agamemnon and his fellow soldiers have been responsible for much of the death and devastation brought upon Cassandra, her family, and her city. Through her fatal marriage, she will be able to enact revenge on behalf of "brother's blood and father's."

> I am ridden by god's curse still, yet I will step so far
> out of my frenzy as to show our city's fate
> is blessed beyond the Achaeans'. For one woman's sake,
> one act of love, these hunted Helen down and threw
> thousands of lives away. Their general—clever man—
> in the name of a vile woman cut his darling down,
> gave up for a brother the sweetness of children in his house,
> all to bring back that brother's wife, a woman who went
> of her free will, not caught in constraint of violence.
> The Achaeans came back Scamander's banks, and died
> day after day, though none of them sought to wrench their land from them
> nor their own towering cities. Those the war god caught
> never saw their sons again, nor were they laid to rest
> decently in winding sheets by their wives' hands, but lie
> buried in alien ground; while all went wrong at home
> as the widows perished, and couples who had raised in vain
> their children were left childless, no one left to tend
> their tombs and give to them the sacrificial blood.
> For such success as this congratulate the Greeks.
> No, but the shame is better left in silence, for fear
> my singing voice become the voice of wretchedness.
> The Trojans have that glory which is loveliest:
> they died for their own country. So the bodies of all
> who took the spears were carried home in loving hands,
> brought, in the land of their fathers, to the embrace of earth
> and buried becomingly as the rite fell due. The rest,
> those Phrygians who escaped death in battle, day by day
> came home to happiness the Achaeans could not know;
> their wives, their children. Then was Hector's fate so sad?
> You think so. Listen to the truth. He is dead and gone
> surely, but with reputation, as a valiant man.
> How could this be, except for the Achaeans' coming?
> Had they held back, none might have known how great he was.

**Related Characters:** Cassandra (speaker), Hector, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Helen

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 365

**Explanation and Analysis**

Although both armies fighting in the Trojan War suffered devastating losses, Cassandra argues that the Greeks, although technically the victors, suffered more than the

Trojans, who were slaughtered en masse during the Fall of Troy. Cassandra argues that the Trojans were fighting for a nobler cause than the Greeks. The Greek armies sieged Troy because they were fighting to reclaim Helen, who Cassandra argues left Greece of her own free will. Meanwhile the Trojans were fighting to protect their families and their homeland.

Additionally, while the Greek soldiers were forced to return to encampments at night, far from their wives, children, and homes, the Trojans were able to return to their loving families from whom they gained strength and resolve. (Cassandra here also makes a veiled reference to Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, which was seen as necessary to the war effort, as an especially brutal example of how the Greeks abandoned their children and families for the sake of the war.) Furthermore, when the Greeks died they were buried in strange, foreign soil, without the rites and rituals normally given to fallen soldiers. In contrast, the Trojans were buried properly, in their families' tombs. Seen through this lens, although war was horrible and tragic for all involved, it was the fallen, defeated Trojans who truly came out victorious.

In her short time on stage Cassandra makes a point to seek out the silver lining in each situation. She is even able to find a positive angle through which to view the death of her brother, Hector, which might seem like an unmitigated tragedy. Although he is now "dead and gone," Cassandra points out that he died a hero. If the Trojan War had never occurred, she argues, how could Hector have had the opportunity to show his valor and gain such glory as a hero?

## Line 568-797 Quotes

Hecuba: *O my children….*
Andromache: *…once. No longer.*
Hecuba: *Lost, lost, Troy our dominion…*
Andromache: *…unhappy…*
Hecuba: *…and my lordly children.*
Andromache: *Gone, alas!*
Hecuba: *They were mine.*
Andromache: *Sorrows only.*
Hecuba: *Sad destiny…*
Andromache: *…of our city…*
Hecuba: *…a wreck, and burning.*

**Related Characters:** Andromache, Hecuba (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 581

### Explanation and Analysis

Hecuba and her daughter-in-law Andromache are reunited after the Fall of Troy. Both women are full of sorrow at their bleak futures as slaves, and at the loss of their husbands and families. The pair sings a song of mourning together. Through their song, they demonstrate the horror of war, specifically its emotional effects on the women left behind. They are filled with "sorrows only," and look forward to a "sad destiny."

In their song the two women also draw parallels between their own bodies and their beloved city of Troy. Their alternating speech, as well as the use of ellipses and fragmented thoughts, allows their song to make connections through associated images as opposed to clear grammatical and logical progressions. When Hecuba laments her "sad destiny," the reader could easily interpret that as her sad destiny, and Andromache's, and when she finishes her thought, linking her "sad destiny" to "a wreck, and burning," this could apply both to the idea of her future and her aging body. However, Andromache's interjection "of our city," which allows the song to be heard as "Sad destiny of our city, a wreck, and burning," suggests the sad destiny and destruction of Troy. Neither reading is "correct"—instead, the broken bodies and spirits of the women are compared to the burning shell of their city, each underscoring the destruction of the other.

*We are the hated of the gods, since once your youngest, escaping*
*death, brought down Troy's towers in the arms of a worthless woman;*
*piled at the feet of Pallas the bleeding bodies of our young men sprawled, kites' food, while Troy takes up the yoke of captivity.*

**Related Characters:** Andromache (speaker), Helen, Hecuba

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 597

### Explanation and Analysis

Andromache, in conversation with Hecuba, wonders why the Trojans have fallen so low. The only explanation she can think of that would explain how dramatically they lost the war after holding their own for so long, is that the gods must

have turned their backs on them (because of the sins of Paris, Hecuba's "youngest). In truth, some gods continued to support Troy until the end, but they proved less powerful than fate and the gods backing the Greek army.

Vivid imagery is used to highlight the immense human cost of the Trojan War. Andromache describes the "bleeding bodies of our young men," an image clearly burned into her mind, now burned into the mind of the reader or audience. Additionally, she uses language to link the city of Troy to its women. The city itself is not taking up the "yoke of captivity"—its citizens are—but this use of metonym links together the suffering of the physical space and the suffering of the women who reside within it.

> *O my sons, this city and your mother are desolate of you.*
> *Sound of lamentation and sorrow,*
> *tears on tears shed. Home, farewell.*
> *The dead have forgotten all sorrows.*

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Andromache

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 603

**Explanation and Analysis**

As other characters argue throughout the play, Hecuba also makes the claim that the dead are luckier than the living; although dead, they no longer experience any suffering or sorrow. The living women are left to make sounds of "lamentation and sorrow," shedding "tears on tears." The dead, meanwhile, are left with no memory and no troubles. The plight of the living is then only amplified in contrast to the peaceful sleep of the dead—only women living in misery would wish for death.

Hecuba also uses language that unites Troy and its women when she remarks, "this city and your mother are desolate of you." Each is desolate in a different way—the mothers have no heirs, the city has no one to populate or rebuild it—but both are missing an essential group of people required to continue their family line or legacy.

> Andromache: She is dead, and this was death indeed; and yet to die
> as she did was happier than to live as I live now.
> Hecuba: Child, no. No life, no light is any kind of death,
> since death is nothing, and in life the hopes live still.
> Andromache: O Mother, our mother, hear me while I reason through
> this matter fairly—might it even hush your grief!
> Death, I am sure, is like never being born, but death
> is better thus by far than to live a life of pain,
> since the dead, with no perception of evil, feel no grief,
> while he who was happy once and then unfortunate
> finds his heart driven far from the old lost happiness.
> She died; it is as if she never saw the light
> of the day, for she knows nothing now of what she suffered.

**Related Characters:** Hecuba, Andromache (speaker), Talthybius

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 630

**Explanation and Analysis**

As they talk, Andromache reveals to Hecuba that Polyxena has been killed. Earlier, Talthybius tried to tell Hecuba that Polyxena was dead, but spoke in metaphor and so Hecuba did not understand. Andromache, however, uses explicit language—"She is dead, and this was death indeed"—to get her point across.

Andromache believes her life and her future to be so bleak that death seems like a welcome alternative. She sees Polyxena as lucky, because death is "better thus by far than to live a life of pain," as the dead can feel nothing and remember no unhappiness or indignity. The dead do not know that they, like she and Hecuba, were once royalty, and are now regarded as slaves. Hecuba disagrees. While she acknowledges that the dead feel nothing, she holds on to the idea that the living can feel hope, and that perhaps in her future there will be some hope of a better life than enslavement to a man she hates. In comparing life to death, Andromache almost twists the situation into a sort of competition—who is suffering more, the living or the already dead? Andromache argues that the dead are better off, whereas Hecuba holds out hope that life has something to offer her yet.

> …I gave
> my lord's presence the tribute of hushed lips, and eyes
> quietly downcast. I knew when my will must have its way
> over his, knew also how to give way to him in turn.
> Men learned of this; I was talked of in the Achaean camp,
> and reputation has destroyed me now. At the choice
> of women, Achilles' son picked me from the rest, to be
> his wife: a murderer's house and I shall be his slave.
> If I dash back the beloved memory of Hector
> and open wide my heart to my new lord, I shall be
> a traitor to the dead love, and know it; if I cling
> faithful to the past, I win my master's hatred…
> I hate and loathe that woman who cast away the once
> beloved, and takes another in her arms of love.
> Even the young mare torn from her running mate and teamed
> with another will not easily wear the yoke. And yet
> this is a brute and speechless beast of burden, not
> like us intelligent, lower far in nature's scale.

**Related Characters:** Andromache (speaker), Neoptolemus, Hecuba, Hector

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 653

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Andromache talks to Hecuba about their uncertain futures as slaves to Greek warriors, Andromache reflects on her past. Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, has claimed Andromache as his own. She despises him, and theorizes as to why he chose her. During her marriage to her husband, Hector, Andromache did her best to be a perfect wife for him. According to contemporary customs she was often silent and reserved, deferring to Hector's judgments. However, when the situation called for it she could also knew when to speak up and push back. Now, Andromache regrets, if not her role as a dutiful wife, but her reputation as such, for it is her positive reputation that has lead to her specific enslavement (it is especially cruel because Achilles, Neoptolemus' father, was the one who killed Hector and then desecrated his body).

Andromache also worries about how she will remain faithful to her husband. She continues to love and respect Hector, but knows that to cling to his memory would be to bring pain upon herself. Her new master will expect complete devotion, but she feels it would be a betrayal to so easily love again. She comes to no concrete conclusion, but argues that even animals, which she judges to be less intelligent and complex than human beings, cannot easily forget a past mate and move on with a new one.

> Andromache: No, Hecuba; can you not see my fate is
> worse
> than hers you mourn, Polyxena's? The one thing left
> always while life lasts, hope, is not for me. I keep
> no secret deception in my heart—sweet though it be
> to dream—that I shall ever be happy any more.
> Chorus Leader: You stand where I do in misfortune, and while
> you mourn
> your life, you tell me what I, too, am suffering.

**Related Characters:** The Chorus, Andromache (speaker), Hecuba

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 679

**Explanation and Analysis**

Andromache and Hecuba argue about whether it is better to be alive and suffering, or dead. This helps illustrate the horrors of war, and the horrors of its aftermath—that life could be so terrible the living would wish they could join the unfeeling dead. Polyxena, Hecuba's daughter, has been murdered, but Andromache argues that her fate is better than either Andromache's or Hecuba's. Hecuba has argued that the living at least can cling on to hope, whereas the dead feel nothing, but Andromache rejects this line of thinking. In her mind, there is no hope, and hope itself is a "secret deception." She never expects to be happy again.

However, her sadness allows her to connect to the women around her. By voicing her grief and her pain she gives voice to the suffering of the Chorus Leader, and presumably other women in the Chorus itself. Although their lives are not made easier by hearing Andromache speak, they are at least given the gift of self-expression, the last bit of agency they are allowed as Greek soldiers enslave them.

He must be hurled down from the battlements of Troy.
Let it happen this way. It will be wiser in the end.
Do not fight it. Take your grief nobly, as you were born;
give up the struggle where your strength is feebleness
with no force anywhere to help. Listen to me!
Your city is gone, your husband. You are in our power.
How can one woman hope to struggle against the arms
of Greece? Think, then. Give up the passionate contest.
Don't...do any shameful thing, or any deed of hatred.
And please—I request you—hurl no curse at the Achaeans
for fear the army, save over some reckless word,
forbid the child his burial and the dirge of honor.
Be brave, be silent; out of such patience you'll be sure
the child you leave behind will not lie unburied here,
and that to you the Achaeans will be less unkind.

**Related Characters:** Talthybius (speaker), Andromache, Hecuba, Astyanax

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 725

**Explanation and Analysis**

Talthybius has received an order from his superiors that Andromache's son, Astyanax, must be put to death. This is one of the few acts of violence that occurs during the play itself (although the murder happens offstage) and one of the clearest illustrations of the cost of war—the unnecessary death of a baby, whose father has already been slaughtered and whose city has already been razed.

Talthybius delivers this news as gently as he can. In his delivery he makes it clear he does not agree with this order, and refuses to carry out the murder himself, but nonetheless allows it to happen. Instead, as an act of relative kindness, he warns Andromache not to lash out or take revenge upon the Greeks. If she behaves, he promises that Astyanax can be given a proper, honorable burial, which will ensure that his soul will go on to the afterlife. Although Talthybius and Andromache are technically enemies, they share a common sense of what is right and what is proper, and Talthybius continues to demonstrate some respect for the feelings of the Trojan women. He understands the importance of completing the proper funeral ritual, and maintaining some sense of order and tradition even amidst the chaos of the war. Andromache also understands this, and perhaps also understands the suffering Astyanax would face were he allowed to live, and so eventually allows Talthybius to take her child away.

## Line 860-1059 Quotes

O splendor of sunburst breaking forth this day, whereon
I lay my hands once more on Helen, my wife. And yet
it is not so much as men think, for a woman's sake
I came to Troy, but against that guest proved treacherous,
who like a robber carried the woman from my house.
Since the gods have seen to it that *he* paid the penalty,
fallen before the Hellenic spear, his kingdom wrecked,
I come for *her* now, the Spartan once my own, whose name
I can no longer speak with any happiness,
to take her away. In this house of captivity
she is numbered among the other women of Troy, a slave.
And those men whose work with the spear has won her back
gave her to me, to kill, or not to kill, but lead
alive to the land of Argos, if such be my pleasure.
And such it is; the death of Helen in Troy I will let
pass, have the oars take her by seaways back to Greek
soil, and there give her over to execution;
blood penalty for friends who are dead in Ilium here.

**Related Characters:** Menelaus (speaker), Paris, Helen

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 860

**Explanation and Analysis**

Menelaus, the King of Sparta, was formerly married to Helen. She eloped with Paris of Troy, and Menelaus chased after her, starting the Trojan War. Now, after ten years of fighting, Menelaus and the Greeks have won, and Menelaus is ready to reclaim his wife.

After all this time, Menelaus still refers to Helen as his wife, his property, something upon which to "lay my hands," something to possess. Menelaus claims he did not start the war for Helen's sake, but instead for Paris'. Because Paris "stole" his wife, like a man would steal another man's property, Menelaus felt that Paris must be punished for his crime. The goods in question, in this case a human woman, are apparently of secondary concern. Only now that the war has been won is Menelaus ready to "come for *her*...the Spartan once my own."

Menelaus is invested in a strict gender binary. In his mind men work with spears, they fight, and they die. Women, meanwhile, are his to do with as he pleases, objects to move or kill at his pleasure. He is also concerned that, if people believe he started the war over a woman, he will come across as weak or lovesick. Instead, he makes it clear that this was a war over (masculine) honor. He insists the battle was not started because of a woman slighting a man, but

because one man stole from another.

Hecuba: O power, who mount the world, wheel where the world rides,
O mystery of man's knowledge, whosoever you be,
named Zeus, nature's necessity or mortal mind,
I call upon you; for you walk the path none hears
yet bring all human action back to right at last.
Menelaus: What can this mean? How strange a way to call on gods.
Hecuba: Kill your wife, Menelaus, and I will bless your name.
But keep your eyes away from her. Desire will win.
She looks enchantment, and where she looks homes are set fire;
she captures cities as she captures the eyes of men.
We have had experience, you and I. We know the truth.

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Menelaus

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 884

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Menelaus comes to the Trojan women's tent to reclaim his ex-wife Helen, first he must talk to Hecuba. Hecuba, who blames Helen for the war and for the deaths of her family, encourages Menelaus to kill Helen as an act of revenge for all the Trojan and Greek lives lost for her sake.

Before telling Menelaus to kill his wife, Hecuba prays to the gods. However, as Menelaus comments, her prayer is "strange." This is because, due to her steep fall in fortune, Hecuba no longer fully trusts the gods to look out for her, or to even listen to her invocations. She still looks to the gods out of habit, but acknowledges how swiftly fortunes can change, and how mysterious the workings of the gods are, asking for help but expecting nothing in return. Menelaus, who prayed to the gods and won the war, has difficulty understanding Hecuba's newfound relationship to religion.

Hecuba wants Helen dead because she blames her for the Trojan War. Hecuba also wants Helen dead immediately, because she does not trust Menelaus to carry out his promise. Hecuba has a fairly reductionist view of men and women, assuming the only relationship they can have is a romantic or sexual one—particularly where Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, is involved. She believes young men and women once in love, or at least once in lust, will remain that way. She believes Helen's charms will overpower any and all of Menelaus's hatred and resolve.

*She* mothered the beginning of all this wickedness.
For Paris was her child. And next to her the old king,
who would not destroy the infant Alexander, that dream
of the firebrand's agony, has ruined Troy and me.
This is not all; listen to the rest I have to say.
Alexander was the judge of the goddess trinity.
Pallas Athena would have given him power, to lead
the Phrygian arms on Hellas and make it desolate.
All Asia was Hera's promise, and the uttermost zones
of Europe for his lordship, if her way prevailed.
But Aphrodite, marveling at my loveliness,
promised it to him, if he would say her beauty surpassed
all others. Think what this means, and all the consequence.
Cypris prevailed, and I was won in marriage: all
for Greek advantage. You are not ruled by barbarians,
you have not been defeated in war nor serve a tyrant.
Yet Hellas' fortune was my own misfortune. I,
sold once for my body's beauty, stand accused, who should
for what has been done wear garlands on my head.

**Related Characters:** Helen (speaker), Aphrodite, Hera, Athena, Priam, Paris, Menelaus, Hecuba

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 919

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Menelaus has told Helen that he plans to kill her, she asks for a moment to speak in her own defense. She uses this opportunity to attempt to prove that she had little agency in the events that led to the Trojan War, and that she, like Menelaus, was merely swept along by fortune.

Helen blames Hecuba for giving birth to Paris, and Paris for bewitching her. She blames the gods, specifically Aphrodite, for trading her to Paris. In Helen's mind, or at least in Helen's speech, she was given no choices, no agency. She was bandied about by the gods, by Paris, and now by Menelaus. As a woman, and as a beautiful woman, she was something to be bought and sold but not someone who could act on her own.

Readers will find that Helen's speech is purposely left ambiguous. Menelaus and Hecuba later refute her arguments, but she makes solid points. Helen is not clearly the villain in this play, but depending on how the actress playing her is portrayed, she can be more or less

sympathetic.

In her speech Helen, like Hecuba before her, compares her own body to Troy. This is notable in that Helen is Greek, not Trojan, but when she describes how Paris "has ruined Troy and me," Troy's obvious destruction is meant to give legitimacy to her own current plight.

> My son was handsome beyond all other men.
> You looked at him, and sense went Cyprian at the sight,
> since Aphrodite is nothing but the human lust,
> named rightly, since the world of lust begins the god's name.
> You saw him in the barbaric splendor of his robes,
> gorgeous with gold. It made your senses itch. You thought,
> being queen only in Argos, in little luxury,
> that once you got rid of Sparta for the Phrygian city
> where gold streamed everywhere, you could let extravagance
> run wild. No longer were Menelaus and his house
> sufficient for your spoiled luxurious appetites.
> So much for that. You say my son took you away
> by force. What Spartan heard you cry for help? You did
> cry out? Or did you? Castor, your brother, was there, a young
> man, and his twin not yet caught up among the stars.
> Then when you had reached Troy, and the Argives at your heels
> came, and the agony of the murderous spears began,
> when the reports came in that Menelaus' side
> was winning, you would praise him, simply to make my son
> unhappy at the strength of his love's challenger,
> forgetting your husband when the luck went back to Troy.
> You worked hard: not to make yourself a better woman,
> but to make sure always to be on the winning side.
> You claim you tried to slip away with ropes let down
> form the ramparts, and this proves you stayed against your will?
> Perhaps. But when were you ever caught in the strangling
> noose,
> or sharpening a dagger? Which any noble wife
> would do, desperate with longing for her lord's return.
> Yet over and over again I gave you good advice:
> "Make your escape, my daughter; there are other girls
> for my sons to marry…Let the Greeks, and us,
> stop fighting."

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Paris, Aphrodite, Menelaus, Helen

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 987

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Menelaus and Helen are reunited outside the fallen city of Troy, Menelaus announces his plan to transport Helen back to Sparta and kill her. Helen is understandably opposed to this plan, and gives an impassioned speech on her own behalf. Meanwhile Hecuba, who has watched the reunion, gives her own speech to Menelaus, arguing that Helen deserves to die and outlining the ways in which she believes Helen betrayed her husband, country, and gender.

Hecuba rebuts Helen's argument point by point. Her biggest issue with Helen seems to be a sense that Helen is disloyal, and is motivated only by self-interest. Helen claimed she was helpless against the power of Aphrodite, and was forced to leave Sparta with Paris. Hecuba argues that Paris was beautiful and clearly wealthy, and Helen was lustful and greedy, an active participant in her elopement. Helen, in Hecuba's mind, abandoned her first husband at the promise of a better, more luxurious lifestyle.

Hecuba also accuses Helen of faking her distress once she safely arrived in Troy. Helen claimed she had tried to escape and return to Menelaus. Hecuba argues that no guards ever caught her sneaking out, and if Helen had been genuinely distraught she would have killed herself or her husband out of desperation. In Hecuba's mind, being faithful to the Greeks, who are her enemies, is better than being a traitor to any cause. Helen is worse than the Greeks, in Hecuba's opinion, because she is unbothered by any obligation to her role as a wife or as a Spartan. Of course, these claims and theories are motivated by Hecbua's anger and sadness at the destruction of her city and her family, both of which she believes could have been avoided had Helen acted differently.

## Line 1060-1332 Quotes

> Achaeans! All your strength is in your spears, not in
> the mind. What were you afraid of, that it made you kill
> this child so savagely? That Troy, which fell, might be
> raised from the ground once more? Your strength meant
> nothing, then.
> When Hector's spear was fortunate, and numberless
> strong hands were there to help him, we were still destroyed.
> Now when the city is fallen and the Phrygians slain,
> this baby terrified you? I despise the fear
> which is pure terror in a mind unreasoning.

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Andromache, Hector, Talthybius, Astyanax

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1158

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Greeks have ordered Talthybius and his men to kill Andromache's young son Astyanax. Andromache was forced to give up her child and a board a Greek ship as a slave, and so only Hecuba is left to deliver funeral rites to the toddler.

As she prepares Astyanax's body, Hecuba emphasizes how senseless and tragic his death is. This illustrates the horrible cost of war. Astyanax was a baby, and was in no way a direct threat to the Greek forces. Hecuba argues that a kind of reductive view of masculinity contributed to the death of her grandson. Although only a child, to the Greeks, Astyanax still appeared as a (future) Trojan man. As such, he represented a new wave of Trojan resistance. The Greeks couldn't conceive of Astyanax as a harmless male child—instead they could only see him and see a man, and because they saw him as a man they could only see him as a threat, who had to be dispatched. Hecuba points out the basic inconsistency in this logic. If Hector, Astyanax's father, couldn't defeat the Greeks, how could a single unarmed child?

> What would the poet say,
> what words might he inscribe upon your monument?
> "Here lies a little child the Argives killed, because
> they were afraid of him." That? The epitaph of Greek shame.
> You will not win your father's heritage, except
> for this, which is your coffin now: the brazen shield.
> O shield, that guarded the strong shape of Hector's arm:
> the bravest man of all, who wore you once, is dead.
> How sweet the impression of his body on your sling,
> and at the true circle of your rim the stain of sweat
> where in the grind of his many combats Hector leaned
> his chin against you, and the drops fell from his brow!
> Take up your work now; bring from what is left some fair
> coverings to wrap this poor dead child. The gods will not
> allow us much. But let him have what we can give.
> That mortal is a fool who, prospering, thinks his life
> has any strong foundation; since our fortune's course
> of action is the reeling way a madman takes,
> and no one person is ever happy all the time.

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Hector, Astyanax

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 1188

**Explanation and Analysis**

After the Fall of Troy, a group of Greek soldiers decrees that Astyanax, who is Andromache's son and Hecuba's grandson, must die. Andromache is taken away on a Greek ship before she has the opportunity to deliver funeral rites to her child. Instead, Hecuba is left to bury her grandson. She delivers an elegy as she treats his wounds, which touches on the horror and unfairness of his murder.

Hecuba concludes that Astyanax was killed because the Greeks saw him as a potential Trojan man, not as a harmless child. Unable to understand that he posed no true threat, the Greeks felt they needed to kill a boy who could, potentially, one day rise up and oppose them. Hecuba sees this as a sign of the Greek's own weakness, and their reductive view of what a man is capable of—Astyanax could have easily grown into any type of man, not just a soldier intent on violence and revenge.

Tragically, Astyanax is ultimately buried on his father's shield. This shield, once an agent of war and death, now becomes a cradle for a child. It is repurposed into a ritual object, one that will give Astyanax a tenuous peace in death.

> The gods mean nothing except to make life hard for me,
> and of all cities they chose Troy to hate. In vain
> we sacrificed. And yet had not the very hand
> of a god gripped and crushed this city deep in the ground,
> we should have disappeared in darkness, and not given
> a theme for music, and songs of men to come.
> You may go now, and hide the dead in his poor tomb;
> he has those flowers that are the right of the underworld.
> I think it makes small difference to the dead, if they
> are buried in the tokens of luxury. All that
> is an empty glorification left for those who live.

**Related Characters:** Hecuba (speaker), Astyanax

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1240

**Explanation and Analysis**

By the end of the play, Hecuba has lost nearly everything. Not only is her husband dead and her city destroyed, but her daughters have been taken from her on enemy ships (and one of them murdered), and her one male heir, the

infant Astyanax, has been killed by the Greek army. Hecuba emphatically believes that fortune is unpredictable, and that the gods are not watching over her. In fact, she believes they may actively be working against her to maximize her suffering. Although earlier in the play Hecuba argued that it is better to be alive than dead, because the living still experience hope, she now seems to have lost all faith in the future. Her description of the dead as unfeeling and uncaring seems almost wistful, as the dead are safe from continued misery, and only the living can mourn and continue to suffer. Still, even in her hopeless reverie, Hecuba conducts funeral rites for Astyanax. Although life seems dark, she clings to the rules and obligations of her previous life, sending her grandson properly into the next one, and at least taking comfort in the fact that Troy will be remembered in song forever, for both its glory and its tragedy.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### LINE 1-97

The scene depicts the walls of the city of Troy, which have been destroyed by the Greeks' decade-long siege. In front of the walls a tent is erected, which houses the play's eponymous Trojan women. The god Poseidon descends from the sky, floating above the chaos as he delivers his soliloquy.

*Based on the set, the audience is immediately alerted to Troy's physical destruction. In contemporary performances, the actor playing Poseidon would be lowered on a crane; the act of a god descending with the help of a machine gave birth to the term "deus ex machina," which is now used more generally to refer to divine intervention or miraculous (and usually unsatisfying) solutions to complicated narrative issues.*

Poseidon introduces himself, explaining that he has come from the ocean. He reveals that he and the god Apollo built the city of Troy together, and as a result he has always had a fondness both for the city and its people. In the great Greek-Trojan war, he sided with the Trojans.

*Poseidon, though a god, has personal and emotional connections to the city of Troy. He is selfishly invested in its wellbeing, and sided with its citizens in the war because he built it himself. As in most Greek drama, the gods are generally petty, jealous, and easily angered.*

Poseidon blames Athena and the Greek architect Epeius, who designed the famous Trojan horse, for Troy's destruction. However, although he was on the opposing side of the war, Poseidon acknowledges Epeius's accomplishment, and anticipates that he will have a long legacy.

*The Greek army won the Trojan war by hiding inside of a giant hollow horse, which they presented as a gift to the Trojans. When the gift was accepted and taken inside the walls of the city, the Greeks swarmed out and slaughtered soldiers and civilians alike. Although glossed over in this narrative, this was an incredibly brutal and violent end to the conflict often described in contemporary texts.*

Athena and Hera supported the Greek effort, and Poseidon admits that their will conquered his.

*Although ostensibly all-powerful, when locked in conflict, the will of some gods will win out over the wills of others. Just like human conflicts, gods' fights are often messy and unpredictable.*

Because Troy has been destroyed, and there is no one there left to worship him or any other god, Poseidon plans to leave his altars and his beloved city.

*The gods rely upon human worship for validation, power, and even survival. Therefore, their investment in the wellbeing of their followers is always inherently selfish.*

Poseidon observes the remaining Trojan women who have been claimed as slaves by the Greek men. He mentions Helen dismissively, but feels pity for Hecuba, who has lost many members of her family, including her daughter Polyxena and husband Priam—who have been killed by the Greeks—and her daughter Cassandra, who is protected by the gods but has nonetheless been claimed by Agamemnon.

*Although the gods seemingly have power over mortals, they allow the Trojan women to suffer in the war's aftermath. Poseidon experiences emotions — he feels pity for Hecuba, Polyxena, and others — but is removed enough from their misery that he feels no obligation to ease their pain.*

The goddess Athena descends from above to join Poseidon. She acknowledges Poseidon's seniority and power, and hopes they can talk despite being on opposite sides of the war. Poseidon permits her to stay, citing their familial relationship.

*The gods have family history, and family loyalty often trumps their loyalty to the mortals who worship them. Poseidon and Athena are able to quickly forget that they were on opposing sides of a conflict that, for mortals, was life or death—again maintaining a distance from their followers.*

Although Athena fought against Troy, she has come to Poseidon with a proposal to punish the Greek army. The Greek soldier, Ajax, raped Cassandra in her temple. Athena sees this as an act of great disrespect to her, especially since she helped Ajax's side win the war.

*Cassandra's rape is significant for several reasons—it demonstrates the brutal gender-based violence enabled by the Greek's victory; it shows the contempt Greek soldiers have for the gods who led them to victory; and it leads to Athena's rejection of the Greek army which she feels has disrespected her.*

With the help of Poseidon and Zeus, Athena wants to make the Greeks' journey home long and treacherous. She hopes to teach them to fear and respect her "sacred places, and respect all gods beside." Poseidon "joyfully" agrees. He will create rough, treacherous seas for them, since "the mortal who sacks fallen cities is a fool" whose disrespect necessitates some kind of cosmic retribution. The two gods are then flown out of sight, leaving the stage to the mortals.

*The gods expect mortals to pay them a certain amount of respect. This is especially true for Athena, who led the Greeks to victory, and expects additional thanks and praise. In this moment, the gods' allegiance to each other, and their shared belief that mortals who act recklessly need to be taught a lesson, overrides any partisan allegiances they had to Greek or Trojan forces.*

## LINE 98-294

Hecuba lies on the stage in despair. She slowly gets up and begins to speak. She speaks in commands, but there is no one else on stage; she seems to be talking to herself. She implores herself to get up off the ground and face her unhappy, uncertain future. She wonders if there's any point in continuing to cry over the death of her husband (Priam) and many sons. Lying on the ground and crying has only brought her more physical and emotional pain. However, she acknowledges that there can be music in the song of "wretchedness."

*Hecuba's despair acts as a stand-in for the despair of all the remaining Trojan women. Contemporary audiences would recognize her as the former Trojan queen, and so would immediately understand how far her fortunes have fallen.*

Hecuba begins to sing. The intended recipient is Helen, although she is not present. According to Hecuba, as Helen crossed the sea from Greece to Troy, she brought with her death and devastation. Hecuba calls Helen a "fatal bride" and accuses her of killing Priam, her late husband and the father of her children.

*Hecuba feels no solidarity with Helen. She does not see them as two women brought low together by the military losses of their nations. Instead, Hecuba sees Helen as a self-serving traitor who, through her selfishness, began the Trojan War and destroyed Hecuba's home and family.*

Now, Hecuba is "an old, unhappy woman, like my city ruined and pitiful." She blames Helen for this, too. She calls upon the other widowed Trojan women to mourn with her, remembering their daughters, now "brides of disaster," and their broken city.

*Hecuba sees the destruction of her city and the destruction of the bodies of the Trojan women as related. The destruction of each guarantees the end to Trojan lineages, and to Trojan society in general.*

Hecuba sees herself as a mother hen, leading her chicks (the other women of Troy) in a song of mourning. She compares this to how she led celebratory songs back when Priam was alive, when she was the Queen of Troy overseeing celebrations in her court.

*Hecuba's low fortunes seem especially bleak when she contrasts her duties before and after the Fall of Troy. Now she remains a dutiful leader to the women of Troy, but she can only lead them in misery.*

Half of the Chorus enters the stage from the tent. They begin to sing with Hecuba, and the song becomes a call and response. The chorus asks Hecuba why she is crying. They say they could hear her through the tent, and were filled with fear, concerned that she was announcing some new degradation. Hecuba announces that the Greeks will set sail today, and take the women of Troy with them.

*Once royalty or nobility, the women of Troy have been reduced to mere property. Still, as low as their fortunes are, they fear their lives could get even worse—after the dramatic upheaval of their initial enslavement, any future indignity seems possible.*

Hecuba hopes that Cassandra will not come to see her in this moment. Seeing her daughter, who has been "driven delirious", would only cause Hecuba more pain. Hecuba then addresses Troy itself, and announces "your last sad people leave you now," "living and broken."

*Hecuba does her best to remain dignified even in the face of misery and disaster. Still, she is a mother, and knows that seeing her daughter in pain would make it difficult for her to keep up her strong outward appearances.*

The second half of the Chorus enters from the tent. They begin to sing with Hecuba as well. Hecuba, an old woman, wonders what will happen to her. She was once a princess, but she imagines she'll be reduced to a nurse or even a guard in her new home.

*The Trojan women are being claimed by Greek warriors as wives and as sex slaves. Hecuba wonders what her place in her new life will be, now that she is too old to bear children, and too old to be a kind of beautiful trophy.*

The two Choruses, who had been singing separately, unite and sing together. They agree their situation is "pitiful." This is the last time they'll see their parents' homes, the last time they'll be free women. They wonder if they will be raped by the Greek men who claim them, or if they'll be used as servants. They hope they'll be taken to Athens, where Theseus is from, but not to Sparta, where Helen and Menelaus once lived. The women of the Chorus try to make light of their situation. They say they would be happy in the city of Peneus, which is near Mount Olympus, or Aetna, which is supposedly beautiful.

*Even during what is likely the darkest time of their lives, the Trojan women do their best to comfort one another, and to imagine the ways their fortunes could improve if they are taken somewhere beautiful. Still, the silver linings they seek out—being a servant instead of a sex slave, being taken to a beautiful or historically significant site against their will—only further illustrate how dire their situation is.*

A herald approaches and the Chorus stops singing and begins chanting, announcing his arrival. They wonder if he will come with a command that they, now officially slaves, will have to obey.

*The Trojan women are slowly getting used to their new condition. Although they were recently noblewomen with personal agency, they are quickly learning to be subservient.*

Talthybius, along with a group of soldiers, enters from offstage. Although he is a Greek herald, he and Hecuba know each other from earlier in the war and are friendly. Hecuba and the Chorus are nonetheless nervous, wondering what news Talthybius will bring. He announces they have all been officially assigned to masters. The women had expected to be taken as a single group to a single place, but Talthybius explains they have each been "allotted separately," each woman assigned to a different man.

*Talthybius remains respectful of Hecuba, even though she is no longer technically a queen. This demonstrates that Greek soldiers are not inherently selfish or domineering, as Talthybius remains considerate of the Trojan women's feelings. Still, his orders bring them more pain, and remind them that they are no longer fully people, but property.*

Hecuba wonders where her daughter Cassandra will go. Talthybius says Agamemnon has claimed her as a sex slave. Hecuba is distraught. Not only will Agamemnon take Cassandra's agency, but his sexual demands will ruin her ability to get married later.

*In Classical Greece, a woman's virginity was an essential component of her identity, and was directly tied to her eligibility as a wife. Cassandra has already been raped by Ajax, and Agamemnon will likely rape her many more times, taking from her any potential to marry in the future and continue her family's lineage.*

Hecuba hopes Cassandra will tear the sacred garlands of the gods off of her body in protest of her upcoming forced marriage. Talthybius, confused, wonders why Hecuba does not think it "high favor to be brought to a king's bed?"

*Talthybius, perhaps because of his gender, which puts him at less of a risk of being taken as a sex slave, does not understand how violating forced marriage and forced intercourse can be. He rather callously assumes that the status of the man violating the woman has some impact on her willingness or level of trauma.*

Hecuba asks who has claimed her youngest daughter, Polyxena. Talthybius tells her Polyxena no longer feels pain, and will guard Achilles' tomb, which confuses Hecuba. In fact, Polyxena has died, and Talthybius is trying to protect Hecuba from her grief.

*Talthybius, although technically Hecuba's enemy, respects her enough to try and protect her feelings. However, hiding the death of her daughter from her does not erase the horrors of war.*

Hecuba is devastated to learn that Odysseus has claimed her for himself. She despises Odysseus, who she believes to be a slippery, treacherous beast, and feels she has been given "the worst lot of all."

*Although no woman is happy to be enslaved to a man who is her enemy, Hecuba seems to believe she is being personally singled out and punished by fortune and the gods.*

## LINE 294-461

Talthybius calls forth Cassandra. He has been ordered to bring her to Agamemnon as soon as possible. Within the tent a torch flares, and Talthybius wonders what it means. He suspects the Trojan women are setting the tent and themselves on fire rather than go to Greece with their captors. He is sympathetic to their cause, but hopes they will not burn themselves. He knows he will be punished if any of the women earmarked for his Greek masters die.

*Although earlier Talthybius had wondered if it was really so awful that Cassandra was being married to Agamemnon, in this moment he fully understands the anguish of the Trojan women. He recognizes that their position is so bleak that death seems like an attractive alternative.*

Cassandra, carrying a torch, exits the tent. She had been dancing erratically inside, which gave the false impression that women were immolating themselves. Cassandra begins to sing. She says her torch is a "fire of worship" for the god Hymen. She announces she feels blessed to "lie at a king's side." While her mother Hecuba cries over the loss of her husband and city, Cassandra will celebrate her "marriage" and the loss of her virginity "as man's custom ordains."

*Cassandra attempts to frame her enslavement to Agamemnon as a kind of consensual marriage. She calls upon the god of marriage, Hymen, and treats the union and the loss of her virginity (though it's unclear why she is still considered a virgin, considering her rape by Ajax) as a happy, lawful occasion, as opposed to the violation it truly is.*

Cassandra implores Hecuba to dance with her. She calls out to the god Apollo, and to Hymen again. She wants all to Trojan women to "dance for my wedding," and "for the husband fate appointed to lie beside me."

*Cassandra continues to act as though her immanent enslavement is a blessed marriage arranged and ordained by the gods. She likely does this to help herself feel better about her uncertain future.*

The Chorus Leader asks Hecuba to stop Cassandra from dancing. Hecuba takes her torch away and gives it to the Chorus, who exit into the tent. Hecuba tells Cassandra she never imagined she would have this kind of forced, violent marriage. She laments "there is no relief for you."

*Cassandra's sunny outlook is disturbing to the other women who more fully, or more visibly, grasp the gravity of their situation. Hecuba, too, sees Cassandra's marriage as a catastrophe, one that will rob her of her agency and any legitimate reproductive future.*

Cassandra begins to see her own future, and narrates it to Hecuba. She predicts that as a wife she will be "more fatal than Helen ever was." She will kill Agamemnon, and in the process avenge the deaths of her father, Priam, and brother, Hector. However, she will not reveal what she knows to Agamemnon, so that she may better enact her revenge.

*Although Cassandra knows that if she embraces her future it will lead to her death, she knows it will also lead to the deaths of Agamemnon and his family—people who she, in turn, blames for the death of her family and her city. She sees it as a kind of obligation to her loved ones to participate in the bloody destiny laid out for her.*

Cassandra is shocked that an entire war was fought for Helen's sake. The way she interprets events, Helen came to Troy of her own free will, so all the men, including Agamemnon, who fight and die for her seem to be wasting their lives. Cassandra recounts how so many Greeks died in battle, and had to be "buried in alien ground," far from their families. Even the men who survived lost a decade with their wives and children.

*Although the Trojans objectively lost the war, it is possible to frame the conflict as one that cost the Greek's almost as much as their besieged enemies. The Greeks lost years of their lives and years with their families, and did not receive the proper complex burial rites that they would have been given in their homelands, therefore potentially being denied entrance to the afterlife.*

Cassandra sees the Trojan men, who nevertheless lost the war, as the true victors, as they "died for their own country," not for some ill-begotten love affair. Although her brother Hector died, Cassandra does not see his death as tragic. Instead, she believes he died with valor, and died having spent the previous years with his own wife and children, unlike the lonely, invading Greek army.

*Although the Trojan men were slaughtered during the war and after the Fall of Troy, Cassandra argues that the cause for which they fought and died was inherently more respectable than the Greeks' cause. The Greeks fought over a single man's wife, whereas the Trojans fought for the sake of their homeland and families.*

Cassandra observes that "though surely the wise man will forever shrink from war," there is honor in fighting and dying protecting one's home. She compares herself to warriors in her "marriage" to Agamemnon. She explains to Hecuba that only her enslavement will "bring to destruction those whom you and I have hated the most."

*Cassandra believes there is virtue and honor in dying for a cause one believes in. She faces her death at the hands of Agamemnon and his family just as her father and brothers faced death at the hands of the Greeks. She argues that she and her family are bound in duty—the duty to protect and avenge their city and each other.*

Talthybius, who is still onstage standing guard, threatens Cassandra for threatening Agamemnon. However, he lets her off with a warning because of her troubled mind. He reflects that he would not marry or have sex with a woman as "unhinged" as Cassandra. He then prepares to lead her as "a bride" to the ships where Agamemnon waits.

*Talthybius remains loyal to the Greeks above all else, but is too sympathetic to the Trojan women to punish them further. He, like Cassandra, sees her enslavement as a wedding as opposed to bondage, but also sees past her potential as a beautiful wife to her emotional and mental instability. Although calling her "unhinged" is insensitive, he is still the only man able to see Cassandra as a complex, damaged human being, not just a sex object.*

Before she leaves, Cassandra delivers one final speech. She wonders why she predicted that Hecuba would die in Troy, when it seems as though Odysseus will take her to be his slave. However, she predicts that Odysseus has suffering in his future. He spent ten years fighting in Troy, but will spend another ten years trying to get home, fighting whirlpools, Cyclopes, witches, and more. She predicts "he will go down to the water of death, and return alive / to reach his home and thousand sorrows waiting there."

*Cassandra's prophecy follows the plot of Homer's* Odyssey, *which traces Odysseus' long journey home from Troy. His journey is made longer by the Greek gods, who he and his fellow soldiers angered when they disrespected their temple. Even though Odysseus was a victor, he will suffer further because of his behavior during the war. Fortunes are fluid, and no one remains on top for long.*

Cassandra takes a moment to gather herself. She demands that Talthybius take her "quick to the house of death where I shall take my mate." In anticipation of her defilement, Cassandra takes off her holy jewelry, bids Hecuba goodbye, and promises her dead brothers and dead father that "I will be with you soon and come triumphant to the dead below." Talthybius and his soldiers then escort her offstage.

*Although the gods have seemingly forsaken her, Cassandra remains dutiful to them. In removing her jewelry, she ensures the gods will not be disrespected even as her own body is violated. Her brief acknowledgement of the dead is both a promise—she knows she too will be dead soon—and an expression of the sorry state of her current life. One's life must seem exceptionally hopeless if death can be seen as "triumphant."*

## LINE 461-567

Hecuba collapses to the ground in tears. The Chorus Leader tries to help her, but Hecuba brushes her off. She believes she deserves all the pain she's endured.

*Hecuba is able to stay strong for herself, but finds it difficult to remain stoic when she sees her family suffer. Watching Hecuba react to Cassandra's enslavement helps instruct the audience on how traumatic and devastating the war is for its survivors.*

Hecuba considers asking the gods for help, but realizes that they have allowed her to suffer so far, and so seem unlikely to ease her suffering now. She begins to recount her fall from grace. She was formerly a queen, married to Priam, a king, and her children were royalty as well. Her sons and daughters were her pride and joy, and her husband was her great love. As a result, it was agonizing to see the men she loved killed, her city ransacked, her daughters enslaved.

*Hecuba has begun to lose faith in the gods. Although she once prayed to them for relief, she believes her fortune now is destined to be random at best, and miserable at worst. After falling so drastically from grace, she believes that the future, and her future specifically, is impossible to predict.*

Hecuba's own enslavement is just one additional indignity added to a pile of many. Still, it upsets her to imagine her future—an older woman so recently respected, now forced to sleep on the ground and serve a master she does not respect. She blames all this on Helen: "All this came to pass / and shall be, for the way one woman chose a man." Hecuba calls out to her daughter Polyxena, and to Cassandra. She pulls herself up off the ground and is escorted by Greek soldiers to the back of the stage, where she collapses again.

*Because she was once a queen, Hecuba's fall from grace is the most dramatic of any of the characters in the play. Furthermore, because she is an older woman, even in her enslavement she is made to feel degraded and worthless. Of course, it is not "better" or "worse" to be a slave who cleans a house than a slave who is forced to have sex with one's captor, but in Hecuba's mind, her enslavement has been designed to maximize her suffering and humiliation.*

The Chorus begins to sing. They feel that they must sing a "dirge for Troy's death." Together they describe how the war ended: they believed Troy had won and the city's citizens came out to celebrate. The Greeks had gifted them an enormous statue of a horse, and they took it as a peace offering and a surrender. The Trojans delivered the horse to the temple of Athena, and celebrated, dancing and singing into the night. Then, suddenly, the Greeks burst out from inside the horse and slaughtered the celebrating Trojans, killing the men, and taking the women as slaves.

*The Fall of Troy was especially bloody and tragic because it came amidst joyful celebration. The Trojans had let their guard down, and assumed they were safe at last, after ten years of conflict. When the Greeks erupted from the horse, which the Trojans had assumed was a hollow gift, they killed not only armed and ready soldiers, but unarmed and unprepared men, women, and children.*

## LINE 568-797

Greek soldiers enter the stage, pulling Andromache and her baby Astyanax on a wagon, piled with other spoils of war. The Chorus announces her arrival and calls to Hecuba to come see her daughter-in-law and her grandchild.

*Andromache and her child are lumped in with the inanimate spoils of war. They have been dehumanized to the point that they are transported like objects to be stripped from the city and claimed by the Greeks.*

Hecuba and Andromache begin to sing together, alternating phrases. Andromache announces that she will soon go with the Greeks, and wonders if her grief will cause Hecuba to cry as well. They lament the sad destiny of Hecuba's children, and the sad destiny of the city of Troy.

*Andromache and Hecuba feel the same kind of pain, as demonstrated by their matching styles of singing speech. Each has lost her husband, and each fears the loss of her children.*

Andromache calls out to Hector, her dead husband and Hecuba's son. Andromache wants to die and join him. She believes the people of Troy must be "hated of the gods." She can think of no other way to explain how Troy fell because of a "worthless woman" (Helen), or why its young men were killed and its women taken captive.

*Andromache believes her life is so sad and hopeless that it would be better to be dead. Once again, this underscores the horror of the situation the Trojan women have found themselves in—stripped of choice, agency, and bodily autonomy.*

The two women stop singing and begin to speak. Hecuba says she sees the destruction of Troy as "the work of gods who pile tower-high the pride / of those who were nothing, and dash present grandeur down."

*Both Hecuba and Andromache believe that their current fate is the work of the gods, but they no longer rely upon the gods to raise their fortunes again.*

Andromache reveals that Hecuba has lost another daughter; Polyxena was killed to "pleasure dead Achilles' corpse." Hecuba, who had not understood Talthybius earlier, finally understands what he was gently trying to tell her.

*Talthybius, in his attempt to be gentle and respectful, accidentally deprived Hecuba of the full knowledge of her daughter Polyxena's fate. He was able to delay her pain, but was unable to prevent it.*

Hecuba begins to mourn Polyxena. Andromache tries to comfort her. Andromache saw Polyxena die, and was able to perform some funeral rites. She also argues that "to die / as she did was happier than to live" as the two women do now. Hecuba disagrees, but Andromache pushes back.

*By performing funeral rites, Andromache helped guarantee Polyxena safe travel in the afterlife. Even in the aftermath of an enemy invasion, Andromache recognizes the importance of honoring and maintaining tradition.*

Andromache believes that death is better than a life of pain. The dead cannot grieve, and they cannot contemplate their suffering. Still alive, Andromache is acutely aware of the losses she's endured, and how far her fortunes have fallen.

*The indignities that Andromache has been forced to endure since the Fall of Troy make Polyxena's fate seem almost desirable. While Andromache continues to suffer, Polyxena has experienced her last humiliation.*

Andromache reflects on what a good wife she was — she rarely talked back, and she knew when and how to compromise. But now she feels that her reputation has ruined her life. Neoptolemus has picked her as his slave based on her good reputation, and now she must go to Greece with him. She isn't sure what to do or how to feel—she hates the idea of women who cast off old lovers for new ones, and can't imagine being a "traitor" to her dead husband, but she also knows she must comply with the desires of her new master.

*Ironically, the same behavior that brought Andromache and the people she loved joy in her past life will bring her misery in her future. Because she so perfectly played the ideal wife with the husband she loved, she'll have to do the same with a man she hates. This is a complicated situation for her—she is used to being compliant and so her instinct is to humor her new master, but she resents women like Helen who do not respect their old husbands when they move on to a new one.*

Andromache remembers the beginning of her relationship with Hector, and compares it to her life now. She is expected to have a sexual relationship with Neoptolemus, but knows it will be nothing like the love she felt for her husband. Andromache then turns to Hecuba. She argues that her fate, which binds her to Neoptolemus, is worse than Polyxena's. She has no hope to go on; she never expects to be happy again.

*Andromache's life was centered around her husband. Her life now is worse without him, and her marriage to Neoptolemus is terrible in two ways—she dreads their nonconsensual sexual relationship, and she dreads "betraying" her deceased husband by appearing to move on with her captor.*

The Chorus leader, who has been listening to Andromache's story, feels solidarity with her. In verbalizing her own suffering, she has also described the pain of the other Trojan women.

*By speaking out about their pain, the women come together and manage to ease some small amount of their suffering.*

Hecuba describes her own suffering through metaphor. As she grapples with an onslaught of woe, she feels like a ship's crew overwhelmed by a storm. Her suffering is so great she has been "swamped" by disaster, and was unable to respond to Andromache during her earlier speech. Now, however, Hecuba has her voice back.

*Hecuba often compares her body, and the bodies of other women, to the city of Troy and other large, stable structures. Describing her feelings proves too difficult, and she can only convey the magnitude of her pain and devastation by using metaphors like these.*

Hecuba advises Andromache to serve her master well, and to make him love her as protection. If Andromache and Neoptolemus have children together, Hecuba suggests these babies could grow up, return to Troy, and rebuild the city.

*While Andromache is worried about betraying her husband's memory, Hecuba sees that by giving in to Neoptolemus' advances Andromache could serve a greater master than either husband—she could serve her wider family and the city of Troy itself by bearing more Trojan children.*

Talthybius returns to the stage with his entourage of soldiers. He has come with terrible news, and is reluctant to deliver it. Andromache appreciates his sensitivity, but eventually he must speak: Odysseus has declared that Andromache's son (Astyanax) must die. He refuses to let Hector's child, a "hero's son," continue to live.

*The Greeks can only see Astyanax as a potential future man and soldier. This means that they perceive him as a threat, not as the child that he is. Talthybius, gracious as always, empathizes with Andromache and realizes the faulty logic of his fellow soldiers, but is powerless to stop their orders.*

Astyanax will be thrown over the wall of Troy, Talthybius says, and he advises Andromache not to fight this decree. He asks her to consider "how can one woman hope to struggle against the arms of Greece?" He warns her that if she fights or says anything against the Greeks, her son will be denied his funeral rites, and will not be buried at all.

*In the end, Andromache realizes that Astyanax will die no matter what she does. It is more important to her that he has a proper burial, which will allow him to travel safely in the afterlife, than for her to make a performance of struggling but lose her son anyway.*

Andromache says a tearful farewell to her child, explaining that his father's valor has proved a death sentence. She feels that all the love and pain of motherhood was all for nothing, only vanity. She then turns her attention to the Greeks—why "kill this child, who never did you any harm?"

*Andromache and Astyanax's suffering is some of the most intense and tragic in the whole play. Although the audience has heard Hecuba and Cassandra recounting past grief or imagining future hardship, the onstage separation of mother from child underscores the brutality of war and its aftermath.*

Andromache ends her speech by cursing the gods. She knows that if her son is to be killed it is because the gods "damn us to death," and there is nothing she can do. She demands Talthybius take her to "that sweet bridal bed," which she can only reach "across the death of my own child." Talthybius takes Astyanax from her, and Andromache is wheeled offstage in the wagon she rode in on.

*Andromache, who had little hope to begin with, now has none left. Her previous concerns of dishonoring her husband pale in comparison to her devastation at the loss of her child. She is too disheartened to even pray to the gods, who she assumes, like Hecuba before her, have damned her to this fate.*

Talthybius speaks to Astyanax sweetly before passing him to a set of Greek guards, who carry the baby offstage. Talthybius explains he is not the man for the job; he has too much pity, too much shame to kill a child. He exits after the guards. Hecuba begins to chant. She wonders what suffering could possibly be left for her and the women of Troy.

*Talthybius retains some decency and empathy. Even though Astyanax is technically his enemy, he cannot kill him alone. However, despite his sensitivity, he allows the orders to be carried out.*

## LINE 798-859

The Chorus sings a song about a previous attack on Troy. The demigod Heracles had made a deal to kill a sea monster that was attacking Troy, if the city's King would trade him some horses. He killed the sea monster, but the king, Laomedon, went back on his word. Angry, Heracles raided the city. The Chorus imagines how Laomedon's daughter, who was going to be sacrificed to the sea monster before Heracles killed it, must have felt as her city burned, and the women in it were killed.

*The horrors the women of Troy are enduring in the play's present unfortunately have a historical precedent. In the past, as in the present, the women and the buildings of the city itself were forced to pay the price for the failures of its armies and its men.*

The Chorus also sings of the goddess of the Dawn, Eos, and her Trojan lover, Tithonus. The remark that "the gods loved Troy once. Now they have forgotten."

*As the Chorus has lamented before, it seems that all the gods, even ones like Poseidon, who had historically supported Troy, have abandoned them.*

## LINE 860-1059

Menelaus enters the stage from the city, flanked by Greek soldiers. He is in a sunny mood, and stands in stark contrast to the miserable women of Troy. He is excited to be reunited with "Helen, my wife."

*Even after her humiliating public betrayal and ten years apart, Menelaus still views Helen as his property to be reclaimed.*

Menelaus wants to set the record straight—he didn't come to Troy just for a woman, but to punish the man who, "like a robber," stole her from him. This man, Paris, has been killed, and Troy has been destroyed—all according to, in Menelaus' mind, the will of the gods.

*Menelaus believes that it is better to fight a war under the pretense of punishing a man who stole property (in this case, a human woman) than to fight a war on behalf of said woman. In his mind, women are so insignificant that there is no honorable way to fight a war over one, although to many viewers, that is exactly what he has been doing.*

Now, it is finally time for Menelaus to reclaim Helen. He refers to her as a woman "once my own," who has now been reduced to a slave like the other women of Troy. He plans to transport her back to Greece where he will execute her in retribution for the Greek men who died on her behalf. First he instructs his soldiers to take her from the tent, but then he amends his language and tells them to "drag her" before him. A few of his soldiers break off and enter the tent.

*Given the opportunity to forgive and forget, or at least treat Helen with some respect, Menelaus instead decides to insult and degrade her. By repeatedly referring to her as his property, and by asking his soldiers to physically drag her out of the tent, he is purposefully showing off his power and control.*

Hecuba, who has remained onstage watching Menelaus's speech, takes a moment to invoke the gods. She asks them to "bring all human action back to right at last." Menelaus comments that this is a strange prayer. Hecuba responds that he should kill Helen. She fears that he will fall back in love, or lust, with his former wife, and will only cause more chaos.

*Hecuba feels no solidarity with Helen, although they are now both enslaved women. Instead Hecuba sees Helen as someone who disrupted the natural order of things, and did not do her duty as a loyal wife to Menelaus or even to her second husband, Paris. Although she does not believe the gods will help her, Hecuba prays to them anyway. Her strange prayer asks for the status quo to be restored, and for Helen to be punished for the crimes Hecuba perceives her to have committed, all of which are related to a lack of honor or sense of duty.*

Helen exits the tent and faces Menelaus. She can tell that Menelaus hates her by the way his soldiers treated her. She wonders what he plans to do to her. He says that although she has not been "strictly condemned," she now belongs to him, and he plans to kill her. Helen asks if she'll be allowed to make an argument for her life. Hecuba presses Menelaus to at least listen to Helen, although she also wants Helen dead. Menelaus lets Helen speak, but only because of Hecuba's intervention.

*As much as she hates Helen, Hecuba recognizes that it is only fair to let her speak. More than anything, Hecuba respects law, order, and ceremony. At this point, Helen has lost everything, and is no longer even in control of whether she lives or dies. This is technically true of all the remaining women, but becomes explicit in this scene.*

Helen begins to barter for her life. She argues based on points she anticipates Menelaus will use against her. First, she accuses Hecuba, the mother of Paris, as being to blame for the conflict. Then she blames Paris himself, for stealing her from Greece. Then she blames Aphrodite, who found Helen so beautiful that she promised her as a prize to Paris if he would declare Aphrodite the winner of a beauty contest. She argues that she was "sold once for my body's beauty," and is blameless.

*Helen refuses to take any blame for her actions or for the war itself. She argues that Aphrodite, who even among her fellow gods and goddesses was enchanting, entranced her. The way she frames the story, Helen was stolen by Paris because of her body, reduced only to her beauty and stripped of any agency.*

Helen then anticipates Menelaus's next argument—that she ran away of her own volition. Although she admits she did run away, it was because Paris came with Aphrodite at his side. She also points out that Menelaus had left her at home alone.

*Helen argues that she was overwhelmed by Aphrodite's power. She also points out that, just as she abandoned her wifely duties, first Menelaus had abandoned his duties as her husband, leaving her lonely and more likely to elope.*

Helen wonders to herself, "what made me run away from home / with the stranger, and betray my country and my hearth?" She argues that Aphrodite's power was too great, and points out that Aphrodite sometimes overpowers even other gods. How was Helen, a mortal, supposed to resist her?

*Helen admits that she did betray her country, a point Hecuba has been making and will continue to make. However, Helen doesn't dwell on it, and doesn't apologize. She sees this betrayal as a small crime, excusable because Aphrodite bewitched her.*

Helen concedes that after Paris died she could have left the city of Troy and joined the Greeks stationed outside its walls. She claims she did try to scale the wall, but gatekeepers caught her and pulled her back inside. She also argues that after Paris died she was married to Deiphobus, who prevented her from escaping. She argues that she was "the bride of force."

*In every component of her story, Helen argues that she was a victim at the mercy of others. Still, she insists she continued to love Menelaus and stayed faithful to him in her heart, an assertion Hecuba will later challenge.*

Helen challenges Menelaus, asking him if he "would be stronger than the gods." She hopes that, after all she has said, he cannot feel "righteous" in killing her.

*Helen hopes to prove that she was not at fault, or at least not at fault enough to justify Menelaus' murder of her. She tries to invoke his sense of right and wrong, and make him question if killing her is truly honorable.*

The Chorus Leader, having listened to Helen's defense, implores Hecuba to "break down the beguilement" of this well-spoken but wicked woman.

*Like Hecuba, the Chorus Leader believes Helen to be lying and duplicitous, a woman who failed to uphold her obligations to her husband and has no reservations about lying.*

Hecuba begins her rebuttal by defending the gods. She is skeptical that Hera and Athena were contestants in the godly beauty contest in which Helen claims Paris won her hand. She continues to criticize Helen's claim that she was unable to resist Aphrodite's pull when she arrived with Paris. Paris was extraordinarily handsome, and Hecuba speculates that Helen's lust for Paris, along with her lust for the gold and luxury reflected in his fine robes, motivated her to leave Sparta.

*Hecuba disagrees with Helen's account of her "abduction." While Helen claimed to have been dazzled by Aphrodite's power, Hecuba proposes that Helen was instead dazzled by Paris's looks and wealth. Hecuba accuses Helen of being an actively unfaithful wife who left Menelaus of her own free will, as opposed to a faithful one stolen away due to divine intervention.*

Hecuba also attacks Helen's claim that she was taken by force. She wonders if any Spartans heard her resisting as Paris took her. Furthermore, she accuses Helen of praising Menelaus to Paris when the Greeks were winning, but fawning over Paris when the Trojans were ahead. Hecuba accuses Helen of making "sure always to be on the winning side."

*Hecuba attacks Helen both for being unfaithful to Menelaus and leaving for Troy with Paris, but also for being an unfaithful wife to Paris. This, in Hecuba's eyes, seems to be Helen's major crime—inconstant loyalties that reveal a self-serving nature.*

Furthermore, Hecuba argues that if Helen really wanted to escape she would have tried to kill herself, or her husband, like a faithful, "noble wife" to Menelaus would do. Hecuba says she told Helen to leave over and over again, to return to Menelaus and end the war, but Helen refused, perhaps, according to Hecuba, because she was "spoiled in the luxury" of Paris's home.

*Shockingly, Hecuba would prefer to see Helen harm herself or Paris (Hecuba's own son) than see her sit complacently in Troy. This complacency, in Hecuba's mind, represents Helen's betrayal of her first husband, who, although Hecuba's enemy, still deserved the affection of his wife.*

Hecuba feels that Helen should at least seem repentant, and believes she retains her "old impudence," sinfulness, and immodesty. She repeats her plea, and asks Menelaus to kill Helen. The Chorus Leader agrees, and urges him to "keep the ancestral honor of your house."

*Hecuba, worried that Menelaus will let Helen live, encourages him to think of his duty, not just to himself and his pride, but to his entire family line, as well as larger systems of honor and obligation, disrespected by Helen once and continuously disrespected by letting her live.*

Menelaus agrees with Hecuba's assessment of Helen and her story. He thinks her talk of Aphrodite is "for pure show." Helen falls to her knees before him and holds on to his legs. She argues that the gods infected her mind, and her actions are not her fault.

*Helen does her best to appear as a subservient wife, but to Menelaus this show is unconvincing. Although her physical lowering of herself is persuasive, her story, unfortunately, was not.*

Hecuba urges Menelaus to think of his fallen friends and soldiers. She also tells him, if he insists on taking Helen back to Greece, to transport her on a separate ship. She worries "a man in love once never is out of love again," and Menelaus agrees. He promises Hecuba he will kill Helen in Argos, as an example to the "lust of women" everywhere. He and Helen then exit together, along with his Greek soldiers.

*Once again, Hecuba invokes Menelaus' greater obligations, not just to his own wounded pride, but to the thousands of fellow soldiers who died on his behalf. She also reveals a fairly reductive view of male-female relationships; one that suggests men and women of similar ages can only be lovers. Hecuba believes that a man and woman who were once attracted to each other will remain so forever, even if that love was interrupted by an affair, a ten-year war, and the enslavement of one of the parties.*

## LINE 1060-1332

The Chorus begins to sing a song. They sing to Zeus of his destroyed Trojan temples. They wonder if he has forgotten and forsaken their city. They sing to their dead husbands, now "wandering ghosts," and imagine their own journeys across the ocean as they are scattered throughout Greece. They also sing of Menelaus's ship. They hope a bolt of Zeus's lightning and will hit and sink it, with Helen aboard.

*Although they believe the gods have deserted them, the women of Troy continue to pray to them. Because their own fortunes fell so rapidly, they recognize that the fortunes of their captors could fall just as unpredictably.*

Talthybius enters from the city, accompanied by Greek soldiers. They carry Astyanax's lifeless body on **Hector's shield**. Talthybius tells Hecuba that the ships have been leaving. Neoptolemus left with Andromache, who was unable to bury her own son. Instead, Andromache has asked that Hecuba and Talthybius perform burial rites for Astyanax, and use Hector's shield as both a coffin and a tomb.

*Kindly, Talthybius has allowed Hecuba to perform funeral rites for her grandson, which will allow Astyanax to pass peacefully into the afterlife. Hector's shield, once a symbol of masculine power, has been tragically converted into a casket, underscoring the brutal human cost of the war.*

Talthybius urges Hecuba to hurry, but promises to give her the time she needs. He has already cleaned Astyanax's wounds, and leaves to go dig a grave for him as Hecuba prepares the body. She speaks generally as she tends to the child's corpse—addressing the Greeks even though the soldiers have left with Talthybius.

*The importance of rituals transcends the divide between Trojans and Greeks. It unites both Talthybius and Hecuba in an obligation not to their relative nations but to the duties and respects paid to the dead.*

Hecuba wonders why the Greek army found it necessary to kill a child. Were they afraid that Astyanax might grow up to reconstruct Troy? She finds this fear baseless, cowardly, and unreasonable. She imagines Astyanax's potential future—he could have died fighting for Troy; he could have grown up to be king. She graphically describes his bloody face, but cuts herself off because it is too awful to linger over.

*Astyanax's destroyed body is the clearest symbol of the horrible cost of war presented in the play. A child, he was incapable of posing any real threat to the Greek army for decades to come. Still, their fear that he would grow into a man and a warrior trumped any rational perception of him as a harmless, defenseless baby.*

Hecuba remembers when Astyanax was alive, and how he would jump on her bed and promise to cut his hair in mourning at her funeral. She wonders what a poet would write on his grave, if he were given one. She considers "here lies a little child the Argives killed, because they were afraid of him," which she describes as "the epitaph of Greek shame." Astyanax will inherit nothing from his father Hector but his **shield**, which is now his coffin. The Chorus comes from the tent to help Hecuba with the burial. They bring with them a few salvaged ornaments with which to decorate Astyanax's body. Hecuba speaks to Astyanax again. She imagines that she could be giving him gifts for success in archery or riding, but instead it is to honor him in death. She blames Helen, who has "brought ruin to all our house."

*Hector's shield once represented the masculine power of a soldier and hero, and now it represents the cowardice and ignorance of the Greek army. Astyanax is not a man—he is a child. Because he is not an adult man he cannot be a Trojan soldier, and he cannot rationally be a threat. Still, to the Greeks, all male children represent a potential warrior who could threaten their power. Just as the majority of Greek soldiers seem unable to see women as more than objects to be claimed, they are unable to see men as anything other than threats to be neutralized.*

The Chorus begins to sing in conversation with Hecuba, who continues to speak. Hecuba drapes Astyanax in a robe, which she notes that he should have worn at his wedding. She lays him upon Hector's **shield**, which symbolizes the many battles he could have fought and won. Together the Chorus and Hecuba singe "the dirge of the dead," a song of anger, mourning, and remembrance. Hecuba binds the rest of Astyanax's wounds as she sings.

*The whole scene of Astyanax's burial is incredibly sad. Again and again the tragedy and pointlessness of his death is emphasized. Hector's shield, which formerly defended Astyanax in life, now cradles him in death. Hector's valorous death is shown to be at least partially meaningless, as the loss of his life couldn't even protect his infant child.*

Hecuba feels that the gods have joined together to ruin her life. She believes Troy's destruction was the result of their random whims. She announces that she has fully prepared Astyanax for burial, and Greek soldiers collect him and carry him offstage. She wonders if it matters to him that he was buried with "tokens of luxury." She decides it is simply a consolation for the living.

*Hecuba has spent much of the play emphasizing how important it is to her to maintain tradition and familial and social duties even in the face of great upheaval. Now, however, her whole world has begun to break down. Although she has performed Astyanax's funeral rites, she barely seems to believe in them. It is in this moment that she loses her last bit of hope.*

Talthybius reenters the stage, flanked by soldiers. He announces that is time for the Greeks to burn down the city, and then to return home. Talthybius then addresses the women of Troy. When the trumpet calls, it is their signal to board the Greek ships. Hecuba unhappily prepares to leave. She reflects on how Troy, once so powerful, will have its "very name of glory…stripped away."

*Like the women themselves, Troy is also stripped of its glory, power, and agency over its own physical body, which will soon be consumed by flames.*

Hecuba wonders if she should call out to the gods. She reflects that she had asked for help with no response, and expects nothing from them now. She tries to rally her fellow women to jump into the fires now consuming Troy, but Talthybius orders his soldiers to hold her back—"She is Odysseus' property," and must be kept safe for him.

*After spending much of the play arguing that living is better than dying, because at least the living have the opportunity to hope and pray for a better life, Hecuba has finally given up on the gods and on her future. However, she no longer even owns her own life—Odysseus does—and he will not let her die until he is ready.*

Hecuba and the Chorus sing together as the city burns behind them. Hecuba wonders if Zeus is watching the destruction of Troy. The Chorus responds that he has seen it, but the city is gone, there is nothing left to destroy, and nothing for him to do. Hecuba calls out to her children, who grew up in the city, but the Chorus reminds her that they are dead or gone. Together, Hecuba and the Chorus kneel, beat the ground, and lament the deaths of their loved ones.

*The gods have truly, finally, and completely forsaken the burning city of Troy. Similarly, they seem to have forsaken the city's women, who are emotionally breaking down as the city is literally consumed by flames. Although throughout the play the women have been listing the indignities they've been forced to endure, this final burning of Troy takes away, once and for all, everything that ever mattered to them—their homes, their memories, their families, and their freedom.*

Hecuba and the Chorus describe the flames and smoke of the burning city, pausing when they hear a crash—the citadel has fallen. This signals to Hecuba that all is lost. She stands and readies herself. She is ready to mourn, and then go "forward: into the slave's life."

*As the citadel falls in the center of Troy, so does the last of Hecuba's resistance crumble. Her city burns, mirroring the last of her willpower eroding. After struggling against her fate for the duration of the play, she is finally ready to succumb to it.*

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