

The Violence of Victory: Moral Collapse in Euripides' *Trojan Women*

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Abstract

This paper examines the emotional, psychological, and social ramifications of war in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, focusing on Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen and highlighting their struggles and resilience in the war's aftermath. By drawing parallels between the play and contemporary events such as the Peloponnesian War and the Melian Dialogue, this paper argues that Euripides critiques the inherent brutality of war and the moral degradation of the victors. Through this examination, themes of grief, loss, and existential despair underscore the timeless relevance of *Trojan Women* and its profound insights into the human condition during periods of crisis.

"People sometimes talk about man's bestial cruelty, but that is being terribly unjust and offensive to the beasts: a beast can never be as cruel as a human being, so artistically, so picturesquely cruel."¹

Euripides' *Trojan Women* endures as a powerful exemplar of ancient Greek tragedy, offering a poignant portrayal of war's aftermath and its human cost. Written in Athens during fifth-century BCE, the play explores the devastation wrought by conflict and the lasting suffering it leaves behind. It presents a timeless meditation on the human condition in times of crisis, connecting themes of grief, loss, and existential despair with a nuanced examination of fate and morality. Within this context, *Trojan Women* can be interpreted as Euripides' expression of pity and sorrow for those destroyed by their own polis,² as the tragedy vividly renders the destruction and trauma inflicted by war. In foregrounding the suffering of Troy's women, Euripides critiques the emotional, psychological, and societal consequences of violence, using their pain as a powerful lens to expose war's broader moral and political implications.

The play is deeply embedded with political allusions and shaped by the historical and social contexts of its time. Euripides may have intended this mirroring to critique the destructive consequences of war, particularly its role in cultivating violence. Such a theme could have resonated strongly with fifth-century BCE Athenian audiences, as the play premiered in March 415 BCE, just three months after the sack of Melos.³ In 426 BCE, Athens sent sixty ships and two thousand hoplites to Melos for the purpose of making the Melians join the Athenian alliance⁴

¹ Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts and an Epilogue*, trans. David McDuff (Penguin Books, 2003), 311.

² Grace Harriet Macurdy, "The Fifth Book of Thucydides and Three Plays of Euripides," *The Classical Review* 24, no. 7 (1910): 206, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/695255>.

³ Paolo Babbiotti and Luca Torrente, "Euripides's *Trojan Women*: A Critique of Asymmetric Conflict?" in *Conflict and Competition: Agon in Western Greece*, vol. 5, ed. Heather L. Reid, John Serrati, and Tim Sorg, Selected Essays from the 2019 Symposium on the Heritage of Western Greece (Parnassos Press – Fonte Aretusa, 2020), 176, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15tt78p.15>.

⁴ Michael G. Seaman, "The Athenian Expedition to Melos in 416 B.C.," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 46, no. 4 (1997): 386, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4436483>.

(possibly to make the Athenian alliance more powerful), but according to Thucydides, Melos declined to join the Athenian league voluntarily⁵ opting instead to maintain neutrality.⁶ In 416 BCE, after failed negotiations commonly known as Melian Dialogue,⁷ the Athenians who were motivated by politics and power⁸ proceeded to siege Melos and executed as many adult males as they captured,⁹ in addition to selling women and children into slavery after territory occupation.¹⁰

Aside from the Athenian attack on Melos and the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), the Mytilenean Debate (427 BCE) further shaped the sociopolitical climate in which Euripides was writing. During the Mytilenean Debate, Cleon urged the Athenian assembly to punish the Mytileneans more seriously than their crimes warranted.¹¹ Cleon proposed the idea that Athens should execute all Mytilenean men and enslave Mytilenean women and children, arguing that such a course of action fits the crime and is warranted to preserve imperial power as Mytilene had revolted against Athens.¹² Athens' attacks on Melos and Mytilene, along with the events of the Peloponnesian War, reinforce the realities of war's destruction—an idea that closely aligns with Euripides' dramatic portrayal of its devastating human cost. Thucydides, in his historical account and reflection, highlights how war breeds violence¹³ and emphasized the moral and societal deterioration brought about by war.

The conflict within *Trojan Women* encapsulates the prevailing moral predicament of Classical Athens, particularly amidst the tumultuous Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) and its imperial aspirations. Against the backdrop of military conflict and ethical introspection, Athens found itself entangled in existential debates surrounding power dynamics, moral imperatives, and the ethical complexities inherent in exercising hegemonic power. This was perhaps what compelled Euripides to write a play riddled with political criticism. In his careful treatment of the conflict in *Trojan Women*, Euripides shines a spotlight on Athenian society, the stark realities of warfare, and excessive suffering endured by the defeated. Euripides undertakes a critique of the prevailing narratives of triumph and conquest perpetuated by the Athenian hegemony.

Trojan Women refreshes the dialogues between Cleon and Diodotus during the Mytilenean debate in the Athenian audience's mind, making them reflect on being a *victor*, confronting the reality that triumph can coexist with moral ruin. Euripides forces the audience into profound introspection, prompting a re-evaluation of the foundations upon which Athenian

⁵ Seaman, "The Athenian Expedition," 387.

⁶ Seaman, "The Athenian Expedition," 389.

⁷ Fernando Echeverría, "The Second Peloponnesian War, 431–404 BC," in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Battles*, ed. Harry Sidebottom and Michael Whitby (Wiley Online Library, 2017), 49, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119099000.wbat0130>.

⁸ Seaman, "The Athenian Expedition," 386.

⁹ Seaman, "The Athenian Expedition," 390.

¹⁰ Echeverría, "Second Peloponnesian War," 50.

¹¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War, Volume II: Books 3-4*, trans. C. F. Smith (Harvard University Press, 1920), Loeb Classical Library 109, 62–3, <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL109/1920/volume.xml>.

¹² Charles Fornara, "The Aftermath of the Mytilenean Revolt," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 59, no. 2 (2010): 129, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27809560>.

¹³ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 142–3.

democracy purportedly rests—“Why are you all agreeing to be complicit in the useless shedding of blood in the name of lust for power?”—thereby reframing the play as a critical mirror of the *polis* and its civic identity.¹⁴ In doing so, Euripides confronts his audience with human suffering and the ethical costs of imperial violence, exposing the fragility of the ideological claims underpinning Athenian power. Read in this light, the play participates in a broader fifth-century BCE discourse on empire, ethics and civic responsibility. Euripides suggests that there are no victors in a war, for even the so-called *victors* betray themselves by shirking their humanity. Euripides thus destabilises triumphalist narratives of victory and suggests that war functions to methodically and systematically diminish human value.

Thucydides’ account of the Melian massacre—particularly the execution of men of military age and the enslavement of women and children—finds a powerful dramatic echo in the laments of the Trojan women, who mourn the losses of their children and slain husbands. Read alongside the chronology of its performance, this parallel encourages the audience to view *Trojan Women* as a poetic counterpart to both the Mytilenean Debate and the Melian Dialogue, transforming myth into a sustained reflection on the brutality of Classical Athenian policy and the suffering inflicted in the context of war. The play thus reinforces Euripides’ depiction of the Trojan women’s suffering as a powerful indictment of the violence and ethical collapse inherent in warfare.

Trojan Women is a tragedy set in the aftermath of the Trojan War, foregrounding the suffering of Troy’s women—particularly Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen. In the wake of the Greeks’ sack of Troy, the surviving women are taken captive and confronted with the prospect of death or enslavement. Hecuba mourns both the fall of Troy and the deaths of her husband, Priam, and her sons, Paris and Hector. Cassandra, endowed with prophetic insight, foresees her own tragic fate—one that the fifth-century Athenian audiences, familiar with Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, would readily recognise—while Andromache grieves for her husband Hector and her child, Astyanax. Throughout the play, the women grapple with their grief, despair, and uncertain future, depicting the human cost of war and its enduring consequences. The play thus functions as a critical counterpoint to imperial discourse, exposing the moral contradictions embedded in Athenian claims to authority and reframing mythic destruction as an implicit critique of the Athenian Empire. According to the Homeric epics, Menelaus wages a war against Troy to maintain his honour following the violation of *xenia* (the act of hospitality, commonly observed in ancient Greece and frequently emphasized in myths and epic poetry which prescribe that all the guests be offered the best possible treatment)¹⁵ by Paris, who allegedly kidnapped Helen, his wife, despite being received as a guest friend.

Xenia offers a moral code that guides the interaction between the visitors and the hosts. Guests and the hosts should maintain these bonds of *friendship* and respect for each other to experience a haven wherein uncertainty and hostility are suspended.¹⁶ At a political level, these

¹⁴ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Le miroir brisé: Tragédie athénienne et politique* (Les Belles Lettres, 2002), 61–2.

¹⁵ Gregory T. Papanikos, “Philoxenia and Xenophobia in Ancient Greece,” *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 6, no. 3 (2020): 238, <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajms.6-3-4>.

¹⁶ Gilbert P. Rose, “The Unfriendly Phaeacians,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 100 (1969): 390, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935923>.

relationships extend beyond the household, forming enduring networks of obligation between elites across *poleis* that facilitated safe passage and mediation, and therefore was understood as a foundation of social order.¹⁷ Since *xenia* functioned not merely as a private ethic but also as a social norm, its violation was understood as a disruption of order that may justify violent retribution. Within such a moral framework, Paris' supposed breach of *xenia* would have been perceived as warranting retaliation—much as, from an Athenian perspective, the refusal of *poleis* such as Mytilene and Melos to submit to Athenian authority was construed as a breach of political order thereby legitimising extreme punitive violence.

One further note is that particular ancient sources, such as Herodotus, indicate disapproval of the Greek response to Helen's abduction, despite acknowledging the violation of *xenia* that prompted it.¹⁸ It is therefore plausible that some of the fifth-century BCE Athenian audiences may have been receptive to similar critical attitudes towards the scale of the Greek retaliation. Viewed in this context, *Trojan Women* can be understood as engaging with a broader intellectual climate in which the moral foundations of retributive warfare were being questioned. This rhetoric is starkly echoed in the logic of the Melian Dialogue, where power rather than justice becomes the determining principle of action. Euripides thus participates in—and problematises—the same ideological world, exposing the fragility of ethical claims in the face of imperial violence. Through this play, he repeatedly compels audiences to interrogate both the action of each character, and civic ideology, along with the consequences that arise from them, producing a form of tragedy that resists closure and remains open to reinterpretation across changing historical and political contexts.¹⁹

There are several edited primary sources with influenced interpretations of the play that complement the narrative of *Trojan Women*. In addition to Thucydides' *Histories of the Peloponnesian War*, Homer's *Iliad* provides an epic account of the Trojan War: the emphasis is on the heroic deeds of Greek heroes, such as Achilles, while the plight of the Trojan women is mentioned only in passing. In contrast, Euripides' *Trojan Women* presents a nuanced and compassionate portrayal of the women's experiences, foregrounding their desperate helplessness and utter inability to change their fate.²⁰ Euripides uses the play to illuminate perhaps the petty *reasons* for war. He forces the audience to witness the moment an agonistic conflict—originally aiming for victory over the Trojans—devolves into an asymmetric one, where the Greeks systematically annihilate and enslave the weaker Trojans.²¹ This is seen most clearly when the victors claim the Trojan women as war prizes and execute the innocent, such as the child Astyanax.

¹⁷ Mary Scott, "Philos, Philotēs and Xenia," *Acta Classica* 25 (1982): 15, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24591786>.

¹⁸ Hdt. 1.4.2.

¹⁹ David Sansone, "Stage and Law Court in Late Fifth-Century Athens," in *Ancient Greek Civilization*, 3rd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 194.

²⁰ S. Farron, "The Portrayal of Women in the *Iliad*," *Acta Classica* 22 (1979): 15, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24591564>.

²¹ Paolo Babbiotti and Luca Torrente, "Euripides's *Trojan Women*: A Critique of Asymmetric Conflict?" in *Conflict and Competition: Agon in Western Greece*, vol. 5, ed. Heather L. Reid, John Serrati, and Tim Sorg, Selected Essays from the 2019 Symposium on the Heritage of Western Greece (Parnassos Press – Fonte Aretusa, 2020), 171, 173, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15tt78p.15>.

The themes of asymmetric conflict, the inherent injustice of war and the chaos that follows it are undeniable: the city of Troy was razed to the ground and its citizens who were not complicit with the events that started a war were mercilessly murdered and enslaved. All this destruction is justified by the victors as a response to a violation of *xenia* and as an act to maintain superiority and power,²² revealing that a decade of slaughter was built on hollow excuses.²³ This strips away any *noble* justification for the conflict, leaving the audience with only the raw, purposeless trauma of the aftermath. In doing so, Euripides transforms the tragedy into an anti-war critique, proving that when victory is measured in the slaughter of the innocent and enslavement of the survivors, the *reasons* are solely related to atrocity. This realization turns the play into a mirror for Athens, suggesting that the Athens-Sparta conflict through which the audience had lived and witnessed was being fought for no particular reason. By confronting this absurdity, the audience is offered a space to sit with their own feelings of helplessness and despair, ultimately reaching catharsis through the tragedy. Moreover, the cathartic resonance emanating from *Trojan Women* embodies profound emotional depth and introspection. Rather than having a conventional denouement, the resolution of the central conflict within the play emerges from a collective empathy and shared humanity.

Furthermore, other ancient Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, also explored aspects of the Trojan cycle in their plays such as *Agamemnon* and *Philoctetes*. These texts offer alternative perspectives on the Trojan War and its aftermath, often emphasizing the heroism and glory of the Greek warriors—their *arete* and *kleos*—rather than the suffering of the Trojan women. In contrast, Euripides' focus on the suffering of Trojan women marks a significant ideological shift, redirecting attention from heroic achievement to the human cost of conquest. As such, the play aligns more closely with the Melian Dialogue, in which power is presented as overriding moral justification. Euripides thus intervenes in a broader fifth-century BCE discourse on empire, exposing the tension between celebratory narratives of Greek success and the ethical instability underlying imperial domination.

Euripides extends his examination of the post-Trojan War experience in later tragedies such as *Andromache* (c. 425 BCE), and *Hecuba* (c. 424 BCE). The former explores Andromache's condition as a captive enslaved to Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, while the latter centres on Hecuba's continued suffering, including the murder of her youngest son Polydorus and the sacrificial death of Polyxena at the hands of the Greeks in honour of Achilles.²⁴ Across these plays, Euripides consistently foregrounds the experiences of marginalised female figures, granting narrative and emotional centrality to those typically excluded from heroic discourse. In doing so, he displaces traditional epic focus on male heroism, reorienting attention toward the lived consequences of war and the perspectives of its victims, who are often excluded from narratives of *kleos*, triumph, and conquest.

²² Euripides, "Trojan Women," in *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, ed. Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, trans. Emily Wilson (Modern Library, 2016), lines 1033–5.

²³ Here, Menelaus is being told not to show mercy to avoid appearing effeminate in front of his army.

²⁴ Euripides, "Hecuba," in *Euripides II: Andromache, Hecuba, The Suppliant Women, Electra*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most, Richmond Lattimore, David Grene, and Mark Griffith, *The Complete Greek Tragedies* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 65.

The primary conflict in *Trojan Women* is between the Greek conquerors and the captive Trojan women. The Greek victors assert their dominance by enslaving the surviving women and reducing them to symbols of conquest. Stripped of their homeland, familial bonds, and political agency, the Trojan women are forced to confront an uncertain and irreparable future defined by displacement and enslavement. The tragedy therefore derives its emotional and ideological force from the stark contrast between the moral degradation of the victors and the profound, unrelenting suffering of the defeated. Read within its fifth-century BCE context, the play functions as an implicit critique of the ideological foundations of Athenian imperialism, exposing the violence and human cost concealed beneath glorified notions of victory in war.²⁵ The Greeks' prideful disdain for divine justice, together with their moral collapse—exemplified by the infanticide of Astyanax²⁶ and the sacrilegious desecration of Trojan temples²⁷—manifests as a profound *hybris* that invites divine retribution.²⁸ Ultimately, the play does not offer a clear resolution; instead, it foregrounds the inability to restore meaning after the devastation of war. *Trojan Women* exposes a logic of imperial power that resonates with both the Mytilenean Debate and Melian Dialogue, both in which violence emerges as an expression of authority. In doing so, it exposes the moral collapse that underpins conquest.

Here, Talthybius, whose humanity intensified the emotional aspect of the tragedy,²⁹ shows the most compassion and sympathy for the Trojan women. He showed his disapproval³⁰ of the excessive brutality of the Greek army, emphasizing Athena's and Poseidon's stance regarding the gratuitous violence of the Greeks.³¹ His empathy does not simply elicit sympathy for the Trojans; it serves as a subversive critique of Athenian expansionism. Talthybius helped Hecuba prepare Astyanax's body for funeral.³² Aside from his emotionality about Andromache's situation,³³ he also prevented Hecuba's suicide³⁴ which was not part of his role as a herald. When this herald of the 'victors' grieves for the defeated, the audience is forced to confront that the maintenance of their hegemony necessitates a betrayal of the fundamental humanity Talthybius struggles to preserve. From this, we can discern that this character is Euripides' balance and mediation of humanity amid war and violence.

Through Talthybius, Euripides holds a mirror to an Athens increasingly intoxicated by its own power—an empire that, as evidenced by the Mytilenean Debate and Melian Dialogue, has traded its ethical integrity for absolute dominance. If a mere subordinate can recognize the

²⁵ C. A. E. Luschnig, "Euripides' 'Trojan Women': All Is Vanity," *The Classical World* 65, no. 1 (1971): 9, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4347531>.

²⁶ Euripides, "Trojan Women," lines 719–75.

²⁷ Euripides, "Trojan Women," lines 69–71.

²⁸ Euripides, "Trojan Women," lines 65–95.

²⁹ James Jan Sullivan, "The Agency of the Herald Talthybius in Euripides' 'Trojan Women,'" *Mnemosyne* 60, no. 3 (2007): 476, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27736155>.

³⁰ Euripides, "Trojan Women," line 710.

³¹ Euripides, "Trojan Women," lines 787–9.

³² Euripides, "Trojan Women," lines 1115–135.

³³ Euripides, "Trojan Women," line 1130.

³⁴ Sullivan, "The Agency," 476.

sanctity of the defeated, the audience is compelled to interrogate why their own leadership cannot. This transition effectively strips the play of its mythological distance, reframing the narrative as an indictment of Athens' lust for hegemony. Euripides seemed to recognise the lapse into immorality of Athenian democracy and disagreed with its decision³⁵ and used Talthybius to challenge the justifications to these atrocities. By showing a herald who is visibly burdened by the pain he must inflict, Euripides suggests that the true cost of war is the destruction of the conscience. The play serves as a warning to the people of Athens that victory should not mean exacting purposeless violence and brutality on those who are weak and innocent.

The play's enduring relevance lies in its refusal to offer a conventional heroic resolution, providing instead a sanctuary for collective empathy and a mirror for every civilization that justifies its ascent through the suffering of others. Euripides leaves his audience not with the comfort of victory, but with the raw, purposeless trauma of the defeated. In doing so, *Trojan Women* transforms from a tragedy rooted in antiquity into a harrowing indictment of cruelty, consequences of war, and human indifference—themes that continue to resonate across generations and conflicts alike. Ultimately, Euripides transforms *Trojan Women* into a cautionary reflection: when the pursuit of war eclipses shared humanity, what remains is not triumph, but a void shaped by suffering, loss, and irreparable destruction.

³⁵ A. Maria van Erp Taalman Kip, "Euripides and Melos," *Mnemosyne* 40, no. 3/4 (1987): 417, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4431648>.

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