

DUCKWORTH COMPANIONS  
TO GREEK AND ROMAN TRAGEDY



# EURIPIDES: TROJAN WOMEN

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## Contexts

### 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?'

Euripides' *Trojan Women* has regularly been acclaimed as a drama of extraordinary power in depicting the sorrows of war. For some, the focus on war has seemed excessive; the play has often been dismissed as 'one long lament'.<sup>2</sup> Others, particularly in more recent years, have sensed that the play's figuring of war's devastation – the loss of homes, families, hope – addresses with disturbing precision their own struggles. The play provokes strong reactions.

*Trojan Women* is interested in much else besides lamentation. The quotation above from *Hamlet*, centring on Hekabe, the fallen queen of Troy, suggests that part of its fascination lies in the complex sympathy between those on stage and those who spectate. *Trojan Women* invites us both to identify with its characters and to stand back and judge them – and in the process to judge ourselves. A more recent response than that of Hamlet, Mary Renault's fictional account of a fourth-century BCE performance of *Trojan Women*, evokes both the play's power to move the audience and its self-awareness. Caught between the play's emotions and his professional responsibilities, the actor playing a dead child speaks:<sup>3</sup>

Soon after came my cue to be brought on, dead ... The chorus called out the dreadful news to my grannie Hekabe; lying, eyes shut ... I prayed Dionysos not to let me sneeze. There was a pause which because I could not see seemed to last for ever. The whole theatre had got dead silent,

holding its breath. Then a terrible low voice said just beside me,

*Lay down the circled shield of Hektor on the ground.*

... the voice seemed to go all through me, making my backbone creep with cold. I forgot it was I who was being mourned for. ... All I remember for certain is my swelling throat, and the horror that came over me when I knew I was going to cry.

My eyes were burning. Terror was added to my grief. I was going to wreck the play. The sponsor would lose the prize; Kroisos the crown; my father would never get a part again; we would be in the streets begging our bread. And after the play, I would have to face terrible Hekabe without a mask. Tears burst from my shut eyes; my nose was running. I hoped I might die, that the earth would open or the skene catch fire, before I sobbed aloud.

The hand that had traced my painted wounds lifted me gently. I was gathered into the arms of Hekabe; the wrinkled mask with its down-turned mouth bent close above. The flute, which had been moaning softly through the speech, getting a cue, wailed louder. Under its sound, Queen Hekabe whispered in my ear, 'Be quiet, you little bastard. You're dead.'

The power of the drama viscerally to move the audience is lovingly celebrated here, but the episode has it both ways, because it is voiced by the actor who shares responsibility for producing the illusion. He too is overcome, but if he does not maintain the illusion, he will likely be dead for real. In line with the concerns of my opening quotations, then, this book will foreground not only the emotional power of *Trojan Women*, but also its self-consciousness and intellectual energy.<sup>4</sup> I shall resist the hoary typing of the play as 'static', 'passive', or 'one long lament', by drawing attention to its dynamic structure, and by examining its capacity to generate new versions of itself in the twentieth century and beyond. My strategy will be to set the play in its historical and cultural context, before proceeding to

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a close reading that allows a full appreciation of its dramatic development, and finally to an account of twentieth-century receptions. Before we embark on these investigations, however, we might review the overall claims that the play makes on our attention; what's Hecuba to us?

### What's Hecuba to us?

*Trojan Women* is a play set in the immediate aftermath of the legendary defeat of Troy by the Greek army, and the women of the title are captives who spend the drama waiting to be assigned as slaves to their new masters. A brief initial scene between two gods, Poseidon and Athena, offers the possibility that the Greeks will also suffer in their turn, but the focus is otherwise firmly on the waiting women. Hardly anything happens except, precisely, waiting – at the end of the play the women leave for the Greek ships as Troy is put to the flames, but up till then, there is little that might count as 'action'. Numerous critics have accordingly complained that this drama is nothing like whatever tragedy is supposed to be; there are no heroes, no ghastly errors of judgement, no terrifying realisations or reversals. Instead, the logical consequences of the fall of Troy work themselves out in a series of scenes that pit the women, especially the erstwhile queen of Troy, Hekabe, against the consequences of the various dispositions made by the victorious Greeks.

The will of the conquerors is made known to the women by the Greek herald Talthybios, who announces their destinations. Thus, Hekabe's daughter Cassandra enters on her way to Agamemnon's ship, bound for a brief life and a shameful death as his concubine. The widow of Hekabe's son Hektor, Andromache, enters on her way to becoming the prize of Neoptolemos, son of the Greek warrior Achilles who killed Hektor. She tells Hekabe that another daughter, Polyxena, has been sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles, and learns herself that her son Astyanax, as heir to Hektor, is to be hurled to his death from the walls of Troy. Lastly there enters Helen, the woman,

as all antiquity knew, who caused the Trojan War by leaving her Greek husband Menelaos and running away to Troy with Hekabe's son Paris. She comes to discover what Menelaos has decided to do with her – the answer is, to take her home – and incidentally to engage in a long debate with Hekabe about the causes of the Trojan War. Once these three 'daughters' of Hekabe have departed for their various fates, the final entrance is that of the child Astyanax, dead, and carried on his father Hektor's shield. The mourning for him by Hekabe and the Trojan women of the chorus modulates into the last lament for the burning city.

*Trojan Women* attained enough popularity to rank among the plays of Euripides most frequently copied out in antiquity, and in late antiquity it achieved 'canonical' status as one of the plays chosen to represent the author in schools.<sup>5</sup> On its first performance, however, in 415 BCE, *Trojan Women* and the plays presented with it won second prize, runner up to a play by the now forgotten Xenocles, as Aelian 2.8 records. Lattimore remarks appositely that 'Aelian seems outraged that Euripides should come second; I can hardly understand how the Athenians let him present this play at all'.<sup>7</sup> Not only do readers wonder how the Athenians could have endured the play's searing indictment of warmongering, but they also criticise *Trojan Women* for various technical failings. The accusation is repeatedly levelled that *Trojan Women* is not a tragedy, or even not a good play; it has several defects of structure, and its overwhelming emotional effect constitutes a defect in taste.<sup>8</sup> The pronouncement of Gilbert Murray, who was a great champion of the play, sums up this strand of the criticism: 'Judged by common standards, the *Troades* is far from a perfect play; it is scarcely even a good play ... little plot, little construction, little or no relief or variety ... scene after scene passes beyond the due limits of the tragic art'.<sup>9</sup> Even critics who have no reservations about the play's quality have to agree that it presents other kinds of problems. Judith Mossman observes that the play is 'remarkably difficult to fit into many schemas that seek to formulate a definition for tragedy' and cites André Rivier to the effect that it cannot be a

tragedy because it consists of lamentation without reflection.<sup>10</sup> A related perception, repeated in the criticism, is that the play is static, episodic and without development; the most interesting version of this view is the work of Francis Dunn on *Trojan Women* as a play that cannot happen.<sup>11</sup>

While the chorus of disapproval clearly registers something disturbing and difficult about the play, it is contradicted by the contemporary popularity of *Trojan Women* in performance. Karelisa Hartigan draws this contrast explicitly: 'although some scholarly analysis of the drama tends to find it rather lacking in theme and characterization, it usually plays to a receptive audience'.<sup>12</sup> This popularity she attributes to the force of the play as an account of war: 'From the day when Euripides penned it in 415 BCE to the present time the suffering he portrayed of war's innocent victims has spoken to audiences in nearly every decade of the past century, for the pain of military conflict is apparently never ending'.<sup>13</sup> We shall consider the issue of the play's anti-war credentials subsequently, but note for now that this divergence between the experience of the play as text and as performance can be seen as a significant indicator of the new relations to Greek tragedy being worked out by the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The issue is perhaps not a simple opposition between 'page' and 'stage', so much as a temporal disjunction whereby the second half of the twentieth century rediscovered the power of Greek tragedy as much through performance as through translations and texts.<sup>14</sup>

We should note also that the charges of excessive emotionalism, and of lack of movement or development, might amount to a charge of being female, and might thus register a resistance to the overwhelmingly female voice of the play.<sup>15</sup> Such a resistance could be characteristic of the early twentieth century but would have much less cultural purchase in more recent times, when, as Edith Hall shows, the prominence of women in Greek tragedy is one of the aspects that have secured it a very high profile in translation and adaptation.<sup>16</sup> Further fostering the elevation of *Trojan Women* in particular is the perception that military conflicts postdating World War II are often morally

much more equivocal than was that mid-century combat, explicitly involving civilians as targets, and thus can readily be delivered to the play's searching gaze. *Trojan Women* speaks to modern audiences and readers not only about war, or women, but also about contemporary relationships to the tragic dramas of the Greeks.

Even without its recent prominence in performance, *Trojan Women* is astonishing enough, both in itself and in comparison with other Greek tragedies. For a start, although the play rarely figures prominently in feminist analyses of Greek drama, all the major characters are women. The only males are Askyanax, who is not a speaking part, Menelaos, whose one scene hardly shows him off to advantage, and Talchybios. Apart from these latter two, and their attendant soldiers, the Greeks are kept offstage and away from our view. In this they are not unlike the anonymous, usually menacing crowd that gathers offstage in other Euripidean dramas such as *Iphigenia at Aulis* or *Orestes*, but in *Trojan Women* the Greeks are not only the nameless masses but also constitute the sole locus of power. The women on stage are victims, without even the victims' revenge such as characterises another Euripidean play set in the aftermath of the fall of Troy, *Hekabe*. Another salient difference from *Hekabe* that sheds light on *Trojan Women* is that the former takes place in an interstice of time after the war when the Greek fleet is becalmed; none of the actions was meant to happen, whereas the actions of *Trojan Women* are organised. Any possible departure from the Greeks' orderly plans – the mass suicide of the Trojan women, Cassandra setting fire to the tents (299-301), Andromache cursing her new masters (733-4), Hekabe throwing herself into the flames of the dying city (1282-3) – is prevented. The only thing that might count as a departure from proper procedure is that the captive women do all the talking.

In that the women do talk, this history, against all expectation, is told by the victims, with whom the audience or readers are consequently invited to identify – even though these victims are barbarians as well, and describe themselves as such.<sup>17</sup> The

fraught nature of this identification is the object of much critical thought regarding the play, as well as of Hamlet's question with which we began.<sup>18</sup> It will occupy us at several different points in our analysis, particularly since it also relates to the Aristotelian account of tragic emotions as dependent on certain kinds of balances between self and other. In its orchestration of this difficult identification *Trojan Women* may be thought to recall Aeschylus' *Persians*, which was staged a few years after the Greeks defeated the Persian invasion, yet is set at the court of the vanquished Xerxes and populated entirely by grieving Persians. While *Persians*, the earlier play, is usually found to extend some sympathy to the failed tyrant Xerxes, there is no corresponding vilification of the Greeks, who are instead reluctantly celebrated by their defeated enemies.<sup>19</sup> In *Trojan Women*, while we are invited to identify with the losers, we are also invited to judge, and condemn, the victors. Various speakers seek to persuade us that the Greeks are barbarous, and even that the barbarians are Greek. Yet there is no easy polarisation either between bad Greeks and good Trojans, since we are also invited to subscribe to the more difficult hypothesis that Hekabe, not Helen, was responsible for the start of the Trojan War.

If we briefly pursue this forensic line of enquiry, we may recollect that the point of the human sympathy orchestrated by Hamlet's theatre was to find out the guilt of the king. A similar dynamic is at work in an early account of audience reaction to *Trojan Women*. The fourth-century tyrant Alexander of Pherae, renowned for devising inventive executions for his enemies, had to leave the theatre, 'because he was ashamed that the citizens could see him, who had never pitied any man that he had murdered, weeping over the sufferings of Hekabe and Andromache' (Plutarch *Pelopidas* 29. 4-6).<sup>20</sup> Not only are the representations of pitiful events devastating to the onlooker, but so also is the dissection of guilt and innocence undertaken by the drama. The notion that Hekabe may be responsible for the Trojan War is an indication that guilt and innocence become hard to distinguish, and *Trojan Women* proceeds also to suggest

that defeat and victory themselves are not very different from each other, or indeed may have changed places. Consequently, we may eventually discover that our identification must be with the deadly Greeks as much as with the suffering Trojans. It is this dialectic of victory and defeat, and guilt and innocence, as much as the representation of loss and misery attendant on conflict, which has made the play repeatedly invoked as an anti-war statement.

In this book I shall endeavour to give weight to a reading of the play in its late fifth-century context, and to this end I shall first discuss contemporary Athenian politics and culture, before considering theatrical practice and the development of tragedy as a genre. The latter discussion will include an account of the trilogy to which *Trojan Women* apparently belonged. After these preliminary considerations, my approach to the play itself will be by a continuous close reading rather than a thematic analysis, countering the charge of static immobility with an emphasis on the pace and dynamism of the play as it unfolds. Within this framework certain themes and issues will emerge repeatedly, chief among them the question of the identity of victory and defeat; other preoccupations will include the relations between gods and mortals, between men and women, Greek and barbarian, and language and the world. A further issue will be how the play has frequently polarised the responses of readers and audiences, between nihilistic despair and a determination to retrieve from the ruins some spark of consolation. From this reading of the play we move in the last part of this study to an account of some elements of its twentieth-century reception. As Hall and Macintosh show, *Trojan Women* has hardly any reception history until the twentieth century, when it becomes exceptionally compelling to writers and theatre practitioners alike.<sup>21</sup> Seneca's *Troades* can, of course, be considered an early reception of the Euripidean play, but I have not dealt with Seneca's *Troades* in this book, partly for reasons of space, but primarily because it deserves a Companion to itself.

#### Athens in 415

*Trojan Women* was first performed at the City Dionysia in 415, when the crucial characteristics of the polis of Athens include that it is a mature, radical democracy, and that it is at war with the polis of Sparta. Both these considerations require further discussion. To take the war first: together responsible for driving a deadly Persian invasion out of Greece in the early years of the fifth century, Athens and Sparta had since pursued different lines of political and military development until mutual wariness escalated into conflict. The Peloponnesian War, named after the Peloponnese where the most powerful polis was the oligarchic Sparta, began in 431 and did not end until the defeat of Athens in 404. 415 falls in a curious hiatus called the 'Peace of Nikias' during which the major players, Athens and Sparta, did not fight one another but were distracted with other adventures. Chief among these at Athens were the conquest of the island of Melos in 416, with ensuing executions of men and enslavement of women and children, and the plan to invade Sicily, which got underway in 415 itself.

We are remarkably well informed about the Peloponnesian War, which pitted Greek against Greek in a way that was troubling even to contemporaries, because it was recorded almost in real time by the Athenian writer Thucydides. His *History* is renowned not only for the battle narratives and details of strategy, but for those elements which make it a meditation, on war and on the exercise of power in wartime, as much as it is a record. Such elements include speeches by the major politicians and generals, which punctuate the narrative, and also excursions on the moral dimensions of the conflict, such as those which describe the plague in Athens of 430 (2.47-55) and the civil strife at Corcyra in 427 (3.82-3). In excursions like these, the descriptions encourage the conclusion that the war led to a breakdown in traditional morality and even in traditional notions of language and communication. Such conclusions have often seemed very relevant to an understanding of tragedy, and we shall revisit them shortly.

If we move now to consider the other characteristic of late fifth-century Athens, its mature radical democracy, we can explain the 'maturity' by the fact that the polis had been used to governing itself more or less democratically for nearly 100 years.<sup>22</sup> 'Democracy' in this context is participatory rather than representative; the Assembly of all citizens (free adult males) was responsible for almost all decisions on the running of the polis both internally and in its relationships with other cities, and the mechanisms of democracy had developed to cope with many eventualities – though arguably not all. Why the democracy is also termed 'radical' is because by 415, almost all the offices of the polis were awarded by lot, ensuring wide participation by men from all classes and statuses. This had not always been the case. In the early days of democracy the traditional noble families continued to supply the most prominent politicians, and even the democratic revolution itself was spearheaded by a member of the powerful and aristocratic Alkmaeonid family, Kleisthenes. Pericles, perhaps the fifth century's most important politician, was also related to the Alkmaeonids, and his sway over the Assembly, from the 460s until 429 when he died of the plague, was sometimes likened to a particularly benign monarchy.<sup>23</sup>

Our view of the developments in the democracy after the traditional noble families lost their grip is conditioned by the nature of our sources, most of which derive from the aristocratic level of society.<sup>24</sup> After the death of Pericles, the conventional story runs, practical control of Athens fell to men who did not understand where Athens' true interests lay; of low social origin, they did not have Pericles' education or experience. Labelled 'demagogues' by sources such as Thucydides and Aristophanes, with connotations of corruption and populist opportunism, politicians like Kleon and Hyperbolos were in fact wealthy and educated, even if not perhaps in the traditional ways, and their policies were intelligible, even if not precisely Periclean.<sup>25</sup> Their prominence in the democracy, however, marking a felt departure from the Periclean paradigm, contributes to the impression of social confusion and breakdown.

As with the war's assault on morality, so with the processes of democracy and demagoguery; Thucydides' *History* provides the most memorable account, and on a topic that will prove germane to our discussions of *Trojan Women*. In Book 3 occurs the Mytilinean Debate, concerning a suitable punishment for an island ally who had revolted in 427. This Debate has long been held to show the Athenian democracy at its worst, or at least its most stressed, since on one day the Assembly decided to execute the males and sell off the women and children, but on the next day had a change of heart and revoked its own decision. The sailors who bore the second message, of reprieve, were paid extra wages to row extra fast and overtake the first, doomladen ship. During the debate Kleon is portrayed as 'the most violent, and the most persuasive' (3.36) of contemporary speakers, arguing that the self-interest of an imperial power demands ruthlessness. 'You do not see that your rule is a tyranny, over subjects who are unwilling and who plot against you. They obey you not because you might indulge them, to your own injury, and not because of their good will, but because you are superior to them in strength' (3.37). His opponent Diodotos makes none of the expected appeals to humanity, but contends instead that precisely the same self-interest requires that democracies spare the common people and punish only the (aristocratic) ring-leaders. To discuss the fate of doomed cities, then, is a thinkable element of public policy in fifth-century Athens, and the complex contours of self-interest are not unfamiliar. This discourse clearly feeds into the debates of *Trojan Women*. An even closer possible connection between *Trojan Women* and contemporary Athenian politics will be examined later on.

The kind of language that Kleon and Diodotos use, and indeed that Thucydides uses, is conditioned above all by the intellectual enquires generated in Athens through the activity of the sophists. The sophists are perhaps a third element which we should highlight as part of what constitutes fifth-century Athens. As with the 'demagogues', our chief source for sophistic activity, namely Plato, is hostile, and the comedies of Aristo-

phanes are also very dubious about its worth. To define the sophists and sophistic activity is difficult except in a crude ostensive way, but we can say that they constitute a philosophical dimension to the general social upheaval of the fifth century. With increased commercial, political and artistic activity went an unprecedented interrogation of traditional habits of thought and action. Reliance on human endeavour in the fields of, for instance, medicine and seamanship, and the relative success of that endeavour, meant that earlier notions of divinity came in for renewed scrutiny; reliance on human decision-making in the processes of democracy led to investigation of human motives and of the power of persuasive language. Sophists took this kind of enquiry as their task, and their conclusions necessarily troubled the traditional outlook.

Originating in several cities, the men known collectively as the sophists were migrant intellectuals who settled disproportionately in Athens, presumably because of its democratic openness and tolerance of debate – which they managed to stretch to its limits and sometimes beyond.<sup>26</sup> Protagoras, for instance, asserted that ‘the human being is the measure of all things’, which might seem in many contexts an overweening claim; Gorgias is responsible for the formulation that ‘nothing exists; if it did, we could not know it; if we could know it, we could not communicate our knowledge’ – a sentiment as alarming to the fifth century BCE as it proved to be to the twentieth century CE when Derrida promulgated not dissimilar views.<sup>27</sup> Wherever they were, sophists taught, and they collected audiences especially of young men, who were eager to question received wisdom. What they claimed to teach, among other philosophical topics, often included ‘*areté*’, which is usually translated in English by ‘virtue’. ‘*Areté*’ is usually more colourful than ‘virtue’ and has a greater sense of masculine striving; ‘excellence’ is another common translation, but ‘success’ might be a possibility too. ‘Success’ in the fifth-century Athenian context implied power within and even over the Assembly, so the sophists often taught the means of persuasive language that would win a debate, and came to be identified with the

power of language to achieve mastery over one’s fellow-citizens, whether for their good or not. It is this development that brought the sophists the most censure, and the common charge that they made the ‘worse’ (less virtuous) argument into the ‘better’ (more successful).<sup>28</sup> The many sources from fifth-century Athens that display concern about language and its manipulation speak compellingly of the anxieties of a society used to conducting its business through the medium of public speech.

### Tragedy in 415

The war, the new political developments, and the radically questioning philosophical activity of the sophists, with their accompanying changes and types of breakdown, all placed Athens in 415, and indeed much of late fifth-century Greece, under considerable stress. While such stress is legible in tragedy, the genre is also conditioned by other factors important for our account of *Trojan Women*. Although we have complete plays by only three dramatists, and of those dramatists only a small proportion of their oeuvre, we have enough other information to indicate the general condition of the theatrical tradition within which *Trojan Women* was produced. Tragedy in 415, like democracy, is both mature and radical. Roughly the same age as democracy, tragedy is possibly closely linked with it at its inception.<sup>29</sup> There are good arguments which claim that Dionysos, as a god presiding over community events and communal identification, was an obvious choice for a democracy to celebrate, and indeed the dramatic performances developed as part of the major festival of Dionysos, the City Dionysia.<sup>30</sup> The genre also exhibits affinities to democratic, or at least civic, practice in its formal dimensions. With an audience of fifteen thousand – roughly three times the size of the Athenian assembly – tragedy at the Dionysia was a mass event. Seating may well have been by tribe, and judges were drawn from tribes, so that all the polis was represented. The chief elected officials of the democracy, the generals or *stratēgoi*, also had a prominent



role in the proceedings.<sup>31</sup> Tragedy's discursive content has also often been linked to the workings of fifth-century democracy, since it partakes of the plurality of competing voices characteristic of the Athenian system, and displays an active questioning stance towards conventional pieties.<sup>32</sup>

Tragedy in 415 is 'mature' because it has developed considerably over a relatively short span. Although its 'original' form is unknown, scholars find it plausible that there was first a chorus, and then that a protagonist detached himself from the chorus to engage it in dialogue.<sup>33</sup> (A protagonist was always 'himself', because tragedies were written, produced and acted exclusively by men.) Several tragedies have scenes of debate between protagonist and chorus, although *Trojan Women* does not. The conventional narrative has it that Aeschylus added one more actor and Sophocles a third, after which no more were added, so that the majority of tragedies have two and three person scenes with interventions by the chorus, divided by longer sung passages ('choral odes') from the chorus. Where there are more than three roles to play, the actors must double up. In contrast, in *Trojan Women* the protagonist or first actor is on stage the whole time, playing Hekabe, which is an unusual and demanding situation.<sup>34</sup> The deuteragonist or second actor presumably took the parts of Cassandra, Andromache and Helen in turn, leaving the tritagonist (third actor) to play Talthybios and Menelaos.

Other theatrical choices made by the play are as notable as the unrelieved stage presence of Hekabe. By the time of *Trojan Women*, scene-painting, the invention of which is credited to Sophocles, had become a regular component of the dramatic *mise en scène*; so indeed had the *skênê*, the building behind the stage, which in many plays functions almost as another character, and is certainly like a part of the plot. There is much less obvious call for scene-painting in *Trojan Women* than in for instance *Ion*, with its descriptions of the temple at Delphi, and the *skênê*-building, which represents the tents of the Greek commanders where the women are held, is much less of a tangible presence than for instance the house of Theseus and

Phaidra in *Hippolytos*. Nor does *Trojan Women* call upon theatrical devices like the *ekbuklêma* or the *mêchanê*. The *ekbuklêma* is a rolling platform that comes out of the *skênê*-building on to the stage, in order to display a scene that would otherwise be interior; the *mêchanê* is a kind of crane which brings a god or other special being flying on to the stage at roof height. The absence of these devices means that there is no epiphany by a *deus ex machina*, a 'god from the machine', to close the play, nor is there any violent act done off stage in the building whose consequences are then displayed outside. The violence is almost all over and done with before the play begins, except for the death of Astyanax, which happens on the city walls. Nor is this one act of violence reported in a messenger speech, which is an even more notable absence than others, since the messenger with the story of disaster from an offstage location is a regular feature of tragedy.<sup>35</sup> So despite the wealth of dramatic and theatrical procedures that were available to 'mature' tragedy, *Trojan Women* avails itself of none. Its poverty of device is like the destitution of the women themselves, throwing the play on the resources of the actors in the rhythms of song, speech, and orchestrated action.

Tragedy was also 'mature' in 415 in that it was highly self-conscious. Even though plays were only performed once at the City Dionysia, they passed into cultural memory by other means, as we can deduce from the fact that the comedies of Aristophanes make frequent references to plays that had been staged years earlier.<sup>36</sup> Whole scenes in some comedies depend on very specific parodies of tragedy, and tragedies were also highly aware of other tragedies. Especially after the decree (dated to the last third of the fifth century) which committed the polis to funding any new production of a tragedy which had first been staged by Aeschylus,<sup>37</sup> new tragedies can often be seen to grapple with the authority of the earlier plays.<sup>38</sup> There were other means to prolong the life of an apparently ephemeral drama. Tragedies might be performed at rural Dionysia after their premieres at the City festival, and they might also be read in Athens' (never very extensive) book trade. Memorisation of

tragic songs and speeches was also a feature of Athenian culture. Tragic quotations appear in fourth century legal speeches,<sup>39</sup> and tragedy is alleged to have saved lives in even more desperate situations. When the Spartans finally defeated Athens in 404, they planned to raze the city to the ground, but were dissuaded from this course of action, the story goes, by a man from Phocis singing the first choral ode from Euripides' *Elektra*. And before the end of the war, when the Athenian navy was destroyed in Sicily, some of the men enslaved and dying in the Syracusan quarries allegedly gained their freedom by singing the latest choral poems from Euripides (Plutarch *Lysander* 15.3, *Nicias* 29.2).

What encourages extensive memorisation, parody and similar re-productions of tragedy is the fact that it is highly stylised, conventional and non-naturalistic. In such a structured genre, any formal innovations can be startling and significant, so that the 'mature' and 'radical' aspects of the genre can be seen to be interdependent. The dramaturgy of Euripides is noted for its destabilising of generic and formal expectations, accompanied by an extreme version of the radical questioning that we have attributed above to tragedy, and indeed to fifth-century discourse in general. Euripides' dramas have always been perceived as the most iconoclastic and disturbing of those we possess, and we can read this perception even in antiquity in the plays of Aristophanes.<sup>40</sup> In one respect, however, tragedy did not innovate at all, and that is in the matter of plot. As Aristotle remarks in his *Poetics* (1453a) the corpus of tragedy quickly settled on a restricted repertoire of plots drawn from panhellenic mythology; the best tragedies were all drawn from the fates of a handful of doomed families. While it was not until Agathon's work, in the fourth century, that entirely new plots for tragedy were devised (*Poetics* 1451b20-3), another possible source of plot, namely contemporary history, was also rejected. Of the extant tragedies only Aeschylus' *Persians* makes overt reference to the lived experience of his audience, and in earlier years such reference had been explicitly discouraged. When Phrynichos in the late 490s produced *The Fall of Miletus*, an

event in the history of Greek relations with the Persian empire that had taken place in 494, the audience was so devastated with grief for the fate of the Milesians, who were Ionian Greeks and hence related to Athenians, that the play was banned and the dramatist fined (Herodotus 6.21). Subsequent writers learned quickly, and almost all the contemporary references that can be read in extant tragedy are heavily coded as mythical discourse. We shall, as noted, consider in a subsequent section the possibility of contemporary reference in *Trojan Women*.

'Mythical discourse' for fifth-century Greeks meant Homeric epic, the cultural authority of which was unparalleled. While the Homeric *Iliad* takes as its subject the war at Troy, it ends before the city does and instead, envisages that end in the words of Trojans who fear it. Thus in Book 6 Andromache foretells her own and her son's sufferings when Hektor will have died, and in 24 even imagines that son's death on the walls, whereas Hektor in 6 tries to turn her lamentation around by envisaging him as an avenging adult. We shall see later on how these moments are replayed in *Trojan Women*.<sup>41</sup> While the relation to Homeric epic thus has a formal dimension, in language and plot, critics also agree that tragedy in general stages multiple ideological collisions between the values promulgated in epic and those of fifth-century democracy. Thus the dramas repeatedly confront individual masculine heroism and martial glory with the necessity of more collective, social priorities.<sup>42</sup> In respect of this ideological formation, *Trojan Women* reaches for the extremes; there is no functioning society left, but the heroic ethos is also rejected out of hand. Although the play returns to the most recognisably Homeric, heroic, epic territory for its subject matter, it deprives its male characters of any glory or renown, instead exposing them as craven thugs. The only stably heroic figure is Hektor, who is not only dead, but whose absence is physically imaged forth in the shield that bears his son's body. *Trojan Women* makes other extreme moves. Few other extant plays have the demand on the protagonist that he be present throughout the entire stage time, or the relentlessly episodic structure that has 'no parallel in serious drama'.<sup>43</sup>

Precisely these aspects have led to the criticism that the play is 'static'. No other extant play is set at the fall of a city, although plenty of tragic cities may be under threat, none of them, not even Aeschylus' Persepolis, is about to be wiped off the map as is Euripides' Troy. The play is exceptional in other ways too: it has, as mentioned above, no messenger speech; it has the largest number of half-line exchanges in the extant corpus (called 'half-stichomythia'); it is the only extant play to end on a lyric, sung exchange and in lyric metre rather than the iambic metre that represents dramatic speech.<sup>44</sup> It also forms part, the last part, of what may have been a fairly innovative trilogy, which we should briefly discuss.

Tragedy had by 415 moved away from the trilogy form of which Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is the outstanding example, and it is only rarely that we can detect connections among the groups of plays that later dramatists submitted to the festival. But *Trojan Women* comes at the end of what is almost certainly a 'Trojan trilogy', comprising the plays *Alexander* (another name for Paris), *Palamedes* (the name of a Greek warrior) and finally *Trojan Women*. While reconstruction of these plays is difficult, scholars concur on the broad lines.<sup>45</sup> The first play, *Alexander*, opened with Cassandra prophesying the downfall of Troy at the hands of Paris and recalling how she prophesied the same outcome when Hekabe was pregnant with Paris. Hekabe dreamed she gave birth to a flaming torch that set fire to the entire world, and was told by the Delphic oracles to put the baby to death. Since the baby was not put to death, but exposed, he was – inevitably – rescued and raised to manhood. During the course of the play the baby, now grown, comes to Troy to take part in athletic contests and, outrageously, wins, defeating the sons of the royal house. Hekabe moves from lamenting her lost child to plotting the murder of the upstart commoner, which is obviated when his identity is made known.

The second play, *Palamedes*, moves us straight from the early years of Paris to the height of the Trojan War. Set in the Greek camp, it concerns internal strife rather than hostilities against Trojans. Palamedes is the inventor of numerous bene-

fits to the human community, such as writing, but Odysseus bears a grudge against him and concocts false accusations that get him executed by his own side. Since the final play is *Trojan Women*, set at the very end of the war, no play of this unusual 'trilogy' deals with the war itself on the territory staked out by the Homeric epic poems, and to that extent it may be considered slightly off-kilter and decentred. Critics have commented that the trilogy as a whole also sheds a different kind of light on *Trojan Women*. Although there are only rarely specific correspondences among the three plays (two of which of course are only reconstructions from fragments), there is at least one recurrent theme, the death of the innocent, and within this theme the thwarted death of Paris can render the death of Astyanax more comprehensible, because it is undertaken to avoid further disaster. Overall too, the high-octane atmosphere of the first two plays makes it more appropriate, in terms of pacing, that *Trojan Women* should eschew pretty much anything that counts as action.<sup>46</sup>

Pursuing the issues both of formal innovation and of relation to its trilogy, we might note that the opening of this play is remarkably like the ending of many others. Dunn points out that the way in which the gods appear and make dispositions for the future, which only come to fruition after the end of the dramatic action, is exactly what one might expect from the ending of a Euripidean play.<sup>47</sup> Overall, he suggests that the play 'starts at the end' and cannot move forward from there; a plot without plot development, it is a play of enforced inaction for both the women and the dramatist. *Trojan Women* does not seem to work through the consequences of the previous dramas as do other surviving 'third' plays like Aeschylus' *Eumenides* or *Seven Against Thebes*.

#### Melos in 416

While it is clear that *Trojan Women* is formally experimental, many readers have asked whether the play is not also discursively innovative in that it does draw directly on contemporary

events, using the setting in Troy as a thin and penetrable disguise for a discourse about Athens. In the year before the production of the play, democracy and drama came together in surprising ways, and an event took place which passed into history in a way not available to other events. The island of Melos was a colony of Sparta's, but had managed for the course of the war to maintain sufficient neutrality to keep out of the way of both antagonists. In 416 this changed; Athens insisted that as an island, Melos should come over to her and should become a democracy.<sup>48</sup> The Melians refused, a siege ensued, the Melians were forced into unconditional surrender; the adult males were executed and the women and children sold as slaves.

The events at Melos are represented in Thucydides' *History* in highly memorable fashion. The 'Melian Dialogue' (5.17) purports to be a dialogue between Athenian ambassadors and oligarchic Melian leaders, before the Athenians begin to ravage the land, and it marks the only point in the *History* where the narrative voice falls silent, and the two parties to the dialogue speak one after another, direct discourse following the identifying name just as in a play script. While this is remarkable enough, still more striking is the content of what they say. Despite Thucydides' description of his practice in recording speeches outlined in Book 1, it is hard to maintain that this dialogue corresponds to his avowed principles, which are as follows (1.22):

As for what each person said, either before the war or already in it, it was difficult for me to remember the exact wording either of the speeches that I heard myself or of those reported to me from elsewhere. I have made the speaker say what it seemed to me each would have found necessary to say in the various circumstances, keeping as close as possible to the overall idea of what was really said.

Few now believe Athenians or Melians said the words reported, let alone that they would have been what was necessary in the

circumstances.<sup>49</sup> Not realism nor naturalism but high tragic discourse is what the Dialogue offers: the Athenians are clear-sighted and even comfortable in their ruthlessness; the Melians undeluded and fully conscious of their impossible position. Both speak at a high level of abstraction and generalisation, alike invoking the deities, the nature of imperial power, and the fortunes of war. Appealing to what is known or imagined of gods, the Melians remind the Athenians of the instability of human power or success, and also point to the calculations of honour and advantage that they must make. They do not omit to threaten the Athenians with the Spartans, who, as it happened, never came. In short, they speak from the heart of a traditional morality which may well no longer suffice for the situation they find themselves in: they are caught in the gap between the word and the world that has been opened up by the war, in which words have to change their meanings in accordance with new political exigencies, as dissected by Thucydides 3.82-3.<sup>50</sup> The Athenians, on the other hand, appeal quite straightforwardly to the power dynamics of the situation, and to the tendency of power to consolidate itself, which they note as a characteristic of the divine as much as of the human. Since their discourse explicitly repudiates any moral considerations in favour of the realities of unequal power, it can represent itself as alone equal to the situation and not liable to fall into the semantic gap between word and world. Stark alternatives, massive imbalance of power, traditional moral platitudes and radical revision of traditional morality alike squeezed out under pressure of extreme conflict; the Thucydidean narrative has chosen to recast whatever was said at Melos in terms of the period's most compelling art form, tragedy.

Did the suffering at Melos contribute even more directly to tragic discourse? Many readers have followed the lead of Gilbert Murray in seeing *Trojan Women* as a direct reference to Melos.<sup>51</sup> The men of Troy are dead and the women are slaves – and the Greeks who have orchestrated this will be punished, as we are told in the prologue, shipwrecked by a huge storm sent by Poseidon and Athena, and in addition, if we are to concur with

such readers, consigned to the opprobrium of centuries. If translated to Athens in 416/15, Troy becomes Melos and Greeks become Athenians, excoriated for their deed of extermination and threatened with their own terrible reverses later on in the war. Since historically a city has recently been emptied, namely Melos, the argument holds that *Trojan Women's* focus on the destruction of a city must be readily understood to map Melos on to Troy; the devastation will in turn, the play warns, be visited on Athens. The argument acquires plausibility from the fact that tragedy regularly used the Trojan War to think through the Peloponnesian War.<sup>52</sup> Although rarely superimposing the one directly on to the other, it is unlikely that the plays of the late fifth century, such as Euripides' *Hekabe* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, did not take the Peloponnesian as well as the Trojan war into their purview when considering the significance and cost of war, and its effects on civil society.

The 'Melos interpretation' of *Trojan Women* is further assisted by the fact that Athens did indeed suffer disaster in the Sicilian campaign, which got underway in 415, and which could therefore be read as retribution for Melos. That Euripides could not have known what would happen at the end of the campaign, in 412, is not seen as an obstacle to this suggestion, because there may well have been doubt about how the war was proceeding, long before the end became obvious. We know, indeed, that doubt did exist about the Sicilian campaign at least, to the extent that the general Nikias warned the assembly against undertaking it (Thucydides 6.18). Doubt may even have extended to the conduct on Melos; as we have seen, the Athenians reversed their decision about comparable retribution at Mytilene, and this may have been from considerations of humanity as much as from the promptings of realpolitik detailed by Diodotos. While our sources cannot impose a decision on us, the notion that *Trojan Women* responds directly to Melos, and responds in a way that is presciently critical of Athens, has been found very compelling by many readers. The issue of identification is critical here too; if *Trojan Women* does indeed concern

Melos directly, then in order to interpret it properly the Athenians should have recognised themselves in the suffering Trojans and in the brutal Greeks.

There are also, however, several objections to this account of the play. The Melos interpretation relies on a fairly straightforward notion of representation where one city is coded for another, but there are arguments that militate against this understanding. For instance, Melos was not consigned to the flames and destroyed, because it was historically colonised by Athenians, and even inhabited again by Melian survivors who were settled there by the Spartans after 404 (Plutarch *Lysander* 14). Contrast this with the fate of Plataea in 427, razed by the Thebans (Thucydides 3.68), and not rebuilt until 382 (Pausanias 9.1-4).<sup>53</sup> On Melos the Athenians did not, as far as we know, sacrifice daughters of the island to shades of Athenian warriors or execute the children of prominent Melians; they kept to a level of atrocity which, some have argued, was simply too common during the Peloponnesian War to warrant wholesale condemnation, or even dramatisation.<sup>54</sup> Nor are the Athenians, as Athenians, notably castigated in *Trojan Women*. Although the sons of Theseus are keen for Polyxena to be sacrificed to Achilles, it is Odysseus who is most responsible for the death of Astyanax, and Athens is lauded in choral song as a desirable place to be (208-9). Other considerations have been assembled by other scholars, both practical and aesthetic. Erp Taalman Kip argues in detail from chronology that the play is too close to the massacre to be able to offer a critical commentary on it. Sidwell makes the different point that the play could express pity for the victims while not necessarily condemning the victors: 'Unlike ourselves, however, the Athenians could make distinctions between the pity to be accorded the victims of enslavement and the iron law of power politics which justified their enslavement.'<sup>55</sup> This dictum could hold for Melos as well as for Troy, and indeed in the case of Troy, the *Iliad* had habituated Greek culture to representing at one and the same time the noble heroes who sold their lives dearly for Troy and the misguided enthusiasts whose stubbornness ensured the

downfall of their city. To represent the terror and pity of the fall is thus not necessarily to reproach the victors for it.

If we further recall that *Trojan Women* is the last play in a kind of trilogy, we might hesitate before subscribing completely to the Melos interpretation. Would there have been so easy a translation between the situations of Troy and Melos once Troy's fall became the culmination of a particular kind of storytelling rather than the isolated representation of wartime cruelties? It is perhaps hard to imagine a context in which Melos inspires a play, but requires that two more roughly connected plays be composed in order to go in front of it. Perhaps it is not necessary to imagine Melos as a specific inspiration, but rather as an additional consideration for a play which was already taking, overall, a sceptical approach to warfare. In other words, if we cannot say with any certainty that *Trojan Women* is anti-Melos, or anti-Athenian, can we say that it is anti-war? It has been hailed as a 'pacifist' play – 'the greatest piece of anti-war literature there is in the world'<sup>56</sup> – and its repeated staging in the twentieth century has plausibly been attributed to its ability to speak an anti-war message.<sup>57</sup> Whether or not such a stance was available in fifth-century Greece is highly debatable. The current scholarly consensus is that a peace movement recognisable in twentieth-century and later terms would not have been a possibility in ancient Greece: ancient Greek cities viewed peace as the hiatus between bouts of war rather than as the end to war.<sup>58</sup> Even those plays of Aristophanes which are generally accounted 'peace' plays, like *Acharnians*, *Peace* or *Lysistrata*, are not necessarily to be understood as opposing all wars, but as pleas for the end of a particular conflict. We might also note that some fifth-century sources, like the plays of Aristophanes, show the city population supporting the Peloponnesian War, while the country dwellers oppose it, so that calling for an end to the war might also be an intervention in internal Athenian politics. Nobody in *Trojan Women* expresses sentiments that are straightforwardly pacifist in a twentieth-century sense,<sup>59</sup> they lament their own sufferings, of course, but since Cassandra is happy to dream of

revenge against Agamemnon and the Greeks, and Hekabe is happy to dream of what would have been Astyanax's future as overlord of Asia, it is not clear that anyone eschews the kinds of attitude that lead to warfare. Even Poseidon castigates not so much war itself as the sacking of cities, temples and graves (95-6). Cassandra's utterance at 400 comes close to a 'pacifist' statement in that she urges the man of sense always to shun war; but she goes on to acknowledge that it is sometimes necessary and that when it is, it is an adornment (literally *stephanos*, a garland) to a city to die a noble death (402).

The 'Melos interpretation' of *Trojan Women* is thus compelling but questionable. The Melos interpretation interrogates the Athenians' relations to their empire and their drama, but to consider it properly we must also examine our own assumptions. Do we respond enthusiastically to the notion of Euripides berating his countrymen chiefly because we are invested in a post-Romantic notion of the artist as isolated from and critical of his society? Such a notion of the artist may be inappropriate for the highly embedded dramatists of fifth-century Athens, whose plays formed the centrepiece of a civic festival with international dimensions. But at the same time, if we remove Melos from the play, we may stand convicted of a disregard akin to that of the Athenians in their imperial ruthlessness. We may perhaps not be convinced that the historical Euripides was deliberately using the stage to condemn the Athenians or induce them to run their empire differently. But it is hard to imagine that *Trojan Women* was not produced as part of a response to the historical Peloponnesian War and the toll it exacted in terms of political discourse as well as of lives and livelihoods. Neil Croally concludes that:<sup>60</sup>

we are in no position to deny the possibilities of a contemporary audience finding – in many different ways, no doubt – references to the war they were engaged in as they watched the play ... This allowance must be made for all tragedy, but at the same time it should not be forgotten that the possibility of contemporary allusion is that much

more obvious in *Troades* than in some other plays (hence the academic debate about it).

This is a judicious assessment of a complex situation.

The play thus offers us two mutually exclusive interpretations – is it about Melos or not? – which also relate to internal divisions in the polis of Athens. This is a debate similar to that over how to understand the play as a whole, which has often polarised responses. At the extremes of interpretation are Murray, who invests in a version of *Trojan Women* as drawing beauty out of pain, music out of horror, and Adrian Poole, who reads nihilism without redemption.<sup>61</sup> Inasmuch as characters within the play, especially Hekabe, struggle to interpret their lives, each critical view is also supported by different moments in the play. As several critics note, Hekabe veers among different accounts of her life and cannot come to a final adjustment between despair that abandons effort and the attempt to wrench hope out of the situation.<sup>62</sup> The question of what sense to make of her predicament is handed over to the audience.

The audience are also invited, as I have suggested, to identify with those who are, in the ancient Greek context, as unlike them as possible, being a group of barbarian women captives. Even when the audience is not in fact composed of ancient Greeks, the gap between an audience viewing in relative security and comfort, and the plight of the women witnessing the end of their culture, is perhaps wider than some others posited by tragic dramas. This play then poses in extreme form the question that all tragedy invites us to, a version of which provides this book's epigraph. How does tragedy work with the relation between self and other – between 'Hecuba' and 'him'? The relations between self and other are, according to one argument at least, what give rise to the tragic responses of pity and fear. Identified as key components of tragedy by Aristotle, pity and fear are not fully defined in his canonical formulation in the *Poetics* (1449b), but possible definitions are illuminated by his account in the *Rhetoric* of pity and fear as dependent on the shifting positions of self and other. 'All things are to be

feared which when they happen, or are on the point of happening, to others, excite compassion' (2.5); 'All that men fear in regard to themselves excites their pity when others are the victim (2.8)'.<sup>63</sup> The self and the other can occupy different positions on the spectrum of emotions, and crucially, they can identify with one another or even exchange places.<sup>64</sup> Since pity and fear are the emotions appropriate to tragedy (*Poetics* 1452b), to negotiate these varying relationships is the task presented to the audience, and this task may be intensified when we are told, as we are by *Trojan Women*, that victory and defeat, the results of which normally make it very clear which is self and which is other, are interchangeable. It is perhaps this structural variation, coupled with the extreme pitifulness of the play's representations, which has ensured that the play can speak significantly to many different contexts and conflicts. The pitiful representations concentrate on women and children, but the dialectic of self and other asks that adult males, the decision makers, imagine themselves equally vulnerable, and perhaps end by castigating themselves as equally culpable as the monstrous Greeks. In the twentieth century large-scale conflicts began explicitly to acknowledge civilians, women and children, as legitimate targets, which was the realisation that sent Gilbert Murray to the play in order to indict the British concentration camps during the Boer War, and which has helped to ensure the play's subsequent repeated appearances on stages throughout the world. The play's focus on women and children as victims, and its interrogation of the audience's relation to them, makes it more 'relevant' than is strictly desirable.