

WOMEN OF TROY ESSAY.

“THERE IS NO AGONY WE DON’T ALREADY FEEL, NO ABYSS OF PAIN TO DISCOVER.” HECUBA’S SUFFERING IS CENTRAL TO THE PLAY’S ANTI-WAR MESSAGE. DISCUSS.

Euripides’s 415 BC tragedy, “The Women of Troy” embodies the immense destruction and grievance of Hecuba’s fall from Queen of the Trojans, intricately exploring the plight of all women and their far-reaching suffering. While Hecuba’s agony is central (and she is on the stage for the duration of the play), she herself is representative of all women and the grief/pain that is inevitable in war. It is clear that Euripides crafted her character to be representative of the plight of all women involved in the tragedy. Moreover, the audience is privy to the acute distress of Hecuba and her daughters, primarily through the commentary of the Chorus. Yet, while the playwright condemns the brutality of war, he also honours the nobility of defending one’s homeland. In this way it carries an anti-war message, but one that only despises senseless brutality. As a result of this juxtaposition, Euripides cements his anti-war message by posing to the audience that this war is futile, employing the character of Cassandra to denounce any nobility in senseless slaughter.

Euripides focuses on the ‘abyss of pain’ that Hecuba experiences as a direct result of the war. From the opening episode of Hecuba being prostrate, ‘throned in the dust’ in the centre of the stage, she comes to represent all that the women of Troy have lost. By depicting the suffering of Hecuba, namely her fall from Queen of Troy into a woman that “no grief can encompass what [she does] feel,” Euripides calls into question the action of men who seem “wisest and of the highest regard” yet in war, choose to “do things which show them to be a good deal less.” It is clear to the audience that the true victims of the Trojan War may well be the women that do not have any new “abyss of pain to discover”. Hecuba is representative of the plight of all women in the Trojan War, and characters utilised by Euripides, such as Talthybius, make the suffering of Hecuba and the other women even more apparent. While he is reluctant to reveal the inevitable fate of Astyanax, he has no qualms in telling Andromache that “you are quite alone, and believe me we are capable to dealing with a single woman if we have to”. This consistent willingness to deliver the Trojan women to their horrific fates, which culminates in Talthybius escorting Hecuba and the Chorus (collectively a powerful image of oppression) to the waiting ships at the end of the tragedy, is shown to be cruel and unfeeling. It is the strength of mind and nobility of the women of Troy that is juxtaposed with the inhumanity and brutality of their suffering that truly portrays Euripides anti-war message. The explicit suffering of Hecuba is central to this message, as she is representative of all women of Troy.

It is through the words of the Chorus that the audience is compelled to question both war and its devastating consequences. The shared potential fate of the surviving Trojan women – that they might be ‘forced into the bed of some loathsome Greek’ – is one the women consistently reject. However, Euripides demonstrates the helplessness of these women, depicting the Chorus pointedly stating that on the night the city of Troy fell, “a whole generation of women” were “raped in their bedrooms”, while Hecuba laments that the “good breeding” of her daughters was “wasted on brutal soldiery”. This raw collection of cause and effect between the Trojan War and the Greek Army heightens the audience’s sensitivity to the barbaric circumstance that the Chorus, being representative of the women of Troy find themselves in. Euripides further positions the audience into sympathising with these women by humanising and materialising their struggle. Hecuba’s lament shows the plight of those “thrust at spear-point into some Greek’s bed as a slave of his lust,” and thus questions the morality of these so-called Greek War Heroes. The fact that the play does not conclude dramatically is because the impact of the war continues long after the ‘war is over’ as the women begin their lives as slaves.

The climax of the tragedy is another chance for Euripides to allow the Chorus to explore the human condition, when Astyanax's fate is decided by Odysseus, who is characterised as "a man without morality". The Chorus are bestowed with the unique ability to portray the emotions of the women of Troy as a collective. As they lament alongside Hecuba, it becomes apparent that Hecuba's own representation of the women of Troy validates the tragic emotions created by the war on all women. Her suffering embodies an anti-war message.

Although Cassandra, Hecuba's 'frenzied visionary' daughter argues eloquently for the nobility and honour of defending one's homeland, she also challenges the heroic mythology surrounding war. Cassandra exclaims that the Trojans won the greatest of all glories, as "they died fighting for their fatherland." Furthermore, Cassandra carries a powerful anti-war message, as although she argues that taking up arms for one's homeland is a noble action, Euripides constructs the character of Cassandra to denounce the senseless slaughter of the women of Troy, posing that "any sensible man must hate war." It is Cassandra's experience that Euripides exploits in order to condemn those that inflict suffering on the women of Troy. There is truly "no agony we don't feel" for Cassandra when it is found that Agamemnon is willing to flout "all religious feeling" and take her as his concubine. The danger of this course of action is expertly shown to the audience by Euripides, as they are made aware of the sacrilegious actions of Ajax, who "dragged Cassandra from sanctuary," and thus elicited the ire of Athene, foreshadowing the destruction of the Greek fleet on their journey home. Cassandra's ability to prophesise and not be trusted creates an image of an unstable woman, her instability is heightened by her imminent enslavement. However, even when caught up in fits of foresight, Cassandra remains dedicated to her family, shown as she is carried out by guards after being assigned to Agamemnon saying "Goodbye mother. No tears." Hecuba's daughter, Cassandra, challenges the traditional heroism associated with war by posing circumstances in which this honour should be denied. Her anti-war message is ironic as her ability to prophesise is precisely what shows her ultimately the destruction that she will face, as a result of the war.

Euripides demonstrates the ultimate tragedy of war and his play is an unmistakable lament for women and children who pay the ultimate sacrifice of war: they suffer through it and they suffer after it. It is not only Hecuba but the interplay between all women that highlight his anti-war message most forcefully. It is for this reason that Euripides explicitly has made Hecuba a voice for all women in this tragedy, and the Chorus works to either support or challenge her human emotions during wartime. Therefore, *Women of Troy* speaks for every woman who has lost a loved one in war, anyone who has had to bury a child and of course challenges the injustices and suffering that human beings are driven to inflict on one other and the inevitable cycle of conflict.