

THE TROJAN WOMEN by EURIPIDES

Translated, with digressions, by Nancy Linden

According to legend, the Trojan War came about when the Trojan prince Paris was called upon to judge who was the most beautiful among three goddesses: Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Each offered a bribe, if he would choose her. He chose Aphrodite, who offered him the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen. She was unfortunately already married to Menelaus, king of Sparta, but left him and went to Troy with Paris. Menelaus and his brother, Agamemnon, the king of Argos, attacked Troy to get her back. Hera and Athena, whom Paris did not choose, helped to defeat Troy.

Troy is a wasteland, a smoldering city. The men are dead, the women wait to be transported as slaves to the homes of the various Greek warriors. A few tents, patched together from various materials, some of them translucent, lean against the ruined gates of Troy. The gates, the city, and some of the characters are represented by black-&-white charcoal drawings projected onto a largely white set. These projections provide much of the lighting for the play. The actors wear black or shades of grey, their faces often obscured by the shadows of the projections; they may be wearing masks. Occasional lines of text, handwritten in charcoal, are projected on the back wall. Discordant music will be heard: Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Alban Berg. The music and the poetry may at times obscure the dialogue (or vice-versa).

The first of the two scenes presented here, Scene 2 in the play, concerns Cassandra, daughter of Hecuba, the grieving Queen of Troy. Cassandra will be the slave of Agamemnon. She is a priestess with the gift of prophecy, and thus knows that when they arrive at Agamemnon's home they will both be murdered.

The second of these scenes, Scene 4, is Helen's. The betrayed Menelaus comes to reclaim and condemn her.

Projected text is double-indented, IN ALL CAPS. Stage directions are double-indented, *in italics*. TS Eliot's poetry is single-indented, *in bold italics*.

SCENE 2: CASSANDRA

*I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea.*

MESSENGER:

Time, ladies. Bring Cassandra out.
She goes with Agamemnon. Bring them all.
The Greek ships are returning home.

Brilliant light flares within a tent, explosively. White projectiles—sparks, confetti, flowers, streamers—burst into the air. These will continue to move randomly in the air, rather like a snow globe.

Text: **FIRE!**

What the fuck?! What are they doing? They're gonna burn the place down! Get Cassandra out of there! She belongs to Agamemnon! --Get them all out! I'm responsible for them! This cannot be allowed! Go, bring them out! They're promised to our kings!

HECUBA:

Don't be afraid.
You look not on destruction but derangement.
My child Cassandra comes to greet you. She is mad.

CASSANDRA:

Bring lights, bring fire, rejoice!
O Hymen, god of marriage,
Honor me!
Bow to me!
Bless me, you gods, for I shall wed a king!

Apollo, whom I love,
Play music for me
Come and dance with me
And bless my wedding day with blinding sun!
Hecate, queen of night,
Ascend to me;
And when my happy day
Fades into darkness,
Give o'er your starlight to this virgin bride!

O mother, leave your mourning:
Come and dance!
Follow my footsteps,
Follow my joy,
And dance!

I go to the bed of a king!

Text: *text fades or dissolves throughout next speech.*

*(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)*

HECUBA:

Hephaestus, god of fire, take back your torch;
Here it enlightens only blackest sorrow.
This marriage does not want your holy light.
Give me the torch, my child; you swing it wildly.
(takes the torch, gives to Chorus)
Take this within; extinguish it with tears.

CASSANDRA:

O Mother, do not weep; rejoice with me!
For Agamemnon is to be my lord,
The honored king of Argos,
The great commander of the conquering Greeks:
Splendid now in our stolen riches,
Joyous in his triumph over us.

I will drag him down to death.

*“Confetti” bits gradually turn red and fall, piling up at her feet. More
continue to form in the sky.*

Text: MY MARRIAGE WILL BE BLOODIER THAN HELEN’S

He, the eldest son of cursed Atreus,
Shall meet that curse in me, more deep in blood
Than ever shed our brothers here in Troy.
This broken town is happier than theirs:
They left their land ten summers in the past,
Ten winters have they spent far from their homes,
Their wives like widows and their children strangers.
Their countless numbers slaughtered on our soil
Will never know a burial. They suffered for
A worthless prize: a false and lustful woman
Who so desired a handsome Trojan prince
She left her lord and followed him to Troy.

Our warriors died to save their fatherland.
Our Trojan valor will live on a thousand years,
Our heroism told in song and legend.
We died an honorable death: that is the greater triumph.
Our Hector’s glorious deeds will still resound
Long generations after we are dust:
The bravest of the brave.

The “confetti” is blown away during the next few lines

And now I shall destroy our conquerors: destroy that king

Who for his brother's wife destroyed us.
Don't mourn for me, my mother, but rejoice:

I go to bring destruction to his house.

Text: text fades

*I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dug
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
I too awaited the expected guest.*

MESSENGER:

Oh, shit, now what do I do? This girl is out of her mind; is she gonna be dangerous to the general? Should I—tie her up, or something? She's going to "destroy his house"; his house? What is she even talking about? Ok, look, if I tell the general about this she'll be in deep shit. She's just crazy with grief, poor girl. Well, bring her along. He wants her, God knows why, I wouldn't touch her with a 10-foot pole; but hey, I'm just the messenger. It's not for me to understand. Just to do and die, as they say.

Ok, so I'm not going to tell anybody about this, your words are dust in the wind as far as I'm concerned. Let's go: our general wants to marry you and sail home.

And you, old woman, go prepare yourself.
Odysseus, your master, sails soon.

CASSANDRA:

This man's a fool, a worthless menial!
My mother, slave to false Odysseus?
Apollo has made clear to me, his oracle,
That she will die in Troy.

Odysseus himself

Will have a long road home:
Ten years of war in Troy, ten years at sea
He'll wander on Poseidon's wild waves
From grief to grief, until these sufferings here
Will seem like pleasure, a sweet memory.

*Text: THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE OF ATREUS
(slow fade-in, complete by the end of Cassandra's speech)*

So much for him. On to my wedding day!
I'll bring my kingly husband down so low
His burial will be suited for a dog,
Devoid of glory, done in the dead of night.
My own corpse will thrown out on the rocks,
Eaten by wolves and washed by winter rains.

Bring me to the ship! Prepare to sail! The wind is rising!
Bear this avenging spirit from the land!
Farewell, my mother, waste no tears on me.
Farewell the ruins of Troy, my lost home.
My father and my brothers, sleeping now,
Soon I will join you there, but first I shall
Destroy our destroyers, those poor fools,
The sons of the House of Atreus.

*The nightingales sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud,
And let their liquid siftings fall
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.*

SCENE 4: HELEN

MESSENGER, *entering with Menelaus*

Ladies, you have a visitor. Come on in, General. Don't pay any attention to the mess here; they're doing the best they can with what we've given them, which isn't much.

MENELAUS.

This morning at the end of ten years' war
I enter Troy's gates: I, Menelaus,
Her conqueror, to claim my sorry prize:
That woman who was once my faithless wife.
I have brought war to Troy not from jealousy,
Not to reclaim a woman whom I loved,
But for revenge against her and the friend
Who stole the worthless harlot from my home.
And now outside the ruins of Troy she waits,
Just one more slave. Those men who suffered here
Because of her have granted her to me.
I'll bring her back to Argos in my ship,
There to be stoned to death by those whose friends
Died here in Ilium.
Go into the tent, and drag her out.
Not gently: drag her roughly by the hair
Through Troy's dust. Then when the wind blows fair
She'll sail to her death.

HECUBA.

I thank you, Menelaus, for this vengeance.
But do not look on her too long: her beauty
Entrances men, destroys their towns, burns down their houses.
I know her witchcraft; so do you, and these her victims.

(The Messenger gently brings Helen from her tent during the following lines)

*The glass
Reflected light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;
In vials of ivory and coloured glass
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused
And drowned the sense in odours.*

HELEN.

Menelaus! Husband! Come at last!
But this rough treatment frightens me; your men
Have hurt me. Can it be that you believe
The legend that I left of my free will?
Do you now hate me? Speak, my husband!

MENELAUS.

No longer husband. You have been condemned
By all the soldiers you have wronged
And given me to kill.

HELEN.

No, in my heart I never was untrue!
Oh, let me tell you of the violation
Done to me, my helpless innocence!

MENELAUS.

I have no wish to listen to your treachery.

HECUBA.

Hear her, Menelaus; allow the accused to speak.
Then let me answer her, for you know nothing
Of her tyranny in Troy; her actions here
Will best condemn her.

MESSENGER.

Ok, look, let her testify; that's the right thing to do. Nobody should be executed without a fair trial.

MENELAUS.

I have no time to waste, but let her speak.
At your request, poor ruined Queen, I will allow it.

MESSENGER.

Let's hear the defense, pretty lady.

Text: **THE DEFENSE**

HELEN.

Oh, hear my sorrows, husband of my heart.
I'll show the falseness of the case against me.
The first point: she herself brought on this fate
When she gave birth to Paris, treacherous friend.
The second point: her husband, kingly Priam,
Though prophecy advised him kill the babe,
Allowed the child to live.
The hateful Paris who ruined Troy and me
Came to be renowned in judgment, and was given
The holy task to choose between three goddesses,
Which was most beautiful. Athena promised him
The conquest of all Greece, if he chose her;
Hera, subjugation of the Asian lands
And Europe. But the third, Aphrodite,
Offered not domination, but love, beauty:
She offered me.

His choice saved your country:

You were not crushed by Troy or ruled by tyrants.
But what saved you was anguishing for me:
Torn from my home, thrust into slavery,
Now cruelly reproached by him I love.
I should instead be greeted as a savior!

You'll question now: why did I acquiesce?
Why leave your house by stealth and follow Paris?
This was your fault: you sailed away to Crete,
Leaving your guest behind alone with me.
But not alone: the goddess Aphrodite
Stood beside him and enchanted me.
Even Zeus, the mighty lord of all the gods,
Is helpless in her gaze; how then should I,
Frail mortal that I am, resist her power?
If you seek vengeance, seek out Aphrodite;
Punish her, if you've more strength than Zeus.

Then you will ask: when Paris died in war,
I was no longer prisoner of the gods;
Why did I stay in Troy? Not run away
And seek the shelter of the Argive ships?
I tried, my lord. On many desperate nights
I climbed the walls with ropes to let me down
Endangering my life to seek my freedom.
The watchmen found me, stopped me, cut me down.
And then the prince Deiphobus took me, raped me,

Made me serve his needs.

You see, my lord, how deeply I have suffered,
Defeated and misused by gods and men.
And now I meekly must await my fate
And pray that you will pity your sad wife.

MESSENGER.

I don't know, General. She's had a tough time, and she seems like a pretty good kid. She didn't mean any harm, she just got carried away by circumstances and a couple of men. Such a pretty little thing. Listen, why don't you just take her home and think it over? But, yeah, I see you, Hecuba; we need to hear the prosecution. Go ahead, hon.

Text: **THE PROSECUTION**

HECUBA.

She claims that she was chosen by the gods
To be the victim of their vanity.
Their vanity! Was Hera, queen of Zeus,
The lord of all the gods, so discontent
She sought a better husband? Or Athena,
Who had begged of Zeus virginity; did she
Need greater beauty now to lure a mate?
Would Hera promise Argos to barbarians,
If he called her most beautiful? Athena, Athens?
The gods are not such shallow fools as that,
To vie like jealous children for a toy.

You were not Aphrodite's gift to Paris.
She did not stand beside him in your sight.
Why need she stir herself?
You saw my son, a handsome Trojan prince,
Splendid in Eastern dress, ablaze with gold,
And you were lost, were mad, struck with desire.
Bored with your husband, bored with Spartan life,
You thought that Troy's rivers flowed with gold,
And all the riches of the East would soon be yours.

Were you taken by force, did you cry out?
No Spartan saw you, no one heard you.
Your brothers were not called upon to help,
Castor and Pollux, now set among the stars.
You followed Paris eagerly, from lust.

Great armies followed in your flight to Troy.
This fed your vanity: That men would die for you!
You listened eagerly to the reports:
When Menelaus triumphed, you would praise

The prowess and the wisdom of that husband
To feed the jealous anger of my son.
When Troy triumphed, Menelaus then
Was less than nothing, not worth mentioning.
You always followed fortune, only caring
Which side triumphed, when it gave you pleasure.

You tried to flee? You lowered yourself on ropes,
From our high towers? When did you ever
Fix the rope around your neck, in sorrow
For your lost husband, or prepare the knife
To stop your heart?
Many times I pled with you to flee,
And would have safely brought you through the gates:
No need for you to creep away by stealth.
Go, my daughter, so I said to you,
Go to the Grecian ships, and end this war!
You didn't want to hear.
You were a princess, proud in Paris' house
With servants kneeling at your dainty feet,
Living high in luxury. Even now,
Crawling in the ruins of our city:
Look at you! In jewels and fine silks,
A decorated corpse. You should shame
To wear such finery before your husband.
You should come to him on hands and knees,
Trembling, in rags, your beauty marred with ash
If you felt any shame.

O Menelaus, hear my argument:
Let her feel justice: let her be condemned!
Slay her! Set the law for traitorous wives;
Let it be death!

Text: **THE REBUTTAL**

HELEN. (*kneeling*)
Don't slay me, Menelaus, don't believe her!
Can you look into my eyes and think me false?
Remember all our days of happiness!
You must then spare your wife!

Text: **THE SURREBUTTAL**

HECUBA.
Remember all the lives this strumpet cost.
Remember hardships of a ten year war.

Remember families despairing back in Greece.
You must then condemn her.

MESSENGER.

Wow. I'm glad I don't have to make this decision. This is all too heavy for me. It's bad enough that I have to carry the reports.

Text: **THE JUDGEMENT**

MENELAUS.

My mind agrees with yours, poor ruined queen.
She left my house without constraint
Compelled by lust alone. No Aphrodite
Charmed her eyes, no man took her by force.
She'll sail with me to Greece, and there she'll die:
Her punishment for shaming me.

HECUBA.

Yet do not let her sail on your same ship.

MENELAUS.

Why; is she much fatter now? D'you think we'll sink?

HECUBA.

When one's loved deeply, one will love again.

MENELAUS.

I have no love remaining for this traitor.
She's dirt beneath my feet, the blackest vermin.
But you speak wisely: she'll not sail
Upon my ship. I will not even touch her.
Drag her to the ships. When we reach Argos
She'll die an evil death, she'll not be spared.
This nightmare of blood will find its end
In hers.

(Exits. Helen is on the ground crying. The Messenger helps her up, smiles, and dusts her shoulders during the following TS Eliot lines.)

*A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.*

HELEN (*taking the Messenger's arm*)

Whoever you are, I have always depended on
The kindness of strangers.