Trojan Women: Introduction

1. Gods in the *Trojan Women*

Two gods take the stage in the prologue to *Trojan Women*. Are these gods real or abstract? In the prologue, with its monologue by Poseidon followed by a dialogue between the master of the sea and Athena, we see them as real, as actors (perhaps statelier than us, and accoutered with their traditional props, a trident for the sea god, a helmet for Zeus' daughter). They are otherwise quite ordinary people with their loves and hates and with their infernal flexibility whether moral or emotional. They keep their emotional side removed from humans, distance which will soon become physical. Poseidon cannot stay in Troy, because the citizens don't worship him any longer. He may feel sadness or regret, but not mourning for the people who once worshiped but now are dead or soon to be dispersed. He is not present for the destruction of the towers that signal his final absence and the diaspora of his Phrygians. He takes pride in the building of the walls, perfected by the use of mason's rules. After the divine departures, the play proceeds to the inanition of his and Apollo's labor, with one more use for the towers before they are wiped from the face of the earth. Nothing will be left. It is true, as Hecuba claims, her last vestige of pride, the name of Troy remains, but the place wandered about throughout antiquity and into the modern age. At the end of his monologue Poseidon can still say farewell to the towers. At the end of the play there is nothing left to say farewell to.

What is outside the play, even when predicted, is outside the play. What about the storm that Poseidon and Athena plot? No doubt it happened and was terrifying to those who survived and deadly to those who did not. But we, the audiences, know a thing or two about the homecomings of the Greeks. And we are reminded by Cassandra of the death of Agamemnon and her own, though details are missing. As for Odysseus we are treated to a long list of his sufferings before he reaches home. If we know anything about the future we know that Menelaus brought his wife back to Sparta where they entertained guests and told stories not quite flattering of each other. In *Trojan Women*'s one positive prayer, the chorus prays that the ship carrying Helen and Menelaus will be sunk. This, we know, does not happen. So, not everything outside the play is really outside the play. References to the *Odyssey* and epic in general make sure that as critics we are supposed to be aware of Homer and the traditional stories.

Poseidon rues the destruction of cities: "turning them to emptiness" whether towers or tombs. The last scene is a burial: the baby Astyanax is buried, but the place of his burial will never be known. And perhaps that does not matter. As Hecuba implies, we do these things for the living. Finally, the gods are gone, the wall, towers, graves (including we must suppose Achilles' memorial) are gone, the people, victors and vanquished, are gone. There can be no *deus ex machina*. Where would she stand?

And where are the gods in the scenes that follow?

—In *Hecuba's monody*, she says this is not like the choral hymn to the gods (149–52): mourning is not the place for the gods. They are no longer needed.

—In the *first episode* Cassandra, the mock-bride, invokes the gods in her wedding ritual, but it is pro forma (beginning at 310).

—Hecuba calls on the gods (468) but at the same time admits they are worthless allies. Rather she calls on them to witness her suffering. Athena (65-6) had said she wanted to gladden the Trojans by causing a bitter homecoming for the Greeks. How could that alleviate the suffering of the Trojan women who would go down with their captors? Athena's desire to help Troy is abstract heartless vengeance.
—The *first stasimon* celebrates the Trojan Horse, the gift to Athena. The barbarity is caused only by the human agents.
—The gods are absent in the *second episode*. Andromache speaks of their ill-will. With the inanition of Troy we see more and more that there is no place for gods.
—The *second stasimon* celebrates the gods' love for individual Trojans, Ganymede and Tithonus, now flown to the skies. The gods' flexibility returns as a theme from the prologue.
—Gods return in the *third episode*, beginning with Hecuba's New Age prayer to Zeus or whatever (884–8). She imagines an abstract ruler of the universe dispensing an abstract Justice, because this is what she hopes from the scene. Justice, however, is not a major theme in the play. Helen resorts to use of the gods in telling of the infamous beauty contest and Cypris' coming for her (924–41), but it is as if the gods are not separate gods but props or people she can use to play roles in her script (and Menelaus seems to agree when he suggests (1139–40) that Cypris is just brought along for a boast). Hecuba's argument mocks Helen's. Aphrodite is no more than an abstract, lust personified (989–90). Hecuba's explanation is god-free.
—The third stasimon returns to the gods' putative betrayal of Troy. It ends with the only genuine prayer in the play: for the destruction of the ship carrying Menelaus and Helen (1099–1105). This does not happen in the tradition, though their ships are blown off course. Poseidon's pact with Athena is only half-heartedly fulfilled, like everything the gods do. It is easily subsumed in something else.

All the hopes and visions for the future were human. The gods betrayed them all and are now betraying the other side. Or simply watch, caring little for what we call human. We are left with some questions. Some ships will be lost at sea. Otherwise Poseidon is a red herring. But what of Cassandra's muddled prophecy? Agamemnon will be murdered along with Cassandra, but not by her (as she proclaims). Odysseus will wander for ten years. But what of Hecuba whose last word is "life" as she is taken to Odysseus' ship? Cassandra knows that her mother will die in Troy. Usually it is only the inner audience to whom Cassandra is incomprehensible or unbelievable. This time the outer audience, both the original fifth century one, all the way down to us, must be bemused by her words. Does Hecuba actually board Odysseus' ship? Is Apollo so far absent that his prophetic virgin's words have no credibility or truth even for people who know the story?

2.Victory and Defeat in *Trojan Women*

In the prologue Poseidon makes clear that victors and vanquished are not so widely separated in time. The destruction of Troy is forever, but the destroyers will soon be destroyed: "He himself will die later," Poseidon proclaims of the destroyer (97).

Cassandra, however, in her scene makes the clearest case for undermining the distinction between victory and defeat. She enters in triumph to celebrate her wedding with the king who defeated her people. Talthybius, in perhaps his most insensitive moment, thinks it is great luck that the king has chosen her (259). All to Hecuba's despair.

Mother, cover my head with crowns of victory (353).

Cassandra predicts she will kill Agamemnon and bring down his house in revenge for her brothers and father. But we know, the outer audiences through the ages, that it is more complicated than that. In fact she does not kill him in the story as it is known. Her major speech confounds the distinction between victory and defeat, but we must make certain assumptions to accept her conclusions. Yes, the Greeks won, but for the ten years of the war they suffered more than the Trojans, away from their families, dying and being buried or cremated in a strange land: but does that really matter to the dead or only to the living? Their surviving companions, overseeing the rites despaired for themselves and carried on the killing. For those years the Trojans lived maybe not a normal family life, but they returned home at the end of the fighting day, and if they died they were tended by their loved ones and buried in their own land. Hector, as the heroic defender of his people, has undying glory. Even Paris married Zeus' daughter and has his own fame. Of course they are all dead, but this is another value that will be questioned in the play.

I will come victorious to the dead
after destroying the house of Atreus' sons by whom we were ruined. (460–1)

The next scenes are of relentless defeat and loss until Hecuba, not always the optimist, but refusing to give in to nihilism, suggests a glimmer of hope in the boy Astyanax who will one day grow up to resettle Troy (702–5). A hope immediately dashed by the reappearance of Talthybius. Andromache's departure is one of utter defeat: "cover my body," she moans, "and throw it on the ship." And yet Hecuba's hope of a resurrected Troy was not as foolish as one might think: we are reminded in the next stasimon that Troy was devastated before and still rose again (816–17).[1] Talthybius tells Andromache not to make a fuss: she is one woman, no match for the Greek army, if she has hopes for the boy's burial. And yet we are often reminded that one woman, one marriage brought on all this horror and grief. Helen, it seems, was a match for the whole population of Troy and for the Greek army.

What are we to do with Helen of Troy, nee of Sparta, the cause of it all who finds a list of reasons not to blame herself, not all of them specious? Where does she belong on the victory/ defeat spectrum? She has been quartered with the captive women. She has been handed over to Menelaus to kill (or, as it turns out, to take home). At her entrance she is dragged out of the shelter by Menelaus' goons. To everyone she is the enemy and deserves to die. But not to herself. She benefitted Greece, kept the Greeks from defeat and foreign domination:

I was sold for my beauty and am reproached
when I should have received a crown for my head (936–7).

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[1]The experimental playwright Charles Mee makes his version of the Trojan Women the prologue to a play about Dido and Aeneas (in *Trojan Women 2.0: a love story*) as part of his "re-making" project. For a script see http://www.charlesmee.org/trojan-women.shtml.

At the end her fate is left up in the air. But as Cassandra said, "Paris married a daughter of Zeus." And so did Menelaus. The last we see of Helen is in the chorus' imagination of her luxuriating like a vain young girl, discovering her beauty, on Menelaus' ship (1106–7).

The Final Scene (*Exodos*)

The victors leave with their spoils, but all is not well. There is trouble in Phthia, Neoptolemus' home. His grandfather Peleus is being harassed by Pelias and he has to leave in haste with Andromache. The burial of Astyanax in Hector's shield can be seen as a victory (736-9), but one depending on defeat. The splendor of the offerings are small victories inside the defeat, Trojan spoils being left behind. But the Greeks' fear of the baby hints at their own fear of defeat.

Is there victory for the defeated left in song?

> *But if the gods had not*
> *overthrown our land and turned it upside down,*
> *we would lie in obscurity and would not be sung of*
> *giving songs to the muses of mortals yet to come* (1242–5).

The women move off thoroughly defeated to a life of slavery. Is the fact that they are alive a kind of victory? They are even made to cooperate with their oppressors (1154–5) in speeding the departure. The victory of immortality in song for Troy, now nothing but burning rubble, rings hollow. Both sides win the victory of eternal memory and it was the Greeks who passed on the tradition. The Greeks are victims too, but not yet equally so. Some will be lost at sea. Whether they lived or died they had a miserable time of the war. Agamemnon will be killed and his house go down in ruins (or not). Odysseus will wander ten years and come back to chaos at home. For Cassandra there is victory in her knowing the end if not always the means of her enemies' defeat. For the Greeks finally setting sail is victory, in their ignorance.

3. Life and Death in *Trojan Women*

In the Second Episode (the long Andromache scene), Andromache arrives in a Greek wagon (a mundane reminiscence of entrances in chariots (Atossa's in *Persians*, Agamemnon's in *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's in Euripides' *Electra*, for example: none of them portending good luck) with her child in her arms and Greek spoils, including Hector's armor, filling the back. She is being taken to the Greek ships. Hecuba mentions the loss of Cassandra. Andromache adds the news that Polyxena, too, is dead:

> ANDROMACHE
>
> *She is dead as she died. But even dead*
> *she is better off than I am alive* (630–1).
>
> HECUBA
>
> *O my dear child, it is not the same to be alive and dead.*
> *The one is nothing but in the other there are hopes* (632–3).

How Hecuba can see hope in this bleak and ashy land is almost beyond comprehension, but the hope in this scene is really there, clinging to his mother's bosom. Hecuba's last word in the play is not *hope*, but *life*. Andromache then gives a nihilistic speech (634) on the subject. "To never have existed is the same as death." Polyxena is dead and free of troubles.

In the prologue, we can only conclude that the theme of life and death is meaningless to the immortals. They do not mind dealing death, but their concern is with place, sacred place, perhaps, and their place. Poseidon feels a kind of benevolence toward Troy (6–7) and he can recognize the misery of mortals (36–44). Athena is concerned with the insult to her temple (69). Once their sites of worship are gone, the gods can leave the place with few regrets. The dead, the corpses that will fill Euboea's bay (84), the dead that lie in the graves of Troy, soon to be abandoned, are not what causes them grief or resentment (96). In Hecuba's monody, despite her losses and her physical misery, the old queen remains hopeful: there is always something new. Go with the flow. There is a new song.

The chorus is less single-minded. One member (or group) fears that the Greeks will put her (them) to death (178), as they have, unbeknownst to the inner audience, already done to Polyxena. Mostly they are concerned about the masters and places they will be sent to. In the first episode the blurring of life and death first appears in the discussion of Polyxena. Talthybius cannot bring himself to say that she is dead, only that she is serving Achilles (264) and that her troubles are over (270). Even Hecuba wonders, "Is she still alive?"(269). As Talthybius and his henchmen turn to collect the women, he sees flames in the quarters and expresses the view that it would not be unnatural for the women to prefer death to a life of slavery (301–3). And Cassandra adds to this triumph of death in her speech about the victory of the Trojans. Hector is dead but his glory is everlasting (395). And most of all in her closing lines about her own victorious death:

> *My beloved country,*
> *and my brothers buried in the earth and father, it is not long*
> *before you receive me. I will come victorious to the dead*
> *after destroying the house of Atreus' sons by whom we were ruined* (458-61).

Both Andromache and Hecuba talk about the good life. For Andromache, compromising for comfort is unthinkable. Until close to the end (and maybe beyond it) Hecuba is convinced (with, perhaps, a lapse or two) that life is better, that life can be lived however hard, that there is always hope. At the end, I must admit that I do not see hope, except hope for Hecuba's metamorphosis, for which we are given little expectation:

The chorus (153) refers to the sounds Hecuba is making with a word that means "whimpering like a dog."

Cassandra (426–8) in mocking Talthybius' role and character as a herald hints at a traditional end for her mother:

> *You say my mother will go to the halls*
> *of Odysseus? When the words of Apollo*
> *made it clear to me that she will die here in Troy?*

But Cassandra's prophecies are not only disbelieved or not understood by the inner audience, it is hard for the outer audiences to know what to believe as well. Of course we recognize the murder of Agamemnon as something that happened. And the wandering of Odysseus is known to all, but it is hard to imagine Hecuba on Odysseus' ship or any in his fleet.

Finally, Hecuba briefly gives up on life and sees her destiny as one with her burning city:

> *Come, let me run to the pyre; it is best for me*
> *to die here along with my burning country* (1282–3).

But that attempt never gets off the ground. She stays to sing the dirge for her grandson.

Cassandra is led to Agamemnon's ship, leaving Hecuba to her endless suffering and atheism. She calls only on the gods because it sounds good (470-1). She begins her speech by talking about the good life she led. The story of rags to rags does not garner as much sympathy, or so she supposes. She is clearly not unaware of the effect of her oratory. She was born royal and married into royalty; she gave birth to outstanding children. Then the story turns more tragic: she buried her sons; she saw Priam slaughtered; and her girls are given over as spear-brides to the enemy. But even these imply what should have been: the sons were heroes, dying for their country; the daughters should have married royals and lived in luxury.

The ode on the joy and horror of the Night of the Trojan Horse is greeted immediately by the arrival of Andromache, the only rival to Hecuba as grieving widow, soon also to be grieving mother. She, unlike her mother-in-law sees no hope until the existence of her child Astyanax is pointed out to her as a hope for the future. Hecuba's mountain of grief is hardly comforting:

HECUBA

Of which [troubles] there is no limit or number
for one evil comes to contest with another (620-1).

And here is Andromache to add another: Polyxena is dead, something which Hecuba half knew and half hoped was not so. "Even dead" asserts Andromache, "she is better off than I am alive." (630–1) as a preface to what she sees as her "most beautiful argument" (634). To which her mother-in-law answers chiastically, allowing life and hope to overcome death and nothingness:

O my dear child, it is not the same to be alive and dead.
The one is nothing but in the other there are hopes.

Andromache with her argument hopes to comfort Hecuba. Polyxena now feels no pain and is free of troubles while Andromache, still alive, has the whole of her life to remember and relive her perfect life with Hector, in which she provided him with a conflict-free home, knowing when to yield and when it was her turn to win a point, a relationship we see in Book 6 of the *Iliad*. Life without Hector is life without hope (679-81). Hecuba advises her to do everything in her power to please her new "husband' so she can raise Astyanax worthily of his father. This must be seen as one of Hecuba's most compromised positions. And too soon after this, Talthybius arrives with the slowly paced news that there is to be no Astyanax to raise. Andromache's despair could not be deeper.

I am ruined and I cannot save my child
from death. Cover my wretched body
and throw it on a ship (776-8).

She has become just another sack of spoils to be tossed on the ship.

Hecuba had said,

Of the prosperous,
think no one happy until he is dead (509–10).

Now perhaps she believes this gem of archaic thought, but she has one last gambit before the obliteration of the city (line 798). In the trial of Helen there is no talk of life and death except for the condemnation of Helen. Hecuba's desire to win the argument overcomes her scruples as she identifies herself with Menelaus' cause and that of the Greeks. The fate of Helen is left up in the

air, but we know that Helen's allure ultimately wins (as the chorus predicts, 1106–7).

Despite the touching funeral scene and mourning for Astyanax and the obliteration of Troy, Hecuba is still able to believe in Troy as the subject of song to the ages (1244-5), echoing Cassandra's praise of Hector's glory (394–6), Though the chorus does not seem to share this sentiment:

Soon you will fall without a name in kindly earth (1319).

And still Hecuba is able to drag her foot to the ships and her life of slavery (1129–30, 1275).

4. Cause/Blame for the War

Who gets the blame for the war? Helen first, but not last. In the prologue Poseidon implies that she is not an innocent victim to be brought home when he identifies her as *rightly* "a spear-won prize" (34–5). No more is said of the cause in the divine dialogue.

In her monody (131–7) Hecuba calls Helen hated wife of Menelaus who caused the death of Priam and ran Hecuba aground.

Cassandra (369–70) continues the same line of reasoning:

The Greeks for the sake of one woman, one desire,
in pursuing Helen, caused tens of thousands of deaths.

And Hecuba takes this up without change (498–9):

Because of one marriage of one
woman I have met with such disasters and they have no end.

Andromache adds a second culprit, her own brother-in-law, Paris:

From the ill will of the gods your son escaped Hades
and for a sordid marriage brought down the towers of Troy. . . (597–8).
He brought the yoke of slavery to Troy (599–600).

But later, after the death sentence for Astyanax, Andromache's tirade against Helen leaves no room for another cause and the chorus agrees:

You, spawn of Tyndareus, never were you Zeus' child
but I would say you were born of many fathers,
first of the curse of Vengeance, then of Envy,
of Murder and Death and whatever evils earth spawns.
For I would never believe that Zeus sired you,
death to countless barbarians and Greeks.
I wish you were dead. From your dazzling eyes
brazenly you devastated the famous plains of Phrygia. (766–73)

Chorus

Unhappy Troy you have lost your people beyond numbering
for the sake of one woman and her hateful mating (780–1).

With the appearance of Helen herself all this changes. Paris bears more of the guilt. To

exonerate himself from the charge of uxoriousness, Menelaus, claims to be avenging the crime against hospitality, as if that were enough to bring about the destruction of a civilization; as if there were really any difference between the two:

> *But I came to Troy, not as they suppose of me,*
> *for the sake of my wife, but against the man*
> *who stole her from my home, betraying his host* (864–6).

And Helen extends the causation back to the birth of Paris and beyond to the Olympian gods

> *First, this woman gave birth to the first cause of evil,*
> *when she bore Paris; second, the old man Priam*
> *was the death of Troy and me when he did not kill*
> *the infant, bitter image of a fire brand, then called Alexandros.*
> *Listen now how the rest followed from that.*
> *He judged the three goddesses vying with each other*. . . . (919–24).

She makes herself not the perpetrator, but the victim of Priam and Hecuba, of the gods, even of Menelaus himself (who took off on a trip to Crete, leaving the stranger in the house). And she is a victim, confined with the other women, dragged from the quarters.

Hecuba pleads, taking sides with the Greek cause (1044–5):

> *Do not betray your companions in arms whose deaths*
> *she caused*.

Hecuba's final verdict is to blame Helen for all Troy's loss:

> *but now the god-hated*
> *Helen has robbed you, and besides destroyed*
> *your life and brought down the whole house* (1214–15).

But is it as simple as that? Helen is not named in the *kommos*. She is not the cause of this final obliteration.

5. Prominence of Place and its History in *Trojan Women*

In *Trojan Women* we are made fully aware of the setting. Troy is in ruins. Only its towers still stand as a reminder of what once was and of the suffering it endured and caused.

Beginning with Poseidon's monologue, we are treated to a mythical history of Troy, more glamorous than a mere succession of kings. First he describes the building of the walls that are so prominent at the beginning (4-5), middle (with the murder of Astyanax), and end (1316–29) of the play, adding the detail that he and Apollo used the mason's line or rule (*kanōn*) in their construction. Poseidon and Apollo were sentenced to work for a year as servants to Laomedon who was king of Troy before Priam. Laomedon cheated the gods out of their wages, but that seems irrelevant to the action of *Trojan Women*, since Poseidon remains true (after his fashion) to the Trojans, unlike his Homeric namesake. The Horse is then brought inside those towers. Offstage elsewheres that Poseidon is concerned about are the sacred groves and shrines, abandoned and reeking of slaughter (15-16), generic places in any town; the altar in front of Priam's house (which later is blotted out by the smoke as Hecuba turns her final gaze toward her city, 1321). And right now we are said to hear the roaring of the Scamander in tune with the

women's wailings and to see the bivouac of the Greeks, with huts housing the captive Trojan women (29–33). This is the setting past and present.

This same Laomedon cheated Heracles and brought on the first assault against Troy and its destruction by Heracles with the hero Telamon of Salamis and the flower of the Greeks (799-818). This is told in the first half of the second stasimon. In the second strophe and antistrophe the chorus (like Hecuba) celebrates the prosperity and blessedness of Troy through the stories of Ganymede, Zeus' beloved cup-bearer (son of Laomedon), and Tithonus (another son of Laomedon) the lover of Eos (the Dawn), both taken to Olympus while Troy is forgotten by the gods.

Helen, in her scene, goes back to another beginning, already brought up by Andromache, the birth of Paris. He should not have been allowed to live. It's Hecuba's fault and Priam's who did not have the heart to kill a baby (919-22). Even Andromache suggests that Paris should have died:

From the ill will of the gods your son escaped Hades (596).

And then because of his choice of Aphrodite in the Contest, the goddess is at fault. Helen talks about trying to escape either through the gates or down from the towers: conveniently, the witnesses she calls, the gate-keepers and the guards of the watchtowers, are, of course, dead along with the other men of the city. No woman shows herself willing to bear witness for Helen.

Throughout we are reminded of the still-famous, romantic stories of the founding of Troy and its early history. Oddly, given all these stories that seem ancient, it all happened in only one generation: Laomedon was Priam's father. Both grandeur and ruin came again in the next.

The ash like smoke on the wing to the sky
will make me unable to see my home (1320–1).

The annihilation of the place and its people, its royal family and all the other families, is new to tragedy. This is what ties this play to the contemporary scene, a war in which it was a common practice to raze the conquered city, kill all the men, and take the women and children as slaves. There is no redemption. No *deus ex machina* can turn it around.

Appendix: Talthybius in the *Trojan Women*

The play is about women, women who have lost everything but can still lose more. Their scenes of grieving are interrupted by the Homeric herald with news to open up new scenes of loss. Is the herald Talthybius a cruel oppressor or a sympathetic helper of these suffering women? He has been called everything from "human and sympathetic" to "a cold and even callous functionary" (Barbara Goff, *Euripides: Trojan Women*, Bloomsbury, 2009: 48). He is admired and despised by critics I admire. Is it up to the director to decide or does Euripides offer hints? Does he perhaps offer too many hints?

The herald makes four separate appearances, each one is hurtful to the women. Can he still be considered a kind friend to the women? Or am I falling into the error of blaming the messenger?

I First Episode: his longest scene
— Talthybius explains himself: Hecuba knows him. He has news. He calls her by name, setting

her apart from the generic captives, and justifies it because he has come many times with messages. But is this a kindness? He reminds her who he is because in her distress she might be so disoriented that she does not recognize him. He speaks normal iambics; she uses excited lyric meters, "The wildest of lyric meters" (K. H. Lee, *Euripides* Troades, 1997, Bristol: *ad* 235ff, p. 109). He has his job to do. Does our reaction to him depend only on a director's decision? In this scene I can see him as a bemused spectator to an awful situation, almost a journalist reporting the news trying not to show emotion. Does he introduce himself in this way because as a common person he would be invisible to royalty?

— He is willing to answer the captive women's questions and does not brush them off. But in the end there is only time for Hecuba's questions. The chorus (291-2) notices this. They can neither be glad nor mourn, knowing nothing of their fate. Hecuba does ask in general about the women 244–5. She does seem to think that some could fare better (244) and others worse, depending on the master each gets.

—Talthybius shows a crass lack of understanding about Cassandra. She was picked by Agamemnon (249). As a common, humble person, a servant and a professional (seen by Cassandra as a slave to the whole army), he is in awe of the powerful. The Trojans are still foreigners/losers to him. Getting Agamemnon is a lucky chance for her. But he does not know either of them. At this point he is just doing his job. "Yes" (*gar*, 259), he says, Cassandra must give up her old life as a priestess for the great fortune of sharing the royal bed. "He is too materialistic to be really sensitive to the pains of others" (Lee, *ad* 259). This is a low point for Talthybius.

—Hecuba abruptly changes the subject to Polyxena. No longer matter-of-fact in his answers, Talthybius cannot bring himself to tell what happened to Polyxena (from concern for Hecuba's feelings or to save himself from the hysterics or the discomfort of sharing another piece of devastating news?) He recognizes that Polyxena is free of her toils (270), a cliche, but taken up in earnest by Andromache. Hecuba moves swiftly to the next "daughter," Hector's wife and without comment on the appropriateness of Neoptolemus' choice, on to herself. Talthybius simply names the names.

—After Hecuba's expression of despair at being the slave of Odysseus. Talthybius orders his attendants to bring out Cassandra. He notices that there is a disturbance in the quarters. Now he is beginning to show understanding of the women's despair, that it is hard for a free spirit to face slavery. Only after this does he voice fear for himself. He does not want to be blamed for the loss of property (305). I can see in him a growing empathy. But others do not.

—The long Cassandra scene, from her wild wedding dance, with torches waving, through her speech about the victory of the Trojans elicits a short comment from Talthybius. Like everyone he misunderstands Cassandra's prophetic vision. On the other hand he seems to catch more than anyone else what she is saying. He realizes that her words are ill-omened to the Greeks sailing away. They are forgivable only because she is god-maddened. He would have nothing to do with her, as if to show the elitist nature of Agamemnon who wants a celebrity. He would never want such a woman (he's like a character in a sit-com shaking his head at the folly of his "betters"). He dismisses Cassandra's praise of the Trojans. It's nothing to him as one of the winners. He will take her to the ships: that's the reward of winning and its cost. And maybe it's just surviving: this is what survivors do. Hecuba is diminished by this new loss and Talthybius seems to understand this. At the end he tries to console Hecabe: Penelope who will be her owner is a good woman: everybody says so. This is more empathetic than his words about Cassandra's

“marriage” to Agamemnon. Talthybius is just an ordinary chap. Does he hear Cassandra’s final speech or has he left her seemingly voluntary dragging off to his henchmen? Her hatred of heralds is oddly poignant in our times. Earlier (231) the chorus had recognized him or his profession and called him a guardian or keeper (*tamias*) of stories, someone valuable in society, a reporter of news.

II Second Episode
Talthybius arrives near the end of the Andromache scene. He is recognized by Hecuba as a messenger of news. One story on top of another.

He addresses not Hecuba, but Andromache. He has news for her, but is reluctant to convey it. She has already told her mother of the death of Polyxena which he could only hint at by saying that her daughter’s troubles are over, a theme picked up by Andromache herself. In the earlier scene he had already led Polyxena away, before the play started. He did not have to tell her where he was taking her, because he is Greek, one in charge. What would he have said, “your youngest daughter is wanted . . .”? He came back without her. Hecuba asks about her after she asks about Cassandra. Cassandra is nearby, still close to her, still alive. Polyxena is gone, forever lost, dead or just removed. The women know they will never see their children alive.

—What does his reluctance to tell Andromache of the intention to seize Astyanax and kill him say about Talthybius? He could not bring himself to tell Hecuba that Polyxena had been killed, but he must have known the intent. He knows now what is to happen and why. There has been, offstage in the Greek assembly, a debate over the child’s fate, another trial scene. In what tone does he address her? “Wife of Hector” ... this could be sarcastic, sneering, but is his reluctance that of an ordinary man who just wants to avoid trouble or of someone who feels the loss of a child, after experiencing it already.
— Does Talthybius give sympathetic advice or is his advice a threat? If Andromache does not comply, her child will lie unburied, just thrown away. Andromache has already ritually covered her sister-in-law’s remains. Talthybius’ advice is not so different from Hecuba’s: go with the flow. But Hecuba’s depended on Astyanax being alive.
— After this advice, Andromache says goodbye to her son. Nothing is left of Hecuba’s hopes and hopeful advice. Talthybius takes the boy and hands him over to the soldiers accompanying him. He tries to excuse himself of blame. Odysseus bears the blame, and his argument was approved by the Achaeans including their commanders from the house of Atreus. The herald’s heart is not in carrying out such orders. In our post twentieth century era, we would say this is not an excuse. One can refuse illegal, immoral commands. One can say no to evil. It is a step too far. They don’t own me. But could these thoughts occur to Talthybius? Do they own him? Socrates refused to participate in the death of an innocent man. But can we imagine an ordinary man saying no to the decision of the assembly? I think of officials at the US southern border tearing children from their parents and grandparents, putting children in cages, letting children die from disease or exposure. But they should know that you can say no. Talthybius had taken Polyxena earlier this morning. One of many women torn from their families, one more loss for Hecuba. We cannot be sure that he knew what was going to happen to her, but as herald (keeper of the news) he is privy to the army’s decisions. When Andromache passes the tomb of Achilles, the body is lying uncovered or at least not properly covered. In any case Achilles will be left

behind with the sacrificed girl, not quite outside the drama because we are meant to believe that the city is being burnt to the ground and even below the ground. Nothing, no one, will be left behind.

Talthybius is absent from the Helen scene. Menelaus, one of the Pelopidae, who agreed to the slaughter of Astyanax represents the Greek victors/masters. The Achaean assembly has been busy today. They have awarded Helen to Menelaus to kill, or take home. Menelaus in his turn treats Hecuba with some respect and listens to her arguments, but then when he is done, he tells her she has gone too far. He has no interest in her beyond unsubtly being snide to his wife. "Has she put on weight?", he asks, obviously looking her over. Hecuba's argument to Helen misses even her own point. Helen has done exactly what Helen had to do: look her most alluring, not come as a suppliant in rags with hair ragged from mourning (1025–6), but as the woman the chorus pictures on shipboard, admiring herself in a mirror (1109). Modesty is not Helen's asset and would have gotten her nowhere with the hollow Menelaus.

III Exodos

Talthybius returns after the third stasimon. His entrance is not announced. Rather, the chorus announces the body of Astyanax. Talthybius in turn does not speak of Astyanax for ten lines. Instead he talks about the ships sailing and Neoptolemus's troubles. This, after all, is the news. Apparently her master had been willing to stay until Andromache buried the boy, but now there can be no delay. Then the herald (as if taking the role of her new husband, a role he would not reject as he does that of Agamemnon, as lover of Cassandra) talks of Andromache and her grief, which caused him to cry. He can go from one emotion to another. He turns to the dead boy and the shield of Hector, the boy's coffin, once the Achaeans' terror. His instructions for the burial go back to his part as a functionary. He gives directions and by using the women as his helpers he can speed up the sailing. He has washed the boy's body in the Scamander and now he will dig a grave. Exit Talthybius. The burial of Astyanax and all the others, Trojan and Greek, whose lives were lost, are left for archaeologists yet unborn. Even the unburied will be cremated in the final conflagrations. Life in the city, homes and temples, gymnasia, swimming holes; death in the city, tombs, "the sacred places of the dead," all are gone. The last hope of Hecuba is gone with them. Events happen so fast, one tragedy on top of another, that there is not time to reflect.

Talthybius' last appearance

Talthybius is next heard (1260) ordering the burning of the city and then directing the women to head for the ships. When he enters, henchmen of Odysseus are with him to take Hecuba. When she threatens to throw herself on the pyre that is her city, he directs the men to see that she reaches Odysseus. The last hope of the outer audience leaves with her. She will be the property of Odysseus.

In the Prologue Poseidon had noticed Hecuba. It is he who points to her listless body, lying on the ground: if any wants to see misery . . . . He is addressing the audience of tragedy. "Look at this poor woman." He names only two of her latest misfortunes. The rest are to come. Men can dismiss the tragedies of women. Talthybius seems to me the least dismissive, but he's only a reporter. Talthybius leaves too. He is a very busy man. He is just following and giving orders, of which there are many. He wants to go home too.