Euripides' The Trojan Women and Edward Bond's The Woman: Ancient and Modern Shrieks Against Wars

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الخلاصة

هذا البحث دراسة لموضوعة الحرب كما تناولتها مسرحيتان، الأولى يرجع تاريخها الى العصر الإغريقي حيث كتبها يوريبيدس عام ٤١٥ ق.م وهي مسرحية (نساء طروادة) في حين كُتِبت المسرحية الثانية (المرأة) في القرن العشرين وتحديداً عام ١٩٧٨ من قِبل الكاتب المسرحي البريطاني أدوارد بوند. يروم البحث مناقشة موضوعة الحرب في المسرحيتين وكيف تعامل هذان الكاتبان مع نفس موضوعة حرب طروادة لإيصال وجهات نظر معينة.

Abstract

This paper is a thematic study of two plays that have tackled war. One play dated long back to the ancient Greek era in which Euripides wrote his 415 BC play *The Trojan Woman* whereas the other play *The Woman* was written in the 20th century, particularly in 1978 by the British playwright Edward Bond. The paper is to review how the two playwrights have approached the same Trojan war to reveal their own perspectives.

Introduction

In all ages, war has been an important topic of analysis due to its catastrophic effects whether immediate or subsequent. In literature, the Trojan War, for instance, is frequently dealt with by various writers. It is the subject matter of Homer's poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Following these two great poems, many writers have tackled that same war from different points of view.

It is useful to mention that the Trojan War began when a golden apple was cast onto Mount Olympus and was bestowed to "the fairest" goddess. Three goddesses:

Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite contested to gain it. The Trojan Prince Paris was selected to be the judge. Aphrodite bribed him, to have Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world as his concubine. Helen, however, was already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Paris visited Menelaus and eloped with Helen to Troy. Hence, Menlaus and his brother Agamemnon, the king of the Greek city of Mycenae, led an army to Troy. After a siege of ten years, Odysseus, the Greek king of Ithaca, devised the trick of the wooden horse by which the Greeks were able to get into Troy, kill all its men, enslave the women and burn the city.[1]

One of the considerable Greek playwrights who wrote about the Trojan War is Euripides (480-406 BC) in his renowned tragedy *The Trojan Women* (415 BC) which is set exactly after Troy's fall into the Greeks' hands.[2]

Centuries after Euripides and precisely in the second half of the 20th century, due to the shadow of the two world wars with their nuclear, biological, and chemical carnages, more was written about wars generally and the Trojan War particularly.

One of the important British playwrights whose name has become prominent in the world of modern drama is Edward Bond (1934-2024). Influenced by the anti-war theme of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, Bond wrote his 1978 play *The Woman*.[3]

Euripides' *The Trojan Women*

Euripides' poetic play *The Trojan Women*, composed of a prologue, three episodes, and an exodos, was first produced only months after the Greeks had attacked savagely the defenceless island of Melos, butchered its men and reduced its women to slavery so the play reflects the playwright's sense of outrage and can be regarded as an indictment of the barbarous cruelties of war.[4]

The play begins with a meeting between the two gods, Poseidon and Athene. Poseidon calls himself the patron of the Trojans and wails that the great city has

been destructed by the Greeks and their patron, Athene. The audience is very early introduced to the atrocities of the war when Poseidon describes the end of the siege by the Trojan horse deception and focuses on the impious acts committed by the conquering Greeks having left the gods' temples inside the city empty and dishonored. He mentions how Priam, the king of Troy, has been murdered although he has resorted to Zeus' altar. But the Greeks have broken the religious compact and killed him there. Further, Poseidon illustrates that the destruction of Troy primarily finalizes the worship which the gods inside the city used to receive in the form of sacrifices because the divine riches in the temples have been looted:[5]

The groves are empty and the sanctuaries
Run red with blood. Unburied Priam lies
By his own hearth, on God's high altar-stair.[6]

Poseidon adds that after Troy's sacred and public treasures have been loaded to the Greek ships, the last thing is to take the Trojan women on board. Following the carnage in the city, all women are now enslaved and even assigned to certain Greek masters. Poseidon asserts that the women are waiting now inside a camp of tents and briefly states that Polyxena, Hecuba's first daughter, has already been murdered as a sacrifice at Achilles' tomb who has been killed in battle a few months before the war ends whereas Cassandra, Hecuba's second daughter, has been driven mad by the god Apollo.[7]

Surprisingly, Athene asks Poseidon to help her punish the Greeks by drowning their fleet on its voyage home across the Aegean Sea. She explains that she is outraged by the Greek's atrocities specially when they allow their hero Ajax to pull Cassandra out of her religious sanctuary in the temple of Athene committing thus a sacrilegious act.[8]

Poseidon effectively finalizes the prologue by lamenting the whole great city being now ruined. In his introduction to the play, Gilbert Murray comments that "the god Poseidon mourns over Troy as he might over the cities of to-day"[9]; Poseidon cries:

How are ye blind,
Ye treaders down of cities, ye that cast
Temples to desolation, and lay waste
Tombs, the untrodden sanctuaries where lie
The ancient dead; yourselves so soon to die!(201)

Hecuba in the open field of the camp reveals her reversal of fortune from the queen of a great city to a slave waiting for her destiny. This is typical for her being a tragic heroine,

Ah woe! …for what woe lacketh here?
My children lost, my land, my lord.
Of thou great wealth of glory, stored
Of old in Ilion, year by year. (202)

Hecuba tells the other captive women that she cannot tolerate the Greeks having decided to take the women as captives and leave Troy that same day. The other women echo Hecuba's lamentation because worse than losing their husbands at the battle, they must go to Sparta as concubines.[10]

The Greek herald, Talthybius accompanied by some soldiers informs the women that each one has been allotted to a certain Greek leader. He tells Hecuba that Cassandra is given to Agamemnon. Hecuba laments that this is an impious act because her daughter has been devoted to the service of Apollo as a lifelong virgin.

Talthybius also declares that Andromache, Hector's widow, is given to Achilles' son Neoptolmus. But Hecuba is terribly astounded when she knows that she herself is allotted to Odysseus. She considers this news the worst because she hates Odysseus particularly because he is the deviser of the Trojan horse which has caused the city to fall.[11]

As Cassandra is about to be taken by the soldiers, she gets out of the tent dancing and performing a hymn of a wedding. She reveals that she is a happy bride because she will murder Agamemnon and have revenge for her city and family. She also says that the Trojans have died honourably defending their city but the Greeks are actually suffering more because thousands of their soldiers are killed for the sake of merely retrieving the adulteress Helen. But these speeches are taken by Hecuba, the other captive women, and Talthybius as evidence of Cassandra's insanity.

The other pity-arousing victim of war is Andromache who is brought with her son, Astynax, in a wagon that contains Hector's arms and other loots of war. Initially, Euripides presents Andromache as the embodiment of the Greek idea of the virtuous woman. It is revealed how she has spent her previous life in her husband's house engaged in domestic affairs. Although she is tempted to learn and get educated and experienced, she sacrifices her desire and submits to her husband as a devoted wife. She contemplates over her past days with her husband, Hector,

O my Hector! Best beloved,
That, being mine, wast all in all to me,
My prince, my wise one, O my majesty
Of valiance! No man's touch had ever come
Near me, when thou from out my father's home
Didst lead me and make me thine
And now thou art dead (227)

This is why choosing such a pure woman as Neoptolemus' concubine is the most hateful part to her and to the audience.[12]

Because of her faithfulness and purity, Andromache even envies Polyxena because the latter is dead. She says that the dead undergo nothing while she has to 'betray' Hector with the hateful, Neoptolemus who may father more children on her. But Hecuba's advice to Andromache is that she must make the new master love her so that Astyanax, who is the legitimate king of Troy, grows and may regain his kingdom and rebuild his city.

Ironically, Talthybius returns and informs the two women that he has to announce something horrible. He says that the Greeks, convinced by Odysseus, decide to throw Astyanax from the wall of Troy in order not to give the little boy any chance of taking revenge once he grows up.

Intentionally, it seems, Euripides frequently makes Talthybius appear reluctant and forced to tell Hecuba and the other women any cruel or harsh news. This is to suggest that even the Greek messenger Talthybius, is disgusted by the excess atrocities committed during the war. When he is about to take the child, he even tells Andromache not to curse the Greeks because they may deprive her child of the suitable religious rituals and burial after death.[13]

The exodus shows an infanticide scene in which Talthybius returns with the body of the child carried on Hector's shield which serves as a casket. In a sentimental scene, he gives the corpse to Hecuba who cleans and buries the corpse lamenting,

'T was a strange murder for brave men!
For fear this babe someday might raise a gain
His fallen land! Had ye so little pride?
When all men are dead and Ilion lieth low,
Ye dread this innocent! I deem it not
Wisdom, that rage of fear that hath no thought. (246)

The tragic heroine then laments the sad fate of her family and nation but she finds solace in the fact that her great city will surely be remembered in the literary works of the following ages; this is an allusion to the repeated works that talk about the atrocities and the carnages of the Trojan War.[14]

Orders are given eventually that the city of Troy is to be set on fire for its ultimate demolition. Hecuba, being the queen of the city, throws herself in the flames but is prevented by the soldiers who lead her along with the other captive Trojan women to the ships on their way to Sparta.

Edward Bond's *The Woman*

Edward Bond spent two holidays in Malta where he soaked himself in the Mediterranean sun and re-read some of the Greek tragedies. The result is a play owing a great deal to Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. But Bond's *The Woman* is not an adaptation or a parody of any of the Greek tragedies, particularly Euripides', because, as Jenny S. Spencer comments, *The Woman* is a "mix of history play, myth, and political allegory".[15]In fact, for Bond, Euripides' play in which he is criticizing his own society represents both an example of political pretext and military brutality and a dramatic model to employ as a starting point of his own play.[16]

As implied by the play's subtitle, "Scenes of War and Freedom", *The Woman* is composed of two parts centering on two events: the first culminates in the tragic events following the sack of Troy whereas the second happens twelve years later and revolves around the liberation of the inhabitants of a small Mediterranean island from the Greeks as a result of the combined effort and heroic action of Hecuba and the Dark Man.[17]

The title representing character, Hecuba, is active in both parts of the play showing the anti-war theme intended by the playwright. Her character changes with

the proceeding of the events and moves from pride to despair in the first part and from resignation to political action in the second.[18]

The play begins with the news that Priam, the Trojan king, is dead so the Greeks hold an urgent conference about the best plan to end the siege and destroy Troy. For a dramatic reason, Bond wittily replaces the abduction of Helen as the cause of the war with the statue of the goddess of Good Fortune that is supposed to have been stolen by the Trojans. For Heros, the leader of the Greeks, the statue represents the cause of both the war and their victory because the goddess will help the Greeks win the war:

> Well, no man's hand can be more impious than the Trojans': to hold what all men call the supreme goddess against her will! On such men the greatest misfortune must fall. What is their greatest misfortune? That we should win the war. This proves we must.[19]

Like all invaders, in the old and recent ages, Heros tries to legalize his search for personal power and fame with appealing words of honour, duty and religion. Heros' wife, Ismene volunteers to accompany Thersites to negotiate with Hecuba a peaceful surrender. The brutality of the soldiers is shown when Ajax and some others express their intention to loot and burn Troy before they withdraw. Heros himself does not deny the aggressive nature of his soldiers even when he talks privately to his wife in their bedroom.[20]

Bond wittily interrupts the Greek heated discussions about Troy by the scene of the three plague-stricken Trojan women who attack some Greek soldiers outside the city. This is to show the horrible effects of the long siege upon the Trojans; one of the Greek soldiers screams, "Plague! Plague! Watch your front!"(184), and Ajax cries out "They'll feed their dogs on bodies and chase them out to our lines"(186).

But still Heros is obsessed irrationally with the statue because upon the suggestion made by Thersites and Ajax to move their soldiers away from the plague zone, Heros insists that they remain, "One loophole – and they'll take the statue out

of the city and hide it in the mountains. We'd never find it"(186). Hiding behind a religious facade, he asserts that the plague is inflicted by the goddess to ensure a Greek victory.[21]

Throughout the meeting of Hecuba and Ismene, the playwright's condemnation of the war is noticeable. Because no one is really a winner of a war, Hecuba reflects, "Even victory would now cost us more than defeat"(187) and "If men were sensible they wouldn't have to go to war!"(191). Ismene herself confirms that "War breeds fanaticism faster than plague"(197). Upon Ismene's assertion that the Greeks would leave Troy in peace if the Trojans return the statue, Hecuba replies "your husband would take the statue and still burn and kill and loot…"(193). The queen knows that the Greeks will burn Troy to the ground and throw her grandson Astyanax from the walls of the city; she addresses Ismene,

> There are thousands of children like my grandson in Troy. Old people like me. Girls like my daughter. In war death's always painful and slow. You wait for it all the time. I give you the statue – my people despair, they already have the plague, and your husband waits at our gates till we give in. then he enters and butchers! (192)

Touched by the queen's genuine feelings about the brutality and the futility of war, Ismene offers herself as a hostage to guarantee the Trojans' safety and assert her husband's virtue. Ironically, Ismene's trust in her husband is shattered by a vow made shortly after by Heros to destruct Troy " There are seven wonders of the world. What I'll do to Troy will be the first of the seven crimes"(196).[22]

With the help of the priests, Hecuba's son seizes power from his mother but he is soon confronted by the starving, plague-stricken inhabitants of Troy and gets killed. Because Bond's intention, being a leftist, is to propagate the collective spirit of the simple people, he makes the revolutionary people get control of the situation and carry the statue of the goddess out of the temple to the Greeks hoping that this would end the war and hence their suffering. Their rebellious speech reflects the fact that the poor do not care for what the leaders and the profiteers of war consider worthy or

even holy; they shout "We're throwing the goddess out! No more bitch! Bitch out! Plague out! War out! Famine out! Out! Out! Out! To the Greeks"(209).[23]

It is noteworthy that during the rebellion of the Trojan people, Ismene while standing on the top of the Trojan walls keeps on preaching the Greek soldiers against the war and its catastrophic results. She is to be considered the mouthpiece of the playwright when she addresses the soldiers "Greek soldiers! Go home! Is there any loot worth the risk of your life? Women? There are women in Greece! The goddess? …What luck could it give you?...You're wasting your life making your tombstones!"(203). She continues,

> Soldiers, I speak to you , not your leaders. They have everything at stake here. You'll be thrown into a grave on top of women and children you killed. Rubble from the ruins you make will be thrown on top of you! Soldiers peace! Peace! Peace! (207)

But the hope of the Trojan poor people that giving the statue back will end the war is dashed when the Greeks insist that it is their "right" to plunder and destruct Troy. The Greeks attack the city and capture Ismene who is imprisoned for her treason. The events of the first part of the play culminate in the brutality and blood-shedding resulting from assaulting Troy. The audience expect these events from their familiarity with the mythical story so Bond makes some changes because it is not in his intention to win sympathy for the characters. For instance, Astyanax's mother is not Andromache, as known in the myth, but Cassandra to distance the audience from the original story and to reflect, as Hirst argues, that it is a tragedy of a nation rather than an individual. Astyanax, when thrown from the walls of Troy to the ground, represents all the innocent people being slaughtered by the brutal military machine of war. Ismene, being released in the chaos of the war when some soldiers break into her prison and loot her jewelry, narrates the horrible destiny of the whole children of Troy:

> I heard children running to warn their parents: Greeks! Then soldiers running after them. Racing to get the first child.

> Seeing who threw him highest. Then the soldiers kicked in the doors and threw loot down to the priests from the windows. (216-17)

Hecuba adds to Ismene's story of the Greek brutalities and bitterly asks Heros about the difference between virtue and vice "No one would license so much murder and not know the answer"(218) and looks at him and groans "how [you] kill a woman and wipe the knife in her husband's grey beard, or throw a man's blood down on his own doorstep"(217). Having no adequate answer, Heros reflects "Troy would have done the same!"(218). Moreover, Heros sees that killing Astyanax is a symbol of the conquest of Troy and that it is for the sake of all the dead Greek soldiers![24]

The atrocities of the war reach the climax when the little boy is taken by the soldiers from the women who plead for mercy. Cassandra's grief is shown in universal and individual expressions "If the whole sky was a cloth and I wrapped it round my wound the blood would soak through in one moment. I cannot bear this"(220). Hecuba desperately blinds one eye of hers and covers the other in order not to see more brutalities. Heros wants to see "death from every angle!"(219) so he gives order to burn the city. Hence, the first part finalizes with the flames rising up from Troy and Nester and some drunken soldiers bragging about how they have looted Troy and raped its women.

The second part of Bond's play makes a surprising departure from the Greek myth. The statue, Hecuba and Ismene who have been supposed to be shipped to Athens, are shipwrecked by a storm into an island but the statue is lost. The two women live for twelve years happily with the islanders whose life is free and simple depending on fishing and planting. But their sense of freedom and peace is shattered with the arrival of Heros looking for the two women and the statue.[25]

Spencer argues that the issues raised by the second part justifies why Bond subtitles his play "Scenes of War and Freedom" rather than the expected "Scenes of War and Peace". The islanders' enjoyment of freedom would surely vanish as long as savage rulers like Heros are in power. Thus, the second part is to be regarded as a

continuation of the war waged previously on Troy but now on the islanders to find the statue. Heros' intrusion on the island replaces reason with fear, law with violence, order with chaos, work with plunder and freedom with slavery.[26]

When Hecuba informs Heros that the statue is lost at sea, the leader's image fishing the sea to find it effectively emphasizes the folly of politicians desperately attempting to secure their power. Thus, the Dark Man, who has escaped from one of the silver mines in Athens to this island, tells Hecuba "If fish could think they'd say men were mad"(245).

Heros' irrationality culminates when he declares that he would destroy the island if he does not find the statue to prove to the Athens that he has made all his effort to gain the holy goddess. He informs Ismene "A good leader knows how to hate"(249) and "From time to time the people must be afraid …from each other or the city falls apart"(249). Interestingly, Ismene becomes the spokesman of the playwright when she portrays the ridiculousness of the invaders and their pretext in the following conversation with her husband:

Ismene: O …you Greeks are silly.
Heros: Are we?
Ismene: Looking for a stone in the sea! You won't find it.(248)

Persuaded that there is no way to stop Heros from attacking and ruining the island, Hecuba arranges a plan to entrap him. She tells Heros that the goddess informs her in a dream that she would appear to anyone who would win a footrace round the island. The escalating madness of the ruler to preserve his reign leads Heros to accept Hecuba's challenge to a race against the Dark Man. Before the race, the Dark Man confronts Heros and describes the suffering and exploitation of the slaves in the Greek silver mines. To stress that the race is between two conflicting classes, the Dark Man refuses to accept Heros' promise to improve the miners' conditions if he wins; the Dark Man affirms "You'll go away and forget. Every second of my life – till I ran – was watched by people like you – holding a whip with a silver handle. If you could count our crumbs, you would"(258).[27]

Moreover, Hecuba confirms that it is not a simple race between two individuals, but it represents a struggle between a brutal war system and those fighting for their freedom. This is why Hecuba comments "since it's the last day of the war that destroyed my city, I'll uncover my eye and watch the race from the hill"(258).[28]Although the Dark Man is crippled, he wins and Heros is killed.

Despite the fact that the play ends optimistically with the liberation of the islanders, they know well that the vicious, inhumane system is not easily defeated so Temi, one of the islanders, warns his native people and consequently the audience of the future dangers shortly before the final curtain "The Greeks are everywhere. We could all end up in the mines"(268).[29]

Conclusion

It is known that the Greek tragedy derives its emotional power from imitating the events of life particularly its most unpleasant experiences. This is to achieve its goal that is to arouse pity and fear. Inspired by a sense of wrath at a specific historical event: the Greek savage attack on the peaceful island of Melos, Euripides portrays the women characters in his play to arouse the audience's pity and fear and ultimately gain their condemnation of wars. For instance, no one reads or sees *The Trojan Women* without having pity and fear for Hecuba's miserable condition. She sees all her sons killed in the battle, witnesses her husband's slaughter when he seeks sanctuary at a divine altar, endures the brutality of throwing her grandson from the walls of Troy, and undergoes a downfall from the status of a great queen to that of a slave.

Moreover, the audience naturally share Hecuba's fears each time the herald has a new announcement which is about one of her daughters being raped, murdered or sent off as a slave. Whenever Talthybius is about to deliver a new horrible news about the atrocities of the war, Hecuba expresses her possible anticipation for it. Each time, through a little bit long discussion between Hecuba and Talthybius, the whole extent of the new misfortune is gradually revealed. This is an interesting

approach followed by Euripides to create an element of suspense, make the audience share his character's experience and build up tension and thus denunciation of the war on the part of the audience.

Although sharing the same critical and convicting sense of Euripides to wars, Edward Bond deals with the Trojan myth in a different approach. Being greatly influenced by Bertolt Brecht, Bond intends to alienate the audience to be aware of the relevance of the historical events on the stage to their own lives. Helen is replaced by a 'sacred' statue to indicate the fabricated pretexts of the modern political leaders when they want to invade peaceful nations and impose their severe political system. This is a witty hint by Bond to indicate that the brutal systems often cloak their aggression with a religious cover. They use a fabricated faith to mask their true motives, manipulate the masses, and silence the dissenters. Besides, reduction of the peaceful islanders to slavery by the Greek invaders might stand for the exploitation of the third world countries in the form of the openly militaristic interventions by western powers. Moreover, the struggle for the 'holy' statue to secure a future life might be related by the audience to the arms race that had been taking place throughout four decades after the second world war. As the islanders' peace is shattered with the arrival of the Greeks, Bond's modern audience should feel that there is always a threat to man's existence as long as those brutal political systems remain.

In the second part of the play, Bond has taken his audience further than what they might have anticipated at the beginning of the first part which is firmly related to the Trojan war. In so doing, Bond has fulfilled his Marxist aim; he relies on the ability of the collective spirit of the simple workers to make a change in the society. Hence, the Dark Man's triumph is not over one man but over a whole culture based on a policy of aggression and enslavement. Consequently, freed from Heros' tyranny, the islanders turn into a united working society living peacefully at the sea.

Notes

[1]**Bernard Evslin, *Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths* (New York: Dell Laurel - Leaf, 2005), 23.**

[2]**Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, *Greek Tragedy* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 85.**

[3]**Sean Carney, " Edward Bond: Tragedy, Postmodernity, *The Woman", Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Fall, 2004), 6.**

[4]**Lindsay Clarke, *The War at Troy* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 108.**

[5]**Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1993), 64.**

[6]**Moses Hadas and John Mclean, trans. *Ten Plays by Euripides*, (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006), 198. All the subsequent references to the text are taken from this book and the pages will parenthetically be written.**

[7]**Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled,* 65.**

[8]**Ibid., 67.**

[9]**Gilbert Murray, Introduction to *The Trojan Women* by Euripides (Oxford: OUP, 2005), iv.**

[10]**Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled,* 67.**

[11]**Ibid., 69.**

[12]**Ibid., 72.**

[13]**Carney, 10.**

[14]**Helene P. Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 165.**

[15]**Jenny S. Spencer, *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 94.**

[16]**David L. Hirst, *Modern Dramatists: Edward Bond* (London: Macmillan, 1985) 66.**

[17]**Ibid., 60.**

[18]**Ibid.**

[19]**Edward Bond, *Plays Three: The Woman* (London: Methuen, 1999), 175. All the subsequent references to the text are taken from this book and the pages will parenthetically be written.**

[20]**Spencer, 96.**

[21]**Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, *Bond: A Study of His Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980) 244.**

[22]**Ibid., 246-47.**

[23]**Ibid., 249.**

[24]**Hirst,67-68.**

[25]**Hay and Roberts, 251.**

[26]**Spencer, 100.**

[27] **Hay and Roberts, 253.**

[28]**Ibid., 254.**

[29]**Hirst, 70.**

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