Reading guide/study questions – *Trojan Women*

The Greek drama has been a mainstay of European literary analysis since Europe was invented. The Greek plays were saved by the Romans and kept safe by the Byzantine empire. Dante (1265 – 1321 CE) mentions Euripedes, but the playwright’s “fame” increases with Early Modernity and the “new” (renaissance) creation of a literary canon.

A question to ponder is why Euripedes’ plays, along with Sophocles’ and Aeschylus’, get the “serious” treatment that [Aristophanes](https://www.ancient.eu/Aristophanes/)’ plays, though immortalized, don’t seem to carry. Aristotle’s [*Poetics*](http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/aristotle/index.html), a kind of [bible](http://www.iep.utm.edu/aris-poe/) for Early Modern literary criticism, suggest comedy’s second-banana status to tragedy. 20th-century theatre blew apart many of these time-honored theatrical paradigms: think Brecht. Nor did Shakespeare adhere to the *Poetics* ostensible “rules” of the best drama’s limited time, place, and action.

Nevertheless, no matter how ancient a paradigm we use for our analysis, plays continue to depend on [character](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30639?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=dNujjO&), [plot](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145916?result=2&rskey=zX3xV6&), and [dialogue](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/51916?isAdvanced=false&result=2&rskey=ZP8aaS&). I suggest that plays depend most on dialogue – and that’s one of their distinctions from movies. Dialogue reveals character; in modern theatre, an actor’s interpretation of the character counts most. But how stable is character? How much do we as audience *desire* stable characters? Don’t characters change in light of circumstances, and *shouldn’t* they change?

Do read the excellent introduction to our edition of the play. [Peter Burian](https://classicalstudies.duke.edu/people/peter-h-burian), who wrote the introduction, spent his career at Duke University; it seems to me that the introduction reflects Duke’s embrace of literary theory. [Alan Shapiro](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alan-r-shapiro), the translator for our edition (who is the same age as my brother) is a much-published poet, about whose ethical interests you might have a look at this [essay](http://www.vqronline.org/essay/ethical-suffering-work-alan-shapiro) about him.

Study question for the first half of the play: why does it begin with the dialogue between Poseidon and Athena? How does a "chorus" work? Why include the chorus in a play? Compare short and long speeches (for instance, Andromache on p. 53): what are their different effects? Think of the pacing of the play.
Even though Poseidon and Athena begin the play, Hecuba is on stage. How does this prepare you for the play? Is Hecuba right when she says, "Pain crushes pain" (p. 51)?

Study questions for the second half of the play: The title is, of course, “Trojan women,” but is this play about women? About women and men? About motherhood? The death of Astyanax, who played a role in an *Iliad* domestic scene, is performed offstage. Is this the worst, to have Astyanax's dead body brought back to the stage? What about Helen and Menelaus and, again, the question of women? Note what Hecuba calls Zeus on p. 61: what does she mean? Why is Hecuba alive at the end of the play?