

From the earliest days Greeks faced the problem of war, and their literature shows a variety of attitudes towards it. The Iliad is of course full of fighting, and it is clear that in Homeric society courage and skill in battle represent the chief means to glory. Yet the poem ends with a scene of reconciliation between Achilles and the father of the great Trojan whom Achilles has slain. War is seen as tragic in its consequences. Tyrtaeus is one of the first of a long line of poets who tell us how noble it is to die bravely fighting for one's country, and a philosopher like Heraclitus could view war as a necessary and even creative factor in human life.

In a society so competitive as that of Greece strife and war were no doubt inevitable, and there is no lack of praise for military glory. Yet there were those who saw the other side, and though in a minority their views were forcefully expressed. An early example is Archilochus, whose robust common sense saw no shame in abandoning his shield in battle and so staying alive. It was in the 5th century, however, when Greece saw its most destructive wars, that the tragic consequences of war were most clearly put before its people.

Two writers, a poet and an historian, may be taken as examples of thinkers who stressed the horror of war. Euripides' views emerge most vividly in his Trojan Women. The setting of the play is mythical, but the Athenian audience was made up of citizens who were involved in the long war with Sparta that had begun sixteen years earlier: war had come to seem a normal part of life. A year before, the Athenians had displayed their power, and revealed their principles, in the unprovoked invasion of the small island of Melos. When the inhabitants protested, and invoked the protection of the gods, the Athenians explained to them that the only thing that mattered was power. "Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can." The Melians attempted to resist but were forced to surrender. All men of military age were killed, and the women and children sold as slaves. Sixteen years of war had brought the Athenians a long way from the thinking of Pericles, who had praised them for their obedience to the laws, "especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break."

In his Trojan Women Euripides does not present the winners on stage except in the person of the herald Talthybius. We learn in the prologue what they have already done, and what fate awaits them. Their work has been desecration, and Poseidon gives the verdict: "That mortal who sacks fallen cities is a fool, who gives the temples and the tombs, the hallowed places of the dead to desolation. His own turn must come."

Most of the play is taken up with sketching the destiny which the victorious Greeks have assigned to the women of Troy. Their high command has sent Talthybius to make the announcements. Cassandra, Apollo's virgin, is to be Agamemnon's slave. Polyxena at least will feel no pain: the herald lacks courage to state plainly that she has been slaughtered at Achilles' tomb. Hector's Andromache, that model wife, goes to Achilles' son. Hecuba, queen and mother, will be slave to the crafty Odysseus, and the list continues. There remains the question of Astyanax, the little boy so dear to Hector and Andromache. Talthybius is a good herald, but even he is shocked by the order he brings: "I wish I did not have to give this message ... how can I say this?... there is no easy way to tell it... it is monstrous..." The generals, however, had decided, and at last the herald speaks: "He must be hurled from the battlements of Troy." As Talthybius carries away in his arms the doomed child, his mother utters her last agonized words: "Greeks! Your Greek cleverness is simple barbarity."

It would be difficult for any audience not to share her feelings: Euripides' audience was made up of Greek soldiers who had scorned the Melians' appeal to the gods, invaded their island, killed their men, and enslaved their women and children. How did they feel? Perhaps some were moved by the play, but there was no change in policy. A new and greater invasion was about to be launched. The policy-makers, and the citizens of Athens, who after all controlled policy, did not take Euripides' message to heart. The play had shown that war demands decisions that even a faithful agent like Talthybius finds monstrous. It had also suggested that there is a divine justice in the world, and that eventually people who perpetrate such crimes will meet their own punishment. Euripides' message was clear, but ignored. A similar message may be found in the works of his contemporary and fellow-citizen, the historian Thucydides, who will be considered in the next issue of Labyrinth. "War" he said "is a stern teacher... it brings most people's minds down to the level of their actual circumstances."

HECUBA'S LAMENT

*(from Euripides' Trojan Women,
translated by Richmond Lattimore)*

I was a princess, who was once a prince's bride,
mother by him of sons pre-eminent, beyond
the mere numbers of them, lords of the Phrygian domain,
such sons for pride to point to as no woman of Troy,
no Hellene, none in the outlander's wide world might match.
And then I saw them fall before the spears of Greece,
and cut this hair for them, and laid it on their graves.
I mourned their father, Priam. None told me the tale
of his death. I saw it, with these eyes. I stood to watch
his throat cut, next the altar of the protecting god.
I saw my city taken. And the girls I nursed,
choice flowers to wear the pride of any husband's eyes,
matured to be dragged by hands of strangers from my arms.
There is not hope left that they will ever see me more,
no hope that I shall ever look on them again.
There is one more stone to key this arch of wretchedness:
I must be carried away to Hellas now, an old
slave woman, where all those tasks that wrack old age shall be
given me by my masters. I must work the bolt
that bars their doorway, I whose son was Hector once;
or bake their bread; lay down these withered limbs to sleep
on the bare ground, whose bed was royal once; abuse
this skin once delicate the slattern's way, exposed
through robes whose rags will mock my luxury of long since.
Unhappy, O unhappy. And all this came to pass
and shall be, for the way one woman chose a man.