

SUMMARIES OF TROJAN WAR PLAYS BY EURIPIDES

Andromache (425 BC)

Orestes meets his friend, Pylades, at the court of Pyrrhus. The Greeks has sent him to retrieve Astyanax whom Pyrrhus is protecting to currey favor with Andromache. Orestes, in love with Hermione, presents his demands to Pyrrhus, who haughtily rejects them. But his refusal is conditional on the love of Andromache. Hermione plans to return to her father, King Menelaus. Pyrrhus, stung by Andromache's coldness, decides to give in to Orestes. Orestes, enraged by the turn of events, plots to kidnap Hermione. Andromache, having plead unsuccessfully with Hermione to save her son, turns to Pyrrhus, who demands her hand in marriage in return for his protection. After Andromache consults Hector's spirit at his tomb, she decides to yield to Pyrrhus, but plans to kill herself directly after the wedding ceremony. Hermione retaliates for her rejection by Pyrrhus by demanding that Orestes kill Pyrrhus at the altar. After Pyrrhus' departure, Hermione is violently torn between love and resentment. Resentment wins out when Cleone, her confidante, informs her of Pyrrhus' insulting happiness during the marriage ceremony. Yet, far from rejoicing when she hears Orestes' account of how the Greeks have avenged her by killing Pyrrhus at the altar, she curses him and stabs herself on Pyrrhus' body. Orestes is overwhelmed by despair and then madness.



Hecuba (424 BC)

Troy has fallen to the Greeks. The women of Troy have been apportioned to the victors, but the return home of the Greek fleet is delayed by contrary winds. The ghost of the Greek hero Achilles has demanded the sacrifice to him of Polyxena, daughter of Hecuba and Priam, king of Troy. The Greek hero Odysseus comes to lead her away. He is unmoved by Hecuba's despair and by her reminder that he once owed his life to her. But Polyxena, a striking figure, prefers death to slavery, and willingly goes to her sacrifice. As Hecuba prepares for the burial, she suffers a further sorrow. Her youngest son Polydorus had been sent for safety to Polymestor, king of the Thracian Chersonese (where the Greek fleet is now detained), with part of the treasure of Priam. When Troy fell, Polymestor had murdered the boy in order to secure the treasure for himself, and had thrown his body into the sea. It has now been washed up and is brought to Hecuba. She appeals to the Greek leader Agamemnon for vengeance; but he, though sympathetic, is timid. Hecuba thereupon takes vengeance into her own hands. She lures Polymestor and his sons to her tent, where her women put out his eyes and kill the sons. Agamemnon orders the blinded king to be left on a deserted island; he then prophesies that Hecuba will turn into a bitch, and that the site of her tomb will be commemorated by the name Cynossema, ('dog's tomb') on the cast coast of the Thracian Chersonese).

Cyclops (Satyr play; c. 423 BCE)

When Odysseus arrives at Mount Etna in Sicily, he meets Silenus and offers to trade food for his wine. Being a servant of Dionysus, Silenus can't resist obtaining the wine despite the fact that the food is not his to trade. The Cyclops soon arrives and Silenus is quick to accuse Odysseus of stealing the food, swearing to a slew of gods and the Satyrs' lives (who are standing right beside him) that he is telling the truth. After an argument, the Cyclops brings Odysseus and his crew inside his cave and eats some of them. Odysseus manages to sneak out and is stunned by what he's witnessed. He hatches a scheme to get the Cyclops drunk, and when he's unconscious he'll burn out his eye with a giant poker. The Cyclops and Silenus drink together, with Silenus attempting to hog the wineskin for himself. When the Cyclops is drunk, he says he is

seeing gods and begins to call Silenus Ganymede. The Cyclops then steals Silenus away into his cave, with the implication that he is about do something sexual to him. Odysseus decides to execute the next phase of his plan. The Satyrs offer to help, but chicken-out with a variety of absurd excuses when the time actually comes. The annoyed Odysseus gets his crew to help instead, and they burn out the Cyclops' eye. He had told the Cyclops earlier that his name was 'Noman'. So when the Cyclops yells out who was responsible for blinding him, it sounds like he's saying "No Man [or Craftiness] blinded me". The satyrs have some fun with the pun. They then make their escape.

Trojan Women (415 BCE)

Trojan Women was produced in 415 BC, shortly after the capture of Melos by the Athenians, who slaughtered its male inhabitants and enslaved its women and children. One of the most poignant of Euripidean dramas, it presents not so much a narrative as a tragic situation: the condition of the Trojan women when their menfolk have been killed and they are at the mercy of their captors. Grieving and anxious they await their fate. Talthybius, the herald, announces that they are to be distributed among the victors. The Trojan queen Hecuba is to become the possession of the hated Odysseus; her daughter Cassandra has been allotted to Agamemnon, and it is revealed that her other daughter Polyxena has been slaughtered on the tomb of Achilles. The tragic figure of Cassandra appears: being a prophetess she foretells some of the disasters which will come upon the conqueror. Andromache enters with her small son Astyanax: she is to be the prize of Neoptolemus, Achilles' son. Talthybius returns to carry off Astyanax whose death has been ordered by the Greeks. The meeting of Menelaus and Helen follows; Menelaus is determined to destroy her and Hecuba encourages his anger. But Helen pleads her cause, and when Helen and Menelaus depart their reconciliation has been foreshadowed. Talthybius appears once more with the broken body of Astyanax and Hecuba prepares the burial. Finally Troy is set on fire and its towers collapse while the women leave for captivity.

Iphigenia at Tauris (c. 413 BCE)

When Iphigenia was about to be sacrificed at Aulis, the goddess Artemis intervened and replaced Iphigenia on the altar with a deer, saving the girl and sweeping her off to Tauris. She has been made a priestess at the temple of Artemis in Tauris, a position in which she has the gruesome task of ritually sacrificing foreigners who land on King Thoas' shores. Iphigenia hates her forced religious servitude in Tauris, and she is desperate to contact her family in Greece, inform them that she is still alive. Furthermore, she has had a prophetic dream about her younger brother Orestes and believes, based on it, that he is dead. Meanwhile, Orestes has killed his mother Clytemnestra and is maddened by the Erinyes. Although found innocent at Athens, some Furies continue to pursue him. So Apollo sends him to steal a sacred statue of Artemis to bring back to Athens, and then he would be set free. Contrary to Iphigenia's dream, Orestes is alive and well and on his way to Tauris with Pylades to steal the sacred statue. They have no idea that Iphigenia is there. Not surprisingly, they are captured by Taurian guards and brought to the temple to be killed, as is customary. Iphigenia and Orestes discover each other's identities, and together they devise a plan to escape. Iphigenia tells King Thoas that the statue of Artemis has been spiritually polluted due to her brother's matricide. She advises Thoas to let the two foreigners cleanse the sacred idol in the sea to remove the dishonor she has brought upon it as its keeper. The three Greeks use this as an opportunity to escape on Orestes' and Pylades' ship, bringing the statue with them. Thoas vows to pursue and kill the three escapees, but he is stopped by the goddess Athena.

Helen (412 BCE)

Rather than going to Troy with Paris, Helen has been whisked away to Egypt, where she is protected by King Proteus. After Proteus' death, his son Theoclymenos, the new king with a penchant for killing Greeks, intends to marry Helen, who after all these years remains loyal to her husband Menelaus. Helen

receives word from the exiled Greek Teucros that Menelaus has drowned, putting her in the perilous position of being available for Theoclymenos to marry, and she consults the seer Theonoe, sister to the king, to find out her husband's fate. Her fears are allayed when a stranger arrives in Egypt and turns out to be Menelaus himself, and the long-separated couple recognize each other. At first, Menelaus does not believe that she is the real Helen, but luckily one of his sailors steps in to inform him that the false Helen has disappeared. The couple still must figure out how to escape from Egypt, but fortunately, the rumor that Menelaus has died is still in circulation. Thus, Helen tells Theoclymenos that the stranger who came ashore was a messenger there to tell her that her husband was truly dead. She informs the king that she may marry him as soon as she has performed a ritual burial at sea, thus freeing her symbolically from her first wedding vows. The king agrees to this, and Helen and Menelaus use this opportunity to escape on the boat given to them for the ceremony. Theoclymenos is furious when he learns of the trick and nearly murders his sister Theonoe for not telling him that Menelaus is still alive. However, he is prevented by the miraculous intervention Castor and Polydeuces.

Electra (408 BCE)

Electra was married off to a farmer, amidst fears that if she remained in the royal household and wed a nobleman, their children would be more likely to try to avenge Agamemnon's death. Although the man is kind to her and has taken advantage of neither her family name nor her virginity, Electra resents being cast out of her house and her mother's loyalty to Aegisthus. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's son, Orestes, was taken out of the country and put under the care of the king of Phocis, where he became friends with the king's son Pylades. Now grown, Orestes and his companion Pylades travel to Argos, hoping for revenge, and end up at the house of Electra and her husband. They have concealed their identities in order to get information, claiming that they are messengers from Orestes, but the aged servant who smuggled Orestes off to Phocis years before recognizes him by a scar, and the siblings are reunited. Electra is eager to help her brother in bringing down Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and they conspire together. While the old servant goes to lure Clytemnestra to Electra's house by telling her that her daughter has had a baby, Orestes sets off and kills Aegisthus and returns with the body, but his resolve begins to waver at the prospect of matricide. However, when Clytemnestra arrives, he and Electra kill her, leaving both feeling oppressive guilt. At the end, Clytemnestra's deified brothers Castor and Polydeuces appear. They tell Electra and Orestes that their mother received just punishment but that their matricide was still a shameful act, and they instruct the siblings on what they must do to atone and purge their souls of the crime.

Orestes (408 BCE)

After the murder of Clytemnestra, Orestes and Electra have fled to Sparta to seek the protection of Menelaus. Helen comes out of the palace under the pretext that she wishes to make an offering at her sister Clytemnestra's grave, blaming Apollo for the problems in the House of Atreus. After Helen leaves Orestes, still maddened by the Furies, awakes. Menelaus arrives at the palace and he and Orestes discuss the murder and the resulting madness. Tyndareus, Orestes' grandfather and Menelaus' father-in-law comes onto the scene and roundly chastises Orestes leading to a conversation with the three men on the role of humans in dispensing divine justice and natural law. As Tyndareus leaves, he warns Menelaus that he will need the old man as an ally. Menelaus shuns his nephew, choosing not to compromise his tenuous power among the Greeks who blame him and his wife for the Trojan War. Pylades, Orestes' best friend and his accomplice in Clytemnestra's murder, arrives. He and Orestes begin to formulate a plan, in the process indicting partisan politics and leaders who manipulate the masses for results contrary to the best interest of the state. Orestes and Pylades state their case before the town assembly, but Orestes and Electra are condemned. Their minds now set on vengeance they plot against Menelaus, Helen, and Hermione. However, when they go to kill Helen, she vanishes. Orestes spares a slave, who argues that both the enslaved and free love life. Menelaus then enters leading to a standoff between him and Orestes, Electra, and Pylades, who have successfully captured Hermione. Just as more bloodshed is to occur, Apollo arrives and explains that Helen has been

placed among the stars and that Menelaus must go back to Sparta. He tells Orestes to go to Athens to stand judgment, where he will later be acquitted. Also, Orestes is to marry Hermione, while Pylades will marry Electra.

***Iphigenia at Aulis* (405 BCE)**

At the start of the play, Agamemnon is having second thoughts about whether he can go through with the sacrifice of his daughter, and he sends a second message to his wife, telling her to ignore the first missive. However, Clytemnestra never receives this message because it is intercepted by Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother, who is enraged that his brother has changed his mind. The brothers debate, and eventually, each changes the other's mind: Agamemnon is now ready to carry out the sacrifice, and Menelaus is convinced that it would be better to disband the Greek army than to have his niece killed. But by this time, Clytemnestra is already en route to Aulis with Iphigenia and her baby brother, Orestes, making the decision of how to proceed all the more difficult. Iphigenia is thrilled at the prospect of marrying one of the great heroes of the Greek army, but she, her mother, and the groom-to-be in the supposed marriage soon discover the truth. Achilles is furious at having been used as a prop in Agamemnon's plan to lure his family to Aulis, and he vows to protect Iphigenia - as much to save the innocent girl as to take revenge on her father for besmirching his own honor. Clytemnestra and Iphigenia try in vain to persuade Agamemnon to change his mind, but the general believes he has no choice. But as Achilles prepares to defend the young woman by force, Iphigenia has a sudden change of heart and decides that the heroic thing to do is to let herself be sacrificed. She is led off to die, with her mother Clytemnestra distraught over the decision. However, in an addition to the play, a messenger arrives in the end to inform Clytemnestra that at the last minute, just as Agamemnon was about to kill their daughter, Artemis, apparently appeased, switched the body of Iphigenia with that of a deer, which was sacrificed in the girl's stead.

***Rhesus* (Anonymous c. 350s BCE)**

In the middle of the night Trojan guards on the lookout for suspicious enemy activity sight bright fires in the Greek camp. They promptly inform Hector, who almost issues a general call to arms before Aeneas makes him see how ill-advised this would be. Their best bet, Aeneas argues, would be to send someone to spy on the Greek camp and see what the enemy is up to. Dolon volunteers to spy on the Greeks in exchange for Achilles's horses when the war is won. Hector accepts the deal and sends him out. Dolon leaves wearing the skin of a wolf, and plans on deceiving the Greeks by walking on all fours. Rhesus, the neighboring king of Thrace, arrives to assist the Trojans soon after Dolon sets out. Hector berates him for coming so many years late, but decides better late than never. Rhesus says he intended on coming in the beginning, but was sidetracked defending his own land from an attack by Scythians. Meanwhile, on their way into the Trojan encampment, Odysseus and Diomedes run into Dolon and kill him. When they reach the encampment with the intention of killing Hector, Athena guides them to Rhesus' sleeping quarters instead, pointing out that they are not destined to kill Hector. Diomedes slays Rhesus and others while Odysseus takes his prized horses before making their escape. Rumors spread from Rhesus' men that it was an inside job, and that Hector was responsible. Hector arrives to cast blame on the sentinels for, due to the sly tactics, the guilty party could only be Odysseus. The mother of Rhesus, one of the nine muses, then arrives and lays blame on all those responsible: Odysseus, Diomedes, and Athena. This short play is most notable in comparison with the Iliad. The part with Dolon is pushed to the background, and much more is revealed about Rhesus and the reactions to his murder by the Trojans.