**Excerpts: *The Trojan Women*, by Seneca**

**HECUBA**

*(Troy has been burned and looted. The women of the Trojan royal family prepare to be taken as prizes by the conquering Greek warriors. Hecuba, queen of ruined Troy, looks on the destruction.)*

HECUBA: Anyone who trusts in royal power, anyone who rules supreme in a great palace without fear of the fickle gods, anyone who surrenders his trusting heart to happiness, should look upon me, and upon you, Troy. Never did Fortune give greater proofs of how unstable the place is where the proud stand. Overthrown and fallen is the pillar of mighty Asia, masterwork of the gods.1 …See, the walls, those lofty glories, lie piled in ruins on the charred buildings; flames throng the palace, and smoke rises across the entire breadth of Assaracus’ house. Yet the flames do not curb the conqueror’s greedy hands: Troy is plundered while she burns. The sky is obscured by the billowing smoke; as though enveloped in thick cloud, the daylight is black and befouled with Ilium’s ash. The conqueror stands insatiable in his anger and measures long-lingering Ilium with his gaze, and savagely refuses as yet to forgive the ten long years. He also shudders at her ruins, and though he sees her defeated, he cannot convince himself that her defeat is possible. Looters seize the Dardan spoils; those thousand ships cannot hold the plunder.

I call the gods to witness (hostile though they are to me), and the ashes of my country, and you, ruler of Phrygia,2 now buried beneath your whole realm, covered by Troy, and *your* spirit3—as long as you stood, Ilium stood—and you great flocks of my children, less mighty shades: all disasters that have happened, all evils that Phoebus’ priestess foretold in raving speech as the god denied her credence, I Hecuba saw first while great with child,4 and I voiced my fears; I was a futile prophetess before Cassandra. It was not the wary Ithacan5 that scattered firebrands among you, nor the Ithacan’s night-prowling companion,6 nor lying Sinon:7 that fire is mine, you are burning with my brands.

But why, lingering old age, lament the downfall of a city that is overthrown? Ill-fated one, face these fresh griefs; Troy by now is an old distress. I saw the accursed sacrilege of the king’s murder, and a crime committed at the very altar greater than the outrage of Ajax,8 when the ferocious fellow, 9 bending back the king’s head by the hair twisted in his cruel hand, buried his wicked blade in a deep wound. After he willingly received the deeply driven sword, it came out dry from the old man’s throat. Who could not have been appeased from savage slaughter by a man closing on the last climacteric of mortal life, and by the gods witnessing the scene, and by a kind of sanctity belonging to fallen kingship? Priam, famous father of so many princes, has no tomb; he lacks a funeral fire, while Troy burns.

Yet this is not enough for the gods above: even now the urn is casting lots, selecting a master for the daughters and daughters-in-law of Priam, and I shall follow—see, a worthless prize! One man betroths Hector’s wife to himself, another hopes for Helenus’ wife, another for Antenor’s; there is even someone who desires your bridal bed, Cassandra. My lot is feared, I alone frighten the Danaans.

Is your lamentation idle, my band of captive women? Strike your breasts with your hands, beat out the sounds of sorrow, and perform the funeral rites for Troy. For a long time now fateful Mt. Ida should have been reechoing, home of the cursed judge.10

1Troy’s walls were built by Neptune (Poseidon) and Apollo.

2Priam

3Hector

4Hecuba, while pregnant with Paris, had dreamed of giving birth to a blazing firebrand, a portent of Troy’s fall.

5Ulysses (Odysseus)

6Diomedes

7Sinon’s lies lulled the Trojans’ suspicions of the Wooden Horse.

8The outrage of Ajax was to drag Cassandra from sanctuary at Athena’s altar and rape her.

9Pyrrhus (Neoptolemus), Achilles’ son, slew Priam.

10An allusion to the Judgment of Paris.

**ANDROMACHE**

*(Andromache has attempted to hide her small son Astyanax from capture and death. Ulysses (Odysseus) threatens to destroy Hector’s tomb if she does not turn over her son, and now Andromache is torn between the memory of her husband and the future of her child.)*

ANDROMACHE: What can I do? My mind is torn by twin fears: on the one side is my son, on the other my dear husband’s ashes. Which will prevail? Witness the pitiless gods, and those true gods, the shades of my husband: I love nothing else, Hector, in my son but you. Let him live, to restore your features to life. But will the ashes be hurled from the tomb and sunk? Shall I allow the bones to be dispersed and scattered on the desolate waves? Better that this one should die. But can you, his mother, see him surrendered to monstrous murder, see him thrown whirling over the high battlements? I shall be able to, shall endure it, shall bear it, as long as my Hector is not tossed about after death by the victor’s hand. Yet this one can still feel injury, while death now safeguards the other. Why are you wavering? Choose which one you will save from injury. Can you hesitate, ungrateful woman? On one side is your Hector—but no, Hector is on both sides. This one still has consciousness, and perhaps will be an avenger for his dead father. Both cannot be protected. What are you to do? From the two, my heart, save the one the Danaans fear…

*(Ulysses (Odysseus) states his plan to destroy the tomb, and Andromache realizes that her son, whom she has hidden, will be crushed if the tomb is destroyed.)*

ANDROMACHE: …I fall at your knees as a suppliant, Ulysses, and grasp your feet with this hand which has touched no man’s feet before. Pity a mother; receive kindly and patiently my prayers of motherly love. The higher the gods have exalted your lofty station, the more gently you should tread on the fallen; gifts to the wretched are gifts to Fortune. So may your chaste wife’s1 bed behold you once again, and Laertes2 lengthen his years until he receives you home; so may that young man of yours3 welcome you, and exceeding you hopes in his natural gifts may he surpass his grandfather’s years and his father’s intellect. Pity a mother; my sole comfort in distress is this boy.

1His wife is Penelope, who stays faithful to Ulysses (Odysseus) for the 20 years he is gone.

2Ulysses’ father

3Ulysses’ son, Telemachus

**HELEN**

*(Helen views the destruction of Troy and the grief of its women, and she considers her own role in what has happened.)*

HELEN: Though great bitterness is irrational and unbending, and sometimes hates even its fellow sufferers, nevertheless I can defend my cause before a hostile judge—for I have suffered worse. Is Andromache in mourning for Hector, and Hecuba for Priam? Only Helen’s mourning for Paris has to be in secret. It is harsh, hateful, oppressive to endure slavery? I have long endured that yoke, ten years a prisoner. Is Ilium overthrown, your guardian gods fallen? It is hard to lose one’s country, but harder to be afraid of it. You are solaced by so large a companionship in suffering; I suffer the rage of both conqueror and conquered. Which woman each Greek would seize as slave has long hung in uncertainty; my master seized me immediately, without drawing lots. Was I the cause of the war, and of such disaster for Trojans? Believe this true, if a *Spartan* ship cut through *your* seas. But if I was plunder stolen by Phrygian sailors, a victorious goddess’ gift to her judge[[1]](#endnote-1), Paris needs your forgiveness. My case certainly will have an angry judge: this decision awaits Menelaus.

1. Venus’ reward to Paris for his famous judgment. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)