

Chapter 7

You Can't go Home Again: On the Conceptualization of Disasters in Ancient Greek Tragedy



Jan Helge Solbakk

*Tragedies don't mean anything.
They do something.*

(Bryan Doerries 2015)

*Victory over an enemy force can be interpreted as a licence to
rape, with women's bodies seen as the spoils of war.*

(Amnesty International 2004)

Abstract The ancient Greek tragedy represents one of the earliest and most dramatic ways of dealing with the phenomenon of disaster in literature. This ancient literary form will be used as a kind of template in the search for recurrent forms of moral attitudes and behaviour that seem to follow almost universally in the wake of war and armed conflicts. First, the focus will be on war veterans' experiences and narratives of going home again, i.e. of returning from combat back to a life called 'normal'. These are experiences that render both the victorious and the defeated representatives of such conflicts extremely vulnerable and susceptible to harm, as dramatically displayed in Sophocles' tragedy *Ajax*. Second, Euripides' plays *Andromache*, *Hecuba* and *The Trojan women* will be made use of. In these plays, unvarnished versions of the horrors women and children are subjected to as a consequence of war are dramatically displayed. To demonstrate the moral timelessness and didactic potentials of these ancient representations, the fate of war veterans, women and children in the wake of modern wars and armed conflicts will then be displayed through Bryan Doerries' narrative, *Theater of war*, of exposing US war veterans to Sophocles play *Ajax*, and through the narratives of 50 Syrian women, all refugees living in Aman, Jordan because of the civil war in Syria, of staging Euripides' play *The Trojan women*.

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7.1 Introduction

From the very start of drafting this chapter two lines in Thomas Wolfe's magnificent novel, *You can't go home again*, have been resounding in my mind. The lines occur in the last chapter of Book Six of the novel, a chapter entitled 'The Way of No Return', and they run like this: "He was 'out'. And, being 'out', he began to see another way, the way that lay before him. He saw now that you can't go home again – not ever" (Wolfe 1934, 600). This quotation may serve as an epitaph to one of the earliest and most dramatic ways of dealing with the phenomenon of disaster in literature; i.e. the ancient Greek tragedy. There are two reasons for making use of the literary form of the ancient Greek tragedy with disasters. The first reason is that in ancient Greek tragedy the ethical dimensions of disaster are at the centre of the playwright's attention. Second, in the ancient Greek tragedy a word often used as a synonym for disaster, i.e. *catastrophe* (Gr: *καταστροφή*), plays a lead role. The word *καταστροφή* means 'an overturning; a sudden end' and derives from *katastrephēin* – 'to overturn, turn down, trample on; to come to an end' -, *katá* means 'down, against' and *strephein* means 'turn'. It was used to denote the final part of the play, i.e. the part where the final destiny of the main characters are unraveled, and notably very often – although not always – in the form of an unexpected fatal turn from bliss to misery. Extension of the word *catastrophe* to mean 'sudden disaster' is first recorded in 1748.¹

In this chapter I aim at addressing the ethical dimensions of disaster using this ancient literary form as a kind of template or paradigm in the search for recurrent patterns of attitudes and behavior that come to life in the wake of disasters caused by humans (and gods). This implies that the handling of *natural* disasters in literature will fall outside the scope of this chapter. It should be noted here, however, that the distinction between man-made and natural disasters is a modern one, in the sense that such a differentiation was not reflected in the word from the very start of its use. This is evident already from the etymology of the word 'disaster'. The English word *disaster* derives from the Middle French *désastre* and that word from Old Italian *disastro* (ill-starred), which again comes from the Greek pejorative prefix *dys-* (bad; Gr: *δυσ-*) + *aster* (star; Gr: *ἀστήρ*). So literally speaking disaster means "bad star" and indicates the understanding of such calamities all being caused by an unfavorable position of a planet.² Another possible limitation follows from the selection of the ancient Greek tragedy as the literary point of departure, since this favors a *narrative* approach instead of a focus on conceptual issues. So in short, what this chapter aims at is an account of human disasters in literature using the

¹ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=catastrophe>.

² <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=disaster>.

literary form of ancient Greek tragedy as a template to identify recurrent forms of moral injury and transgression following in the wake of such upheavals.

7.2 On the Literary Form and Morality of the Ancient Greek Tragedy

Tragedies are not easily amenable to *theoretical* and *methodological* systematisation and categorisation (Gellrich 1988, 10). This is already evidenced in Aristotle's famous account of this literary form in the *Poetics*, where emphasis is on representation, action and plot, not on conceptualization:

Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity [*eleos*] and terror [*fobos*] the catharsis of such emotions.

By 'embellished speech', I mean that which has rhythm and melody, i.e. song; by 'with its elements separately', I mean that some [parts of] are accomplished only by means of spoken verses, and others again by means of song. (Aristotle 1984, 49b23–31)

In order to get a grasp on what constitutes a tragedy Burian suggests to look for "story patterns" characteristic of tragedy, while at the same time renouncing the idea of *the paradigmatic story*. This brings him to what he calls the «starting-point of all story-telling», the notion of conflict:

Tragic narrative patterns can usefully be classified by their characteristic conflicts, and something can be said in general about the kinds of conflicts that tragic plots seem to require. (Burian 1997, 181)

Burian operates with three qualifications of tragic conflicts, of which the first – *extremity* – is of particular relevance here. A characteristic feature of such conflicts, he says, is that possibilities of resolution in terms of "compromise" or "mediation" are *de facto* non-existing options. Whatever choice is made, it will by necessity lead to an extreme degree of misery and suffering (Burian 1997, 181). Kuhn in his account adds a moral dimension to the qualification of extremity, by introducing the notion of *guilt*: tragic suffering conceived of as the result of an inexplicable disproportion of guilt and misery (Kuhn 1941, 12). Also Nussbaum attributes importance to this dimension. According to her reading, in situations of tragic conflict, choice is under a *double* constraint: the absence of a "guilt-free course" amidst the necessity to choose (Nussbaum 1986, 34). In other words, the possibility of *abstaining* from making a choice is non-existent as is the possibility of making a choice not contaminated with guilt.³ So whatever is the answer to the haunting question "What shall I do?" (Lattimore 1964, p. 29), the moral agent cannot escape making «une décision capitale, souvent mortelle, toujours irrévocable» (Rivier 1944, 33). Guilt in

³For such situations, see for example Aeschylus' play, *Libation-Bearers*, 924–927, Sophocles', *Oedipus at Colonus*, 988–994 and Euripides', *Electra*, 966–987.

situations of tragic conflict, however, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the role played by ‘error’ or ‘mistake’ – of *hamartia* – in conflicts of this kind. The word *hamartia* has a wide variety of meanings ranging from the purely epistemological ‘mistake of fact’, ‘ignorance of fact’, ‘error of judgement’, ‘error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances’ and ‘tragic error’ to moralised forms of interpretation such as ‘moral error’, ‘moral defect’, ‘moral flaw’, ‘moral mistake’, ‘defect of character’, ‘tragic error’ and ‘tragic flaw’ (Stinton 1975; Østerud 1976; Sorabji 1980; Schütrumpf 1989; Solbakk 2004). It is important to keep in mind the plurality of meanings attributed to *hamartia* in tragedy since this implies that guilt in this context has to be interpreted within a context with both moral and epistemological connotations.

What is more important for our purposes is Aristotle’s differentiation in *Poetics* 51a37–b33 of tragedy from history. The first of their distinguishing traits is that history narrates things that *have* happened, while tragedy relates to events or incidents that *may* happen. This, he says, is the reason why poetry, in particular tragic poetry, is more *philosophical* than history; it speaks of universals, while history is an account of particulars. “A universal”, says Aristotle, “is the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity – this is what poetry aims at, although it assigns names [to people]. A particular is what Alcibiades did or what he suffered” (Aristotle 1984, 51b8–12). This remark about the use of *historical* names in tragedies, and thereby about the representation of events that have actually taken place, is important, because it informs us that not everything in a tragedy is fictional. More important, however, is the explanation Aristotle gives for the poet’s use of historical material. For tragic accounts to be trustworthy, they must be *possible*, and things which have happened, says Aristotle, are obviously possible. Consequently, by using events, names or things that have actually existed or taken place, as templates for giving shape to a tragic plot, the poet is free to invent for himself a whole that *may* have taken place (Aristotle, 53b23–27). Thereby, out of the creative reconfiguration of the historical and particular, emerge neither *imaginary* accounts nor wild *thought experiments* but accounts that are possible and at the same time of universal moral relevance and value (Solbakk 2006). The playwright Edward Albee has formulated this insight in a way I find particularly illuminating: “A play is fiction – and fiction is fact distilled into truth” (*New York Times* 18.09 1966).

7.3 On the Ancient Greek Tragedy as a Paradigmatic Case of Human Disaster

The kind of distilled truths that will be the subject of attention in the rest of this chapter originate from a group of ancient Greek tragedies that dramatize the aftermaths of war, i.e. the kind of conflict Heraclitus considers the starting point of everything: “War is the father and king of all, and has produced some as gods and

some as men, and has made some slaves and some free” (Πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι πάντων δὲ βασιλεύς, καὶ τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς ἔδειξε τοὺς δὲ ἀνθρώπους, τοὺς μὲν δούλους ἐποίησε τοὺς δὲ ἐλευθέρους).⁴ More precisely the focus of attention will be on recurrent forms of moral attitudes and behavior that seem to follow almost universally in the wake of wars and armed conflicts. First, the focus will be on war veterans’ experiences and narratives of going home again, i.e. of returning from combat back to a life called ‘normal’. These are experiences that render both the victorious and the defeated representatives of such conflicts extremely vulnerable and susceptible to harm, as dramatically displayed in Sophocles’ tragedies *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, as well as in Euripides’ play *The madness of Hercules*. Second, while turning our attention to the first victim of war, i.e. the truth, could have been an interesting exercise in itself, I suggest instead to listen to eye-witness experiences of the second and third victims of such disasters, i.e. women and children trapped in such conflicts. This is the kind of material from which Sophocles’ tragedies *Antigone* and *The women of Trachis*, as well as Euripides’ plays *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, and *The Trojan women*, have been woven.

7.4 Patterns of Behavior in the Wake of War: A Typology from Ancient Greek Tragedy

What are the recurrent patterns of human behaviour and attitudes that the ancient Greek tragedies give centre stage in their representations of the aftermath of armed conflicts and wars? High up on the list come the moral degradation and crime of *hybris* committed by the victors followed by dramatized accounts of the suffering and humiliation representatives of the defeated are forced to undergo. Rancor, xenophobia and hate are richly represented attitudes. Likewise rape and other forms of degrading abuse and violence, including bondage and the most horrendous forms of religiously motivated forms of abuse, such as ritual killing, human sacrifice and prohibition against burying one’s loved ones. Among patterns of attitude and behaviour associated in these plays with war-veterans returning from combat to a life called ‘normal’ count existential solitude, social isolation and alienation; the incapacity to talk (‘the wall of silence’); survival guilt, remorse and shame; loss of meaning and self-respect; domestic violence (including different forms of parricide); dependence on alcohol and other stimulants to handle life; and finally, ‘the way of no return’ – self-slaughter.

⁴<http://www.heraclitusfragments.com/>.

7.5 Patterns of Behavior in the Wake of War: Distilled Representations in Greek Tragedy

7.5.1 *First Representation: When the Home Front Becomes the Battlefield*

We encounter a dramatic representation of the home-coming war-veteran in Sophocles' play *Ajax* (Sophocles 1994, hereafter referred to as *Ajax*). The play starts with a conversation taking place outside Ajax's tent, during the siege of Troy, between the goddess Athena – the daughter of Zeus – and Odysseus, the legendary Greek king of Ithaca and hero of Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*. In this play he is depicted as the subject of Ajax's most deep-felt rancor. The topic of the conversation is the sudden madness that has taken possession of Ajax. Odysseus has been sent by the Greek kings and war leaders, Menelaus (king of Mycenaean Sparta) and his brother Agamemnon (king of Argos), to find out whether Ajax is the vicious killer of the cattle that the Greeks had taken captive from the Trojans. Athena confirms Odysseus' suspicion and unveils to him the cause behind Ajax's madness: "He was stung by anger on account of the arms of Achilles" (*Ajax*, lines 40–41). The reason behind the rage of Ajax is that the armor of the dead Achilles, the most formidable of the Greek warriors, even in the eyes of Ajax, had been awarded to Odysseus instead of to himself. Ajax feels betrayed by Menelaus and Agamemnon:

I well know, that if Achilles were alive and were to award the prize of valour in a contest for his own arms, no other would receive them but I. But now the sons of Atreus have made them over to an unscrupulous fellow, pushing aside this man's mighty deeds. (*Ajax*, lines 441–445)

He swears to take revenge and in the dead of night he sets out secretly to trace and kill Odysseus, the undeserved heir of Achilles' armor, as well as the brother kings. However, Athena steps in and deludes Ajax into attacking instead the cattle that the Greeks had taken from the Trojans. The play provides with surgical precision an account of the delusional killings:

It was I [Athena] that held him back from his intolerable delight, casting upon his eyes mistaken notions, and I diverted him against the herds and the various beasts guarded by the herdsmen [...] here he fell upon them and hacked the horned beasts to death, cleaving their spines all around him; [...] And as the man wandered in the madness that afflicted him, I urged him on and drove him into a cruel trap. Then when he rested from this work he tied up those of the cattle that were still alive and all the sheep, and brought them home, thinking he had men there, and not the horned creatures that were his prey, and now he is torturing them, bound as they are, inside his dwelling. (*Ajax*, lines 51–64)

When Ajax comes to his senses and realizes the "mighty deeds" he had performed "among beasts that frightened no one", he is overwhelmed by shame. His self-respect is put in peril, his dignity likewise. And his mind is dominated by the feeling of having become a complete ridicule and outcast in the world of humans and gods. He can't go home again – not ever:

Alas! Who ever would have thought that my name would come to harmonise with my sorrows? For now I can say 'Alas' a second time, I whose father came home from this land of Oda having won the army's first prize for valour, and bringing home every kind of fame [...] And now what must I do, I who patently am hated by the gods, and loathed by the army of the Greeks, and hated, too, by Troy and by these plains? Shall I cross the Aegean sea, leaving behind the station of the ships and the sons of Atreus, and go home? And what kind of face shall I show to my father Telamon when I appear? However shall he bring himself to look at me when I appear empty-handed, without the prize of victory, when he himself won a great crown of fame? The thing is not to be endured. (*Ajax*, lines 430–434, and lines 457–465)

There is for him only one viable option left, self-slaughter, by his two-edged sword. The sword was originally owned by Hector, the Trojan prince and commander of the Trojan army, but was given as a gift to Ajax by Hector in exchange for Ajax's belt, after a duel between them which none of them was able to bring to victory (*Ajax*, lines 1025–1030). This gift provides Ajax with the solution which for the morality of a noble warrior seems to be the only possible one:

The killer stands where it will be sharpest, if one has time to work it out, a gift of Hector, the acquaintance I most hated, and whose sight I most detested; it stands in the enemy soil of Troy, newly sharpened with a whetstone that cuts away the iron. And I have planted it there with care, so that it may loyally help me to a speedy death [...].

O light, O sacred plain of my own land of Salamis, O pedestal of my native hearth, and you glorious Athens, and the race that lives with you, streams and rivers here, and plains of Troy do I address; hail, you who have given me sustenance! This is the last word Ajax speaks to you; the rest I shall utter in Hades to those below. (*Ajax*, lines 815–819, and lines 860–865)

The play does not end with the self-slaughtering of Ajax; it provides in addition a dramatic representation of the deep grief and despair of Tecmessa, the war trophy and slave-concubine of Ajax, who now risks becoming a complete outcast herself with nowhere to seek shelter for herself and their son, Eurysaces. Tecmessa was the daughter of Teleutas, king of Phrygia, and her fate had been sealed during the Trojan war when Ajax killed the king and took his daughter captive. In Tecmessa's own words to Ajax before his suicide, her fate is thus described:

Lord Ajax, there is no greater evil for men than the fate imposed by compulsion. I was born of a father who was free, greatest of all the Phrygians, and now I am a slave; that was the will of the gods, and in particular of your strength. (*Ajax*, lines 485–489)

After having been exposed directly in their own home to Ajax's delusional killings of the cattle he had brought back with him, and in addition having herself received "awful threats" from the mad-man (*Ajax*, line 312), she attempts to stop Ajax from committing suicide by reminding him that she and their son's life will be put in extreme danger from the day he commits such an act (*Ajax*, lines 490–504, 510–519):

For on the day when you perish and by your death abandon me, believe that on that day I shall be seized with violence by the Argives together with your son and shall have the treatment of a slave [...] pity your son, my lord, thinking how much harm you will cause to him and to me by your death, if he is robbed of his early sustenance and must live bereft of you, placed under unfriendly guardians! For I have nothing to look to except you; you devastated

my country by violence, and another fate took my mother and my father in death to live in Hades. What country, what riches can there be for me but you? On you rests all my safety.

Tecmessa also pleads with Ajax to show regard for his parents by instead hanging on to his life and thereby also making possible the fulfillment of his mother's prayers for many years that her son may return home again alive (*Ajax*, lines 505–508). But alas to no avail, for Ajax the only possible place to dwell now is Hades.

The fate of the bodily remains of Ajax is the focus of dramatic attention in the last part of the play. This is the conflict topic from which also Sophocles' play *Antigone* is woven, i.e. the treatment – and mistreatment – of corpses of fallen warriors. Teucer, the half-brother of Ajax, tries to rescue the remains of Ajax from the revenge of the brother kings, but Menelaus orders him to leave the body uncovered to serve as food for the birds (*Ajax*, line 1064). Menelaus tries to justify his cruel order by recalling Ajax's attempted plan of murdering his own allies and military leaders and his refusal "to obey those in authority". He also makes reference to the importance of upholding control in the army through the cultivation of fear and respect (*Ajax*, lines 1052–1076). Teucer challenges Menelaus' arguments and when Agamemnon tries to follow up the case of his brother by using a combination of threats and allusions to Teucer's ignoble background (he was himself the son of a captive woman), he stands by his determination, as did Antigone, of having his (her) brother buried even if that would cost him (her) his (her) own life (*Ajax*, lines 1300–1315). Finally it is Odysseus, the man subject of Ajax's most deep-felt rancor, who by reference to justice and the laws of the gods manages to bring the conflict to a solution and safeguards an honourable burial of Ajax:

Violence must not so prevail on you that you trample justice under foot! For me too he was once my chief enemy in the army, ever since I became the owner of the arms of Achilles; but though he was such in regard to me, I would not so far fail to do him honour as to deny that he was the most valiant among the Argives, except Achilles. And so you cannot dishonour him without injustice; for you would be destroying not him, but the laws of the gods. It is unjust to injure a noble man, if he is dead, even if it happens that you hate him. (*Ajax*, lines 1332–1345)

7.5.2 *Ancient Views and Forms of Behaviour in Modern Wars: The Ghost of Ajax*

In his fascinating book, *Theater of war*, Bryan Doerries tells about his experience with exposing US war veterans to Sophocles' play. Here are some of his observations:

Standing before a war-weary infantry of soldiers after a reading of Sophocles' *Ajax* on a U.S. army installation in Southern Germany, I posed the following question, one that I have asked tens of thousands of service members and veterans on military bases all over the world: "Why do you think Sophocles wrote this play?"[...] The play was written nearly twenty-five hundred years ago [...] And yet the story is as contemporary as this morning's

news. According to a 2012 Veterans Affairs study, an average of 22 U.S. veterans take their lives every day. That's almost one suicide every hour.

A junior enlisted soldier, seated in the third row, raised his hand and matter-of-factly replied: 'He wrote it to boost morale'.

I stepped closer to him and asked, 'What is morale-boosting about watching a decorated warrior descend into madness and take his own life?'.

'It's the truth', he replied – subsumed in a sea of green uniforms, 'and we're all here watching it together'.

The soldier had highlighted something hidden within *Ajax*: a message for our time. This wasn't government-sponsored propaganda. Nor was his play an act of protest. It was the unvarnished truth. And by presenting the truth of war to combat veterans, he sought to give voice to their secret struggles and to convey to them that they were not alone. (Doerries 2016, 2–3)

According to Doerries the message of Sophocles' *Ajax* for the audience of his time as well as for our time is the following: "Even the strongest of warriors can be taken down, long after the battle has been lost or won. The violence of war extends far past the battlefield. Not only was psychological injury, it seems, a persistent and universal problem for warriors twenty-five centuries ago, but – like Americans today – the ancient Greeks must have struggled with the violence of war, on and off the battlefield" (Doerries 2016, 70–71). In his book Doerries provides moving accounts from several U.S war veterans and their spouses of how they found comfort in the way Sophocles gives expression to the impact of war on and beyond the battlefield on individuals, families and communities, and how the experiences of *Ajax* and Tecmessa resonated with their own experiences of coping with the emotional reactions and moral injuries following in the wake of war.

7.5.3 *Second Representation: The Fate of Women and Their Offspring in the Wake of War*

The impact of war on and off the battlefield on women and children is, as we have seen above, given dramatic attention in *Ajax* through the fates of Tecmessa and their son Eurysaces. But in *Ajax* this topic does not occupy centre stage as is the case in Euripides' plays *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, and *The Trojan women*. In these three plays, unvarnished versions of the horrors women and children are subjected to as a consequence of war are dramatically displayed. *Hecuba*, the queen of Troy and wife of [Priam](#) the Magnificent, is the main character in the play of her name as well as in *The Trojan women*, while in the third play the lead role is held by *Andromache*, the widow of Hector, the fallen Trojan hero and son of *Hecuba*. All three plays deal with the human aftermath of the conquest of Troy, and notably with particular focus on the fates of the leading women and their children, i.e. Queen *Hecuba*, her daughters *Cassandra* and *Polyxena*, and her son *Polydorus*, as well as her daughter-in-law *Andromache*, her son with Hector, *Astyanax*, and *Molossus*, the son *Andromache* gave birth to in captivity. Instead of providing a condensed account of each of these plays I suggest a 'synoptic' approach, i.e. to look for recurrent story fragments and

narrative patterns that Euripides uses to dramatize the plights of these victims of war.

7.5.4 *Women as War Trophies*

While the fate of Tecmessa as a war trophy and slave-concubine to Ajax serves as a narrative backdrop for the plot in Sophocles' play *Ajax*, Euripides bases his plots in *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, and *The Trojan women* directly on the fates of these women and their offspring. Among these three plays perhaps the most heart-breaking narrative of what it entails for a woman to become a war trophy occurs in *Andromache* (Euripides 1998, hereafter referred to as *Andromache*):

If any woman was born to be broken on the earth's turning wheel,
I am she. I watched my husband Hector die
under Achilles' hands, and on that day
the Greeks swarmed Troy,
I watched my son flung from a tower – my son, Astyanax!
And I – the daughter of a royal house –
Packed off to Greece and bonded,
A plum for Achilles' son, Neoptolemus
The island prince. Andromache, his Trojan trophy. (*Andromache*, lines 6–15)

The fall into misery of Andromache here displayed does not only concern a former princess having lost all her royal privileges and living as a slave concubine at the mercy of the son of her husband's killer, Achilles. In addition she is exposed to the jealous rage and death threats of Hermione, Neoptolemus' wedded wife, who hates the "slave bitch" and war souvenir of the island prince because of her own barrenness (*Andromache*, line 155). The extent of the emotional horror under which Andromache is doomed to live is, however, not fully spelled out in the play, since it is not mentioned that her father and her seven brothers also had perished at the hands of Achilles (*Iliad*, Book 6). In addition the play is mute with regard to the tradition that it was Neoptolemus, the man whom she is forced to sleep with and to whom she unwillingly had born a child, who had caused the death of Astyanax, her son with Hector. In the play, there are only two lines alluding to the fate of her previous child (*Andromache*, lines 11 and 392). Although these accounts are not textually present in the play, there are good reasons to believe that they were emotionally present in the minds and memories of the ancient Greek public when they were watching the play.

While Euripides in *Andromache* focuses the attention in particular on the fate of Andromache and her offspring, *The Trojan women* (Euripides 2008, hereafter referred to as *The Trojan women*) follows in addition the fates after the fall of Troy of the dethroned queen Hecuba, her oldest daughter Cassandra, her youngest daughter Polyxena and her youngest son Polydorus. The queen herself is to be given away as a slave to Odysseus, who the play attributes with the decision to kill her grandson *Astyanax* (for this, see later), while her oldest daughter, Cassandra, the cursed

soothsayer, is to become the “bride of desire” of king Agamemnon. The curse, according to the tradition, had been caused by the god Apollo, who spellbound by the beauty of Cassandra had granted her the gift of foretelling the future. However, when Cassandra did not return his infatuation, he made that nobody believed her predictions – thinking she was mad – while she at the same time was doomed to foretell the future and endure the pain and frustrations of doing it to no avail. In the play this gift is alluded to by Cassandra expressing a morbid delight in her fate, since she, thanks to her gift, is able to foresee that her becoming the concubine of Agamemnon will lead to his death and the total destruction of the house of Atreus:

Mother, come! Wrap my head with wreaths of victory.
 Dress me up like a bride. Be happy for me, be happy for my royal wedding!
 Come, send me off to the bridegroom [...]
 [...] I swear by Apollo
 that my marriage to Agamemnon, to that ... *sarcastically* ... glorious king of the Greeks,
 will come to an end more bitter than that of Menelaus and Helen!
 I will kill him, mother!
 I will destroy his city, mother, and I will avenge the murders of my father and my
 brothers!
 But enough of this lament for now.
 I will not tell now of the axe that will fall upon my neck and upon the neck of others. Nor
 will I tell about the matricide that my marriage will cause or the destruction of the house of
 Atreus.
 I will show them that our city is more blessed than any city in Greece, mother! (*The Trojan
 women*, lines 353–367)

For the ancient Greek audience familiar with the different legends and stories of the fortunes and fate of the house of Atreus,⁵ of which Aeschylus' trilogy, *Oresteia* (Aeschylus 1991), probably was the best known,⁶ when exposed to this part of the play they would immediately link the prophecy about the killing of Agamemnon and a forthcoming matricide to the accounts about the death of *Agamemnon* at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra and to Orestes' slaying of his mother to avenge the murder of his father. The fate of Andromache the *woman* is given less attention in the play compared to the attention paid to her fate as a mother, in the sense that it is only stated that Achilles' son Neoptolemus has taken her as his “special prize” (*The women of Troy*, line 273). Andromache pleads to her beloved husband Hector to return from Hades to protect her from this dire fate, and she makes the promise never to put Hector out of her mind and heart or turn her love to the murderer she now is doomed to share bed with (*The Trojan women*, lines 660–668).

⁵The expression «the house of Atreus» refers to Atreus, king of Mycene, who according to the tradition was the son of Pelops and Hippodamia and the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus.

⁶The *Oresteia* consists of the following three plays: *Agamemnon*, *The libation-bearers* and *Eumenides*.

7.5.5 *The Fate of Children of Female War Trophies*

Another topic, besides the war trophy topic, that occupies centre stage in the three plays here considered, is the plight of the children of the noble widows of Troy and their deceased husbands. Since the fate of Hecuba's daughter Cassandra has already been addressed, I now turn the attention to her youngest daughter, Polyxena. When Hecuba asks Talthybius what will happen with Polyxena she receives an enigmatic answer:

Hecuba:

Tell me, then, Talthybius, who has drawn my unfortunate daughter, Cassandra?

Talthybius:

She was Agamemnon's special prize.

[...]

Hecuba:

And the other one? The last daughter you took from me? What has become of her?

Talthybius:

Who do you mean, Polyxena or some other one?

Hecuba:

Yes, Polyxene, that one. Who has drawn her name?

Talthybius:

Her draw is to serve Achilles' tomb.

Hecuba:

My daughter? To serve a tomb? Is this a Greek custom or some sort of law? Tell me, friend!

Talthybius:

Just be happy for your daughter. Her Fate is good. That's all you need to know.

Hecuba:

"Her Fate is good?" What do you mean by that? Is she still alive? Can she still look upon the light?

Talthybius:

She's in the hands of Fate, so she is released from pain. (*The women of Troy*, lines 247[...]–270)

This answer prepares the audience for Hecuba's emotional reactions when the horrible news will be disclosed to her later in the play through the words of Andromache. The audience, however, is aware of what has happened with Polyxena, since her fate is disclosed already at the outset of the play:

The river Scamandros echoes violently with the sounds of the crying women who must wait for Fate to tell them whose slave they are going to be.

Fate has declared that some of them will serve the men of Arcadia while others will be slaves to the men from Thessaly. Others still, will be slaves to the sons of Theseus, the king of Athens.

Then there are those who haven't been told their lot yet. These are the choicest of all the Trojan women. They are those picked for the army's top soldiers. That lot of women is waiting here, in these huts. Among them is Helen, daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta. Now, that woman is no greater than any of the other slaves. One of a great many captives. Quite right, too.

(*Indicating Hecuba:*) And, if anyone cares at all about that one there, the queen of this city, well, there she is, Hecuba! The poor wretch is lying there, by her city's gates, shedding floods of tears. Her grief is great. The disasters that befell her many. Her daughter, Polyxene,

was gruesomely slaughtered, upon Achilles' grave. Slaughtered as a sacrificial offering to Achilles. (*The women of Troy*, lines 29–39)

A substantial part of the play is dedicated to Hecuba and Andromache lamenting the fall of Troy and the loss of their loved ones, and their conversation almost turns into a competition between them about which of them fate has struck hardest. It is during this part of the play that Andromache breaks the terrible news about Polyxena's destiny (*The women of Troy*, lines 610–647, and, lines 680–685).

So far in the play it is the misfortune of Andromache the widowed woman and war trophy that has been staged, but now follows the disclosure of the fate of her son Astyanax. As mentioned in the previous paragraph there are only two lines in *Andromache* alluding to the fate of the child she had given birth to before the fall of Troy. The focus in these lines is on the mother's grief following the brutal death of the son she had with Hector. No explanation is provided as to *why* Astyanax had to be killed. In *The women of Troy* such an explanation is provided; i.e. that it would be risky business to let the son of a Trojan noble grow into a man (*The Trojan women*, lines 717–722).

A few stanzas later Andromache herself breaks the horrible news to her little son (*The Trojan women*, lines 740–763), and the grief of Hecuba in the face of this imminent disaster is also spelled out:

Hekabe:

No! No! O, my son! Son of my ill-fated son!

It's unfair! These evil men have torn away your life from me and from your mother, my little boy!

How can I endure this? How can I help you my poor boy, unfortunate boy? (*The Trojan women*, lines 790–796)

Talthybius' disclosure to Andromache that Odysseus is the mastermind behind the decision to kill her grandson, makes her misery even worse in the minds and hearts of the audience watching the play, since this means that it is the man she now is doomed to live with that has instigated this evil.

In *Hecuba*, (Euripides 1998, hereafter referred to as *Hecuba*), the third play of Euripides addressing the plight of women and children in the wake of war, the role of Odysseus in exacerbating Hecuba's misery is dramatically heightened through the disclosure that it was him who had convinced the Greeks of the necessity of sacrificing Polyxena on Achilles' tomb:

Chorus:

Until he broke in

That sweet-talking, forked tongued,
glad-handling son of Laertes, Odysseus.

Until Odysseus harangued the crowd, asking
If one slave woman's little life counted as much
as the glorious honor of Achilles.

He said he was ashamed to imagine
One of their valorous fallen brothers
Complaining in Hades that Greeks
Failed to thank the heroes
who died for victory

on the bloodied plains of Troy. (*Hecuba*, lines 168–180)

While the first part of the play provides a much more detailed representation than is the case in *The Trojan women* of the fate of Polyxena and the role Hecuba's new master, Odysseus, plays in the sacrifice of her youngest daughter, it is the destiny of Polydorus, "the last prince born to Hecuba and Priam", that occupies centre stage in the remaining part of the play (*Hecuba*, line 6). In the play's opening (*Hecuba*, lines 8–18), the ghost of Polydorus tells that when his father feared the fall of Troy he had his son smuggled to his old ally and friend together with a fortune in gold, so that in case of defeat, his surviving children would have something to live on (*Hecuba*, lines 19–39).

While Hecuba is still lamenting the loss of Polyxena, the body of Polydorus, which has been washed up on shore, is brought to her. First she thinks it is the body of Polyxena or of her daughter Cassandra. Upon recognizing her son whom she thought safe, Hecuba reaches new heights of despair. And when Polymestor's treason of the house of Priam is disclosed to her – according to the tradition his wife, Ilione, was the eldest daughter of Hecuba and king Priam – her inconsolable grief turns into an uncompromising intention to avenge the unspeakable, unbelievable, ungodly and unbearable crime committed by Polymestor:

Is this what friendship means?
 You monster!
 You child-murderer?
 You hacked him up like this?
 You killed our son with your sword? (*Hecuba*, lines 920–927)

Hecuba pleads with Agamemnon to help her avenge the slaying of her son and the "even more ungodly" act following the murder, i.e. that Polydorus' body was left unburied and thrown away into the sea (*Hecuba*, lines 1053–1056). Agamemnon, who has taken her daughter Cassandra as his "bride of desire", agrees reluctantly to assist Hecuba in setting up a trap against Polymestor. But since the Greek army considers Polymestor an ally he insists that no information about this must be disclosed to the army. Polymestor arrives with his sons pretending he is still a dear friend of the house of Priam and that he mourns with Hecuba the fall of Troy and the recent death of Polyxena (*Hecuba*, lines 1269–1299). Hecuba conceals her knowledge of Polydorus being the murderer of her son and asks Polymestor how her son is. Polymestor assures her that he is absolutely fine, and he adds: "In him you have good luck" (*Hecuba*, line 1328). Hecuba tells Polymestor she knows where the remaining treasures of Troy are hidden and she offers to share the secret with Polymestor so that he can disclose to Polydorus their whereabouts (*Hecuba*, lines 1354–1361). She persuades Polymestor that in case something should happen with him his sons should also know where the treasures are located. When Polymestor in his greedy eagerness to get hold of the treasures asks her whether she has more to say, Hecuba tells that she has managed to hide her personal jewels in a tent nearby. She makes Polymestor believe that she wants him to take care of them as well, and invites him and his sons to follow her into the tent. With the help of other female

slaves from Troy who have been hiding in the tent, Hecuba kills Polymestor's sons and stabs Polymestor's eyes (*Hecuba*, lines 1397–1409).

The blinded king of Thrace cries in despair out for help to his Thracian guards and to the sons of Atreus, i.e. Agamemnon and Menelaus (*Hecuba*, lines 1482–1488). Agamemnon re-enters the stage escorted by Greek soldiers angry with the uproar which has disturbed the piece of his soldiers. Agamemnon pretends to be shocked by the sight of the blinded and bleeding Polymestor and the slayed sons, and he asks who the perpetrator is. Polymestor tells it is the vile deed of “Hecuba and those other Trojan she-devils” to revenge his killing of Polydorus. He pleads Agamemnon to lead him to her so that he can “tear her into thousand pieces!” (*Hecuba*, lines 1517–1518 and 1528–1530). Agamemnon says he is going to judge fairly between them after both of them have stated their case. Polymestor is first out, arguing that his killing of Polydorus was for the sake of preserving peace and stability (*Hecuba*, lines 1538–1558).

Hecuba delivers a rebuttal arguing that Polymestor's defense speech was a disgusting attempt at white-washing himself and at hiding the underlying motive for the slaying: “You killed my son for gold” (*Hecuba*, line 1675). Agamemnon sides with Hecuba and concludes that justice has been served by her revenge. Polymestor, in a fit of rage, foretells that Hecuba's death is imminent; she will drown before the ships of the army reaches Greece. Following this doomsaying he also predicts the forthcoming deaths of Cassandra and Agamemnon at the hands of his wedded wife [Clytemnestra](#) (*Hecuba*, lines 1773–1778, and 1808–1825). Agamemnon reacts with a mixture of anger and fear and orders his soldiers to gag Polymestor and take him away to “some deserted island where no one will hear his wretched lies!” (*Hecuba*, lines 1840–1843). Polymestor assures Agamemnon that even if he took to killing him this would not save him “from the bloodbath of homecoming” in wait for him (*Hecuba*, lines 1828–1829). Soon after, the wind finally rises again, the Greeks will sail, and the Chorus goes to an unknown, dark fate:

Chorus:

We must go
to our masters' tents.
Nobody knows why
what will happen to us
there must happen.
From the harbor
we must voyage
to life upon the shore
of bondage. Nobody
knows why this must be.
Fate knows no mercy
Necessity is hard.
Why must everything
happen as it must?
What is this “must,”
and why? Nobody knows
Nobody knows. (*Hecuba*, lines 1852–1868)

7.5.6 *Ancient Views and Forms of Behavior in Modern Wars: The Fate of Women and Their Offspring*

Women's experiences of abduction and bondage, of systematic rape and sexual slavery, of extermination of their offspring, of forced displacement, marriage and impregnation, of religiously motivated forms of killing and sacrilege of human remains, as well as of other forms of extreme cruelty, have been there from the very start. That is, hardly any example of armed conflict exists in human history where such experiences were not – and still continue to be – abundantly represented (UNICEF 1996; Amnesty International 2004; Smith-Park 2004; Khan 2011; Wallace 2011). And this was exactly the kind of material Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus made use of to weave their war-plays and forge a universal moral language enabling any audience at any time and space to understand the disastrous effects such conflicts have on women's and children's lives. A moving illustration of the timelessness of these plays is *The Queens of Syria*, a Developing Artists' project where 50 Syrian women, all refugees living in Amman, Jordan, were given 6 weeks to prepare and perform their own adaptation of Euripides' play *The Trojan women* to an audience in the UK (Developing Artists 2013). None of the women had any previous experience of acting. They were all amateurs, trying to make sense of a play written nearly 25 hundred years ago. Here are some of their reactions after working with the play: Woman 1: "Troy's story is very similar to Syria's story; its women, its children, the country that was destroyed. So when they offered us this text and this play we were very keen to participate because we all lived the real experience. It's not like we needed to write a new story, whatever happened in Troy was documented, but it's no more than what happened in Syria". The same woman a little later in the presentation of the project: "This part of the play makes me cry a lot [the stanza she is referring to is the following: "*You are living a painful present while your soul yearns for a happy past*". And she continues: "We left our hometown, there was a lot of shelling. I wanted to find a better life for my children. The play talks about something real to us. It's old but history repeats itself". Woman 2: "Hecuba is just like me. She was the wife of the king of Troy. Then she lost everything she owned. She lost loved ones and family. It's like us, she was a queen in her home. Hecuba said: '*I used to run this place but now I am nothing*'. That's us now". Woman 3: "I would like to go to London to deliver the message about our life and the conditions we live in. We want the whole world to hear that. I mean, the whole world is not treating us as humans. Some people ran away from death only to meet death. Some drowned in the sea while they ran away from death. Some people were trying to cross illegally. They died on the borders. What is happening to the Syrians?" Woman 4: "It is not enough that you see the things through the television or the radio or other media. You have to meet this people, speak with them and understand them. Then you can decide what's the wrong and what's the right. I would like to thank each and every person who do help any refugee, ever, because it is very good. I know why you did that, because you are human. And we are human. And you

break all the walls and you just stand and say 'I am a human and these people are human and we should help them'."

7.6 Concluding Remarks

The Greeks in antiquity did not make a sharp distinction between human disasters and natural disasters, and notably for the simple reason that a third causal factor was always implicated; the Greek gods and deities in their different forms and formats of defence and revenge. In spite of this apparent out-datedness with regard to conceptual clarity and refinement, I believe there are good reasons to argue that the ancient Greek playwrights had a better grasp of what it morally speaking entails for human beings to be hit by disasters than what empirical evidence and theoretical accounts are able to provide. The aim of this chapter has been to come up with arguments for such a position using the narratives of ancient Greek tragedy as a telling source with regard to the different ways human lives might be blown apart in the wake of armed conflicts. For these reasons I believe a narrative approach to disaster bioethics deserves more attention than what has hitherto been the case.

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