Between the Conquerors and the Defeated: 
Talthybius in Euripides’s *The Women of Troy*

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In the past, Euripides’s extraordinary tragedy, *The Women of Troy*, composed in 415 B.C.E., has been deemed a static lamentation; however, it is now understood as a different form of drama (106). The illustrious tragedian portrays the deep suffering and grief inflicted upon the women who survived the harrowing catastrophe of the Trojan War. He does not focus on the acts of warriors or courageous battle scenes, but on the pain of the women remaining in the aftermath. The dealings between the unseen Greeks and the pitiable Trojans are through the messenger Talthybius. Through his assigned duties, the reader (or observer of the onstage play) can witness his clear compassion and guilt for the sorrowful women who are about to be ripped from their homes. It is also possible to comprehend his obedience to the Greek warriors and his perspective on the roles of men and women.

The number of heartbreaking messages that Talthybius must convey is large. He informs the women of their designation to different Greek men, namely of Cassandra to King Agamemnon, Hecabe to Odysseus, and Andromache to the son of Achilles. In addition, he alludes to, but avoids divulging, the sacrifice of Hecabe’s daughter, Polyxena. He also must tell Andromache the tragic fate for her son, who has been condemned to die. Talthybius must then perform the acts he was ordered to carry out, specifically bringing the women to the ships bound for Greece and taking Andromache’s son to his death.

His obligations pain him and weigh on his conscience, which is evident in scores of comments to the grieving women. For example, when he refers to Polyxena’s death to her mother, he advises, “Be happy for your daughter; all is well with her... Her fate is settled. She is
free from suffering” (132). His understanding of Polyxena’s fortune and peace in death discloses his understanding of the present and imminent pain that is to befall the unfortunate Trojan survivors. He realizes, to a certain extent, that freedom from the deepest misery can be procured in death. In addition, his evasion of informing Hecabe of her daughter’s death displays his desire to avoid the infliction of further pain.

Talthybius must also take from Andromache her infant son. He struggles with relating his orders to the already grieving widow. He begins by stating,

Andromache, now widow of Troy’s once greatest man,  
Do not hate me. I speak these words reluctantly.  
The Greeks and their two generals sent me to convey- (137).

He is strained to give his report, saying “Their joint decision, that your son - how can I say it?” and “My news is bad. I don’t know how to find the words” (137). When she finally discovers the truth, Talthybius attempts to explain the Greeks’ rationale behind killing the boy. It is clear that his compassion drives him to this, whereas a colder man would simply declare the death sentence and collect Andromache’s son to be killed. As the mother grapples with the unthinkable, Talthybius advises her to accept the inevitable. He urges,

Don’t cling to him, or tell yourself you have some strength,  
When you have none; but bear what must be like a queen.  
You have no possible source of help. See for yourself:  
Your city is destroyed, your husband dead; you are  
A prisoner. Shall we match our strength against one woman?  
We can. I hope, therefore, you will not feel inclined  
To struggle, or attempt anything unseemly, or  
Likely to cause resentment (137).

He beseeches Andromache not to attempt defiance against the Greek army single-handedly as it will only lead to her own demise. Talthybius goes further to insist that she refrain from speaking cruelly of the Greeks:
If you say anything to make the army angry, this child will receive
no mourning rites, no burial. If you are quiet,
and in proper spirit accept what comes to you,
you will not have to leave his body unburied, and
you’ll find the Achaeans more considerate to yourself (138).

The messenger endeavors to save Andromache from the pain of her child being denied a
proper burial. The heartbroken mother grieves before her baby is taken, saying,

You are crying. Do you understand? You tug my dress,
Cling to my fingers, nestling like a bird under
Its mother’s wing... You must leap from that sickening
Height, and fall, and break your neck, and yield your breath,
With none to pity you (138).

Talthybius then sadly remarks, “A job like this is fit for a man without feeling or decency; I’m
not half brutal enough” (138). After the child’s death, Andromache sails on to Greece, crying
out for Troy and calling on Hector’s grave. Her sobs bring tears to Talthybius’s eyes. She had
pleaded for Hecabe to be given her son’s dead body to care for. The messenger bathes him in
the stream and cleans his wounds. He digs a grave for a proper burial. The grief of the Trojan
women overwhelms him, and he does all that is in his power to alleviate what pain he can.

While he clearly sympathizes with the women, Talthybius will not stray from his orders.
He may hate his mission, but like soldiers throughout history, he must complete what his
superior officers’ demand of him. Talthybius is moved by the suffering around him, but orders
are the most important thing. When he believes that the women are attempting to “burn
themselves to death, rather than be brought back to Argos,” he commands, “Open the door,
there! This may suit the prisoners,” yet immediately follows with, “But our generals will be
annoyed, and they’ll blame me” (133). It is to his officers that his true allegiance lays, and not
with the Trojan women. This is also portrayed in his interactions with Andromache and her son when he takes him from his mother, stating,

Come, child; I pity your mother, but time is up.
No more embracing now.
You must climb to the topmost fringe of your father’s towers,
Where the sentence says you must leave your life behind.
Take him (138).

He may be haunted by decisions of the Greeks, but he will inevitably adhere to their wishes. Talthybius performs his duties with kindness and sympathy, such as preparing Andromache’s son for his burial. However, he notes to Hecabe, “If you and I both do our best to waste no time, we’ll soon be under way for home” (142). He will assist the women, but only to a certain extent. His first priority will always be to follow orders, regardless of what they instruct. While Talthybius continuously mentions his difficulty with his responsibilities, he seldom outwardly criticizes the warriors’ choices. With the exception of his bewilderment towards Agamemnon’s choice to take Cassandra, who exhibits signs of madness, as his concubine, Talthybius’s challenge lies in being the bearer of bad news, but not in struggling to accept the certainty of the actual decisions.

Talthybius’s statements allude to his perspective on the contrasting roles of men and women. It seems that while he can pity the misery inflicted by the Greek warriors’ commands, he accepts their strongly dominant role. He is touched by the women’s sadness; however, he expects complete submission. It appears that Talthybius imagines a woman’s assignment to a great man will induce some sense of gratitude and lessen the misery. When he informs Hecabe of Cassandra’s fate, her mother is gripped by sorrow and Talthybius replies, “Is it not good fortune that she is chosen for the king’s bed?” (132). He seems to focus primarily on her
owner’s high status; however King Agamemnon is just that - her owner. Her home, family, and
virginity will all be torn from her, and all that will remain for Cassandra is the man who burned
her life to the ground. Talthybius also has difficulty completely comprehending the survivors’
overwhelming dread of the future. When he believes the women are attempting to burn
themselves alive, he wonders, “Strange how intolerable the indignity of slavery is to those born
free” (133). It is true that he can pity their sorrow, but he cannot fully understand the gripping
fear of the terrifying and cruel strangers who overtake the defeated women. He recognizes the
inevitability of their fates and believes that their role must be to abide to the men’s commands.

Talthybius is a deeply sympathetic, yet dutiful and loyal messenger of the Greeks. He
attempts to ease the suffering that his mission inflicts upon Trojan women and children, the
most helpless victims of the male compulsion to engage in war. Talthybius’s compassion is
evident in his interactions with the Trojans, yet his underlying obedience persists as his primary
objective. Although he is saddened by the women’s downfall to the victors of the battle, he
follows the decisions of the Greek warriors as an unavoidable reality. Talthybius’s viewpoint of
gender roles in this war and its aftermath are clear - the Greek men are dominant and entitled
to anyone and anything, and the Trojan women are to be entirely obedient. While the
messenger does not play a central role in The Women of Troy, he is an essential character to
the development of the plot. By relating the orders of the Greeks, he provokes the
 corresponding reactions of the women. Without Talthybius, there would be no communication
between the conquerors and the conquered, and it would be then, and only then, that The
Women of Troy could be labeled as a play in which “‘nothing happens,’ plotless and static”
(106).
Works Cited