The first performance of *The Trojan Women* took place at the Festival of Dionysus in March of 415 BCE. This was only three months after Athenian troops sacked the small and strategically insignificant island of Melos. This small island had enraged the Athenian military commanders by withdrawing from the Delian league and declaring itself neutral. Fearing a domino effect, or more probably seeking a way to redeem themselves from recent military debacles, the Athenians colonize Melos, kill all men and enslave all women and children. With *The Trojan Women*, Euripides takes elements from the Trojan War and transposes them to the current situation, producing a strong condemnation of the politics of Athens during his time through the use of allegory. Though the characters of *The Trojan Women* are symbolic of events concerning the sack of Melos, the ideas that Euripides expresses in the play can be transposed to condemn the strong militarism that currently prevails in Athens.

The *casus belli* of the Trojan War is Helen: the Argives and the Achaeans ultimately fight a devastating nine-year war for a woman’s sake. Euripides subtly stresses this point in the play. Amid the suffering of Hecuba, who has to assist to the execution, physical and moral, of her children as well as subjects, enters Menelaus. He has finally come as a bringer of justice, considering that “the price of adultery is death” (Euripides l. 1032), and is determined to execute Helen. The trial that follows, in juxtaposition with
the atmosphere of suffering that the play conveys to the audience, is somewhat comical, especially since Helen’s fate has already been predetermined by Menelaus himself.

The absurdity of the trial scene is not unintentional. Just as Helen left Menelaus and fell for Paris, so does the island of Melos leave the Athenian alliance. As in the *Iliad* it was ultimately idiotic the way in which two parties fight a nine year war sparked by a woman’s adultery, Euripides claims that this is the case with Melos. The enslaving or killing of all inhabitants of a strategically insignificant island as a consequence of declaring neutrality is not very different from a costly conflict as a result for Helen leaving Menelaus.

As the allegorical role of Helen is slowly taking its form as a representation of Melos, it is legitimate to question what historical references the other characters draw to. Around the time Euripides wrote *The Trojan Women*, the Athenians had just been through a series of military losses. From an historical perspective, it was a time in which the military power of Athens had effectively been de-masculinated, in a society which greatly pondered the idea of manhood. The literature of the time reflects this general feeling, as is made unsubtly clear in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. In this play, by refusing to concede themselves to their men, the women of Athens force an end of the conflict. It is clear that Aristophanes’ message is that women detain power. Since plays were attended exclusively by males, playwrights were allowed to express these ideas, since there was no fear that women might acquire notion of their underlying power. *The Trojan Women* is also an example where women detain the power, not as much as for what they do, as for what they symbolize. While it is true that Helen does represent the island of Melos, it is nonetheless also true that Melos itself is represented by many of the other characters in
the play. What each and every one stands for, as a matter of fact, is a specific characteristic, or rather political value. This achieves a double meaning. On the one hand, Euripides stresses the same point that Aristophanes would stress four years later in *Lysistrata*: women detain the power (or, from a more satirical point of view, those who detain the power are women); on the other hand, the Athenians are seeking revenge and redemption for their loss of manhood by subjugating a group of apparently helpless women. Euripides therefore uses women to represent the political values or characteristics of Melos, those same values that the Athenians have marched upon.

The figure of Helen, therefore, does not encompass Melos in its entirety, but merely its politics. The mere decision of Melos to commit military adultery and leave Athens is symbolized by Helen. Other characters stand for different concepts. The figure of Astyanax, for instance, is also a representation of Melos, yet seen from a different angle that that of Helen. Euripides’ use of Astyanax has, once again, a double meaning. On a more superficial level, it recalls the audience to the enslaving of children that took place once Greek soldiers sacked Melos. On a deeper level, it is symbolic of the strategic insignificance of the island of Melos. From an historical perspective, the harm that Melos’ leaving the Delian league could cause to the Athenians is the same as the harm that Astyanax, as a youngsters, could cause to the Achaeans. Through the use of this defenseless character, whose fate has been decided by a greater force, Euripides argues that the takeover of Melos is purely symbolic: as it is stated in the play, “A hero’s son could to be allowed to live” (Euripides l. 1722). Astyanax, with regards to the Athenians, provides a façade to their own people: what is claimed to be “a hero’s son,” that is, and island that provides a negative example to allies and therefore must be punished as a
matter of principle, is in reality a senseless military campaign that came into existence after numerous military defeats. The fate of Astyanax therefore stands out not for what it is claimed to be, rather for what it really is: the brutal murder of a defenseless kid.

While the execution of a young kid is definitely a powerful device in the *Trojan Women*, there are other strong connections that can be drawn between the play and the historical context it was written in. The entire relationship between Cassandra, Hecuba, and Talthybius is an example of this. Cassandra is Hecuba’s daughter. As such, she is the daughter of the dethroned queen of Troy. Hecuba has been stripped of her position just as Melos itself has been deinstitutionalized of its power to make decisions. Cassandra is therefore the representation of a doomed future. She represents the liberty and the hope of Melos. Euripides could be drawing references to Thucydides’ *Melian Dialogue* in several parts of *The Trojan Women*. For example, as a dialogue is composed by the alternation of two speakers, it is plausible that Talthybius could be a reference to this historical piece. He is the ambassador of the Achaean forces and, as such, the bearer of the horrible sentences that are being proclaimed with regards to the characters of the play. His constant entering and exiting the scene recalls the literary style of a dialogue. As Hecuba and Andromache plead Talthybius to lessen the sentences for their loved ones, the latter is impotent before these requests. In the same way, the attitude of the Athenians in the *Melian Dialogue* is representative of a unilateral policy-making process, which leaves very little or no space to compromise and diplomacy. For the people of Melos to discuss with the Athenians produces the same results as for Hecuba to plead pity to Talthybius: the notion that the Achaean have made up their mind.
In the *Melian Dialogue*, the liberty and hope of Melos are at stake, just as Cassandra’s fate is at stake. The conditions that the Athenians impose to the island of Melos are the same conditions that are being imposed to Cassandra. Melos is not be allowed to be a neutral friend, but a subjugated island or, if they persist in seeking neutrality, a repressed colony. The future of Melos is therefore one that is most dishonorable from a political perspective. In the same way, Cassandra has been destined to be Agamemnon’s mistress, a punishment that is equally dishonorable. Melos and Cassandra are both doomed to become Athens’ concubine. Polyxena, Andromache’s daughter, has instead been sacrificed to honor Achilles. Cassandra, Polyxena, and Astyanax can all be placed into one group of characters, that of offspring. Their killing is significant for two main reasons. On the one hand, it once again stresses the historical facts that have occurred during the sack of Melos, that is, the brutal enslavement of kids. On the other hand, as offspring are symbolic of the future and hope of a people, it emphasizes how Melos has been condemned to a tragic fate.

The relationships between the historical events and concepts concerning the sack of Melos and the characters of *The Trojan Women* are clear and support the claim that this particular play is an allegorical work. Yet, despite the use of strong, powerful images such as the killing of children, they alone are not enough to categorize *The Trojan Women* as an anti-war play. However, Euripides builds the entire plot against an event that is ultimately a condemnation of what the Athenians did at Melos. In the first scenes of the play, the goddess Athena, whose temple has been dishonored by Greek soldiers, requests Poseidon that he make the Achaeans journey back home not an easy one. Poseidon will not limit himself to impede their return home, rather he will strike with a
deadly storm once their journey is well under way. It is understood by the audience that the likelihood of survival is very improbable. An impressive dramatic irony is therefore in effect all throughout the play. While the Athenians decide on the fate of every single character, the audience is aware that everything is futile, that everybody is going to die once they leave for Athens. As an ultimate act of condemnation on Euripides part, the last line of the play sees the characters heading towards the ships: the playwright has condemned them to death. His claim is that the sack of Melos was a barbaric act, for which the Athenians will be punished by a greater force.

An ironic integration to the allegory of The Trojan Woman is provided by history. As a matter of fact, Euripides was quite insightful in predicting godly revenge towards the Athenians. Only several weeks after the first public performance of his play, the Athenians launched a military expedition to Syracuse, which ended with a massive defeat for the Greeks. Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, on the useless suffering caused by war, might have been in part inspired by this.

Works Cited

- Aristophanes, Lysistrata, translated by Jeffrey Henderson.
- Euripides, The Trojan Women, translated by Richmond Lattimore.
- Homer, The Iliad, translated by Robert Fagles.
- Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, translated by Walter Blanco.