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Promotional Poster for Cacoyannis' Trojan Women (1971)

Studying Greek Tragedy is not Always a Tragedy



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Since I had studied Greek in high school, I naively felt qualified to enroll in the Hellenic Traditions Seminar in my freshman year at Holy Cross (in 1968–69). The topic of this two-semester seminar was Aeschylus, probably the most difficult of the surviving Greek tragedians to read, and we were expected to read all seven surviving plays, in Greek not in English! And the climax of the seminar was a public examination of the class by two or three formidable classicists from other colleges and universities. Fortunately, the instructor, Werner Loewy, was a kind and understanding professor who nurtured and encouraged everyone in the class, including me. I worked hard and learned a lot of Greek that year. By the end of that academic year I was hooked on Greek and glad that I had declared a major in Classics. One of the seniors enrolled in that seminar, I should add, was Ken Kitchell. As a lowly freshman, I could only look up to the seniors like Ken and never dreamed that forty years later he and I would collaborate, as Classics professors, in writing an elementary Latin course for college students (*Disce!*) This eventual collaboration with Ken is my first reason for suggesting that “Studying Greek Tragedy is not Always a Tragedy.”

In my last year at Holy Cross (1970–71) I was again enrolled in the Hellenic Tradition Seminar, this time dedicated to reading the seven extant tragedies of Sophocles. By then I was a much more confident, if not proficient, Greek student but was still intimidated by the fact that the instructor was a new face, a Holy Cross alumnus and newly-minted Ph.D from Johns Hopkins, named William Ziobro. Coming right out of graduate school, Bill Ziobro had very high expectations and pushed us hard. Somehow we were able to meet his demands and the seminar was a success. It was especially successful for me, because Bill Ziobro nurtured my thoughts about applying to graduate school in Classics and encouraged me to apply to his alma mater. Much to my astonishment, I was not only accepted at Hopkins but was also offered a very attractive three-year NDEA scholarship which was impossible to turn

down. I am sure, in retrospect, that Bill Ziobro's letter of recommendation for me had a lot to do with my acceptance by Hopkins. So that's my second reason for suggesting that "Studying Greek Tragedy is not Always a Tragedy."

But the tragedy saga continued Hopkins. In second semester (1972) I enrolled in a course on Euripides taught by Marsh McCall, a young scholar from Harvard and an expert on Greek tragedy. Although I had never read Euripides in Greek, my years in the Hellenic Tradition Seminar at Holy Cross had well prepared me for a graduate course in Greek tragedy and I found McCall's Euripides course much to my liking. One of the assignments for this course was to write a paper on some aspect of Euripides' plays. I chose the *Trojan Women*, a play about the aftermath of the Trojan War and the fate of the women who survived the destruction of the city: Cassandra, the insane Trojan princess; Andromache, the widow of Hector, Hecuba, the queen of Troy, and also Helen, the wife of the Greek king Menelaus whose elopement with the Trojan prince Paris had led to the war. In particular, I became fascinated with the play's chorus, consisting of a group of women from the city and decided to focus my work on an analysis of the songs which the chorus sing in the tragedy.

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Fortuitously, Michael Cacoyannis' 1971 screenplay of the *Trojan Women* was playing in Baltimore just as I was working on my paper and I was determined to see it. The film has an incredible cast: Katherine Hepburn as Hecuba, Vanessa Redgrave as Andromache, Geneviève Bujold as Cassandra,

and Irene Papas as Helen of Troy. I asked a graduate student in the French Department if she would like to see the film with me and she agreed. I didn't think that through very well. That film was really not an ideal one to see on a first date. Or was it? The screenplay was so well-done and so sad, that Anne spent most of the film in tears and clinging to my arm. The rest is history because several weeks later she and I were engaged to be married in June. This marriage has survived raising three children and has now lasted 49 years, so Cacoyannis' film must have created a powerful bond. This is my third, and probably most important, reason for suggesting that "Studying Greek Tragedy is not Always a Tragedy."

My wife actually has a different memory of that first date. She says that I mentioned to her that I was going to see the film and she asked to tag along because she'd like to see it, too. She says that I'd asked her out to see "Wait Until Dark" several weeks earlier and she'd declined because she had to babysit, and claims I would have hesitated to ask her out again. She admits to being in tears during the film but not grabbing my arm. I like my version better.

She also reminded me that while we took the bus downtown from the Homewood campus to the movie theatre, we walked all the way back to campus in deep conversation about the film and who knows what else.

So, I eventually produced for that Euripides' course a paper on the parodos and first choral ode of the play. My thesis was that the chorus was a coherent dramatic character and that the choral songs were not detached from the plot as several scholars had suggested, but central to the play's meaning.

This leads me to my final reason for suggesting that "Studying Greek Tragedy is not Always a Tragedy." My work on this play eventually led to my proposal

to make the *Trojan Women* the subject of my doctoral dissertation. March McCall agreed to be my thesis advisor and on April 28, 1975, the day before my 25th birthday I successfully defended a thesis entitled “Euripides’ *Trojan Women*: An Interpretative Study based upon the Role of the Chorus and Ironic Development,” in which I argued that the play was not part of a connected trilogy, as many scholars had suggested, and that the chorus was actually the main character in the play.

So I hope that I have made a persuasive argument that “Studying Greek Tragedy is not Always a Tragedy.” In my case it led to a Ph.D., a Latin textbook, and a marriage which has lasted 49 years, so far.

Euripides +

Trojan Women +

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