

ἐρημόπολις μάτηρ: Hecuba's politics of care in Euripides' *Trojan Women*

In Homer's *Iliad*, when Hector returns to the city of Troy to find his mother, Hecuba's first response is not traditional maternal concern, but dismay over what his absence means for the city. Hecuba's interest in the safety of the city supersedes her more intimate follow-up offer of a mid battle snack: "Child, why have you left the fierce fighting and come here? Surely the hateful sons of the Achaeans are gaining ground fighting around the city!" (τέκνον τίπτε λιπὼν πόλεμον θρασὺν εἰλήλουθας; / ἧ μάλα δὴ τείρουσι δυσώνυμοι υἱεὺς Ἀχαιῶν /μαρνάμενοι περὶ ἄστρῳ, 254-56). Euripides expands on Hecuba's political interests in *Trojan Women*, a play in which Hecuba appears fixated on the polis of Troy, or what is left of it. While the majority of the Trojan women including Hecuba spend a good deal of the play bemoaning their individual losses, Hecuba always returns to the shared communal disaster and offers the women reason to hope for something better in the future. Throughout the play her Janus-like gaze looks backwards to commemorate her great losses but also forward to consider how she and her bereaved daughters (both biological and chosen) might build a future out of so much devastation. Although scholars commonly read Hecuba as emblematic of a woman destroyed by grief and consumed by her suffering (Rabinowitz 2016, Hall 2010, Scodel 1998) or as preoccupied with revenge and destruction (Zanotti 2019, Meridor 1978), this paper observes that her maternal grief has a political agenda: acting as a mother to the other women, Hecuba fosters what is left of the Trojan community, even in diaspora.

To this end, this paper makes use of contemporary feminist care ethics as a critical lens through which to better parse Hecuba's political motherhood. Care ethics, which grew out of the early women's movement, has often taken mothers as paradigm moral agents (Gilligan 1982,

Noddings 1984), whose caring attitudes and practices towards vulnerable others stand in stark contrast to the dominant, masculinist, and universalist ethics of utilitarianism (J. S. Mill) and deontology (Kant). However, maternal-focused care ethics has often faced a challenge: critics argue that an emphasis on motherhood renders the ethical insights it generates parochial, narrowly focused on a caregiver's primary allegiances without the resources to explain an appropriate level of moral concern for more distant others (Tronto 1995; Robinson 1999). Some have even alleged that maternal ethics will allow for favoritism among an agent's closest relations (Friedman 2006). In response, care ethicists have shown that motherly attitudes and practices easily extend to the political/global level (Held 2006). In Hecuba's example, we locate an example that challenges a contemporary assumption at the heart of this debate – the notion that motherhood is properly conceived of as a personal relation *first*, a relation whose attitudes and insights might be usefully extended to the political sphere. Hecuba is different: her motherhood is conceived of as a political relation *first*. She is the mother of a *polis*, before she is mother to any individual. For this reason, Hecuba may serve as an ethically transformative paradigm both for contemporary discussions of the nature of motherhood and contemporary maternal-care ethical investigations that look to mothers for ethical insight.

Works Cited

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