

## Euripides' *Hecuba* as Imperial Drama

Critics are divided on the character of Hecuba as victimized mother who rightfully avenges her son's death and those who argue for Hecuba's moral deterioration over the course of the play's two movements, sacrifice and revenge (e.g., Heath 1986, Gregory 1991, Mossman 1995). Less attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which the historical background informs Hecuba's revenge in light of the *Hecuba*'s focus on the protection due prisoners of war and the treatment of the vanquished (Dué 1996, Gregory 1999, Mitchell-Boyask 1993). The play's dating in the latter half of the 420's places it a few years after the revolt at Mytilene in the course of which the Athenian demos first decided to kill the male population and enslave the women and children and then voted to rescind the earlier decision (Thuc. 3. 36-49).

Seen against the background of Athenian violence against its subjects, the power the Greeks wield over the life and death of their female captives in the play approximates Hecuba's plight in particular with that of the allies, victims of imperial domination. Polymestor, on the other hand, can be seen as playing the part of the subservient king-ally of the Greeks. This triangular relationship in which the strong abuse powerless victims and maintain alliances of profit and interest with the morally corrupt, provides the framework for relating the characters' use and abuse of power to the inequalities of status between Athenians and their subjects in the present. The weight of this argument is borne out by a political analysis that punctuates two pivotal scenes: Hecuba's supplication of Odysseus after the assembly of the Greek army and the trial scene with Agamemnon after Polymestor's blinding and the murder of his children. Both debates contain elements that refer to institutions of decision-making under Athens'

imperial democracy in the 420s. I approximate for the purposes of this reading the army's assembly to the Athenian Assembly and the trial debate of Hecuba to the allied trials judged by Athenian courts. The Athenian Assembly was the main instrument for shaping foreign policy and passed a number of measures, affecting the sovereignty of the allies. By the 420s, moreover, Athenian courts heard cases of homicide, exile and treason from allied cities (Ant. *On the Murder of Herodes* 5.47; Xen. [*Ath. Pol.*] 1. 16).

*Hecuba* evokes the shortcomings and flaws of Athens' imperial democracy—demagoguery, the rule of violence and the devaluation of justice; but the play's searching interrogation of Athenian politics formulates the ethical breaches, committed by the Greek army and its leaders, in terms that expose the shortcomings of Athenian hegemonic ideology and its cherished ideals of justice, compassion and moderation (Mills 1997). Such ideals were encased in Athenian political myths that celebrated the help Athens granted defenseless suppliants, as in Euripides' *Suppliants*, a play contemporaneous with *Hecuba*. Theseus' pious acceptance of the suppliants, for example, lays claim to a favorable depiction of Athens as a generous city that punished evildoers. Hecuba's failed supplication to Odysseus mirrors the opposite of the image of mythical Athens as protector of suppliants. Odysseus' rejection of Hecuba's deserving claims to *charis* (and similarly Agamemnon's subsequent rejection of her plea for help against Polymestor) shatters the illusion that the powerful abet the weak.

By relating war crimes to ethical violations, committed against suppliants and *xenoi*, Hecuba's advocacy on behalf of the vanquished expands the play's anti-imperial narrative. Lending her voice to and speaking on behalf of the captive female slaves, enemies of the Greeks, at the imperial outpost of the Thracian Chersonese, she also

speaks for Athens' subjects whose voice went largely unheard. I will argue in greater detail that the analysis of Hecuba's rhetorical agency in the two supplications scenes contributes to the making of the play's counterhegemonic discourse. I intend to show that Hecuba's character contributes to our understanding of the role of marginal, subaltern figures in Euripides' plays and of their relation to tragic politics.

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