κεῖμαι δ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἀκταῖς, ἄλλοτ᾽ ἐν πόντου σάλῳ: Exploring *Hecuba*'s Symbolic Landscape

When the eponymous heroine of Euripides' *Hecuba* first enters view, she requires the physical support of her fellow captive Trojan women to stand and walk. Her inability to support herself without these women has been interpreted as a somatic manifestation of the psychosocial instability that the destruction of her city, society, and family has caused her (e.g., Zeitlin 1995: 184 and Tarkow 1984). This moment is only the most obvious instance in a system of visual, linguistic, and topographic signs that Polydorus establishes in the prologue, that pervades every episode and stasimon, and that Polymestor's sentencing and prophecies at the end of the play extend past the staged events. Repurposing semantic relationships already prevalent in archaic poetry, *Hecuba* defines two antithetical semantic clusters: it associates the integrity of social and ethical structures with physical autonomy, stability, and terrestriality on the one hand and the disintegration or absence of those same structures with the loss of physical autonomy, instability or caducity, and wateriness on the other. Despite how pervasively *Hecuba* employs this system, scholarly analyses have not examined its function in the drama, perhaps because it leans so heavily on familiar motifs or perhaps because, compared with Aeschylus, Euripides has been thought to avoid using imagery extensively (Barlow 2008).

This paper will explore how *Hecuba*'s widespread application of this system does not simply help generate a sense of poetic coherence in a tragedy that was long maligned for having a disjointed plot and supposedly tangential choral odes, but more importantly how the consistent way in which the play arranges the system's images helps it convey a coherent view of human suffering. Every character's suffering is, at one point or another, identified literally or metaphorically with land failing to provide the security and stability with which it is expected to protect people from the misfortunes associated with the sea. In some cases land itself exposes

people to water surreptitiously. As a result, when characters suffer in the play, they are depicted as either existing in an amphibious state or inhabiting an amphibious space.

The seminal instance of this dynamic teaches the audience programmatically how to construe it later. When Polydorus provides the play's backstory in the prologue, he couches Troy's "fall" (11, 16-17, 478), Polymestor's betrayal, and his own death in language of stability, instability, land, and sea. His account characterizes the security offered by his native Trojan land and the social structures correlated with it as illusory. The security proffered by the Chersonesian land to which Polydorus was sent, however, proved to be a ruse that lured his gullible parents into handing him over to a social transgressor who exploited the appearance of ethical tenets in order subvert them and satiate his own greed at the cost of Polydorus's life. Soon thereafter, Hecuba unwittingly clarifies the imagery of Polydorus's account by recapitulating it in more metaphoric terms. She prays to "Mistress Ground" (70) and the "chthonic gods" (78) to protect her children by preserving the guest-friendship that presumably safeguards Polydorus. She uses a ship-of-state metaphor (78-81) in which the only thing keeping her family (the ship) from being completely adrift on the sea is Polydorus, who, as the ship's anchor, roots it to the ground under the sea. Hecuba identifies the seabed's tenor as "snowy Thrace," land contaminated by water. As the audience already knows, Polymestor's guest-friendship lured Hecuba into subjecting Polydorus to the same asocial violence it was supposed to protect him from. When the ethical structures that should protects a society's constituents actually serve the opposite function, betraying them to scoundrels eager to commit terrible crimes in order to satiate their own emotions or appetites for power, social order and asocial disorder do not simply coexist but become to a certain extent undifferentiated. Land and sea coextend.

The regularity with which the characters who suffer in *Hecuba*—Polydorus, Polyxena,

Hecuba, the chorus, Polymestor, and Agamemnon—are all marked by parallel amphibious imagery characterizes their miseries as iterations of this same fundamental problem, a problem that, according to Thucydides (3.82-84), plagued Greece in the mid-420s, the period during which *Hecuba* was almost certainly composed. By setting the play on the shore of the Chersonese, a narrow peninsula of land jutting out into the sea, Euripides has made this dynamic fundamental to the very space in which the events unfold and so endemic the human experience he has his audience imagine.

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