

Falling on Deaf Ears: Traumatic Loss of Language in Euripides' *Hecuba*

Recent scholarship has detailed the rhetorical prowess of Euripides' *Hecuba*, whose *agones* in the eponymous tragedy should show her rightfully victorious, but ultimately result in her defeat in two of three contests (Kastely 1993). Her progressive response to her declining fortunes has been characterized as a "moral decline," reflected in the argumentative shift in her *agon* with Agamemnon to include his attachment to Cassandra and subsequent murder of Polymestor's children (Lloyd 1992). However, *Hecuba*'s limited success with rhetoric and eventual replacement of words by violent action are better characterized as a physical expression and manifestation of trauma consistent with Cathy Caruth's description of traumatic narratives as "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (Caruth 1996). In this paper, I argue that the *Hecuba* dramatizes externally *Hecuba*'s traumatic narrative in her shift from speech to violent action. Her lack of success rhetorically is not only the result of her victimhood, but a byproduct of how trauma renders narratives incommunicable to those outside of its effects.

Hecuba is the "embodiment of Trojan suffering" and a consistent presence on stage throughout the play, which establishes all dramatic action in relation to her character (Lloyd 94, 1992). In her *agones* with Odysseus and Agamemnon, she relives her wartime experiences in an attempt to engender empathy for herself. In Odysseus' case, she recalls how she spared him when he came, disguised, to Troy. In her *agon* with Agamemnon, she appeals to the authority of divine law, a standard already violated by the Greeks in her husband Priam's death on the altar of Zeus. The relative ease with which these two men rebuff *Hecuba*'s pleas indicates the

fundamental opposition of their wartime experiences as victors to Hecuba's and highlights the inaccessibility of her traumatic experience.

In response to the verbal incommunicability of her trauma, Hecuba forces a physical parallel to her experience through the murder of Polymestor's sons. Hecuba's "success" therein depends ironically upon her desertion of rhetorical argument and use of deceit and murder. Her overall experience "rewards" the perversion of formerly socially positive aspects of her nature - her rhetorical prowess and maternal instinct - with retributive justice only achieved extra-legally and by her own hands. This hinges on her loss of power in speech, and signals "civilized" society's failure to respond to her as it would have to her previous identity as a Trojan queen.

Physical manifestations of Hecuba's trauma are reflected in the episodes of her children's deaths, beginning with the appearance of Polydorus' ghost at the start of the play, whose opening speech is strikingly similar to the entrance of Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*. The ghost of Polydorus, as Hecuba's loss embodied, personifies a pervasive driving force of the narrative similar to Dionysus': the spirit of loss, treachery, and grief animating dramatic action, whose presence drives on Hecuba's search for justice and motivation towards murder. The final transformation of Hecuba into dog can be simply taken as a final degradation, or perhaps the reification of her fierce maternal instinct. However, I argue that it combines both the embodiment of maternal ferocity as well as the loss of authoritative speech: a dog can make noise but elicit no response to its desires.

The reading of the *Hecuba* as a dramatization of psychological trauma illuminates our understanding of her experience in terms of wartime experience and victimhood, rather than a "moral decline." It also opens up possible interdisciplinary comparisons with the experiences of

trauma victims such as military PTSD victims who express criminal behavior as the result of internalized and externalized symptoms (Traynham et al. 2019).

Bibliography

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