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HECUBA'S REVENGE SOME OBSERVATIONS ON EURIPIDES' *HECUBA*

The *Hecuba* was one of the most admired tragedies of Euripides throughout antiquity.¹ While it is generally agreed that, for the composition of this play, Euripides availed himself of two independent stories relating to the sufferings of Hecuba—the sacrifice of her daughter Polyxena and the murder of her son Polydorus—and added to them the story of Hecuba's revenge on the murderer of her son, the Thracian Polymestor, opinions differ about the nature and the meaning of this combination.² All differences of opinion notwithstanding, it is evident that the vengeance which Hecuba exacts from Polymestor is given special emphasis by its final position. This vengeance is mostly regarded as an odious act of fury performed by a devilish creature,³ a view which seems to be confirmed by the prophecy about Hecuba's impending death in the shape of a bitch mentioned near the end of the play (1259ff.).

However, a number of details concerning the representation of Hecuba's revenge seem to indicate that Euripides intended her act to be regarded in a different light; this may be of importance to the interpretation of the tragedy as a whole.

τιμωρός, *τιμωρέω* and *τιμωρέομαι* are used six times in this play (749-50, 756, 789-90, 842-43, 882, 1258), all by Hecuba and all in connection with the action taken against Polymestor to revenge the murder of Polydorus.⁴ Both the frequency and the

¹ The *Hecuba* was included in the selection of the ten annotated plays and was also one of the Byzantine triad.

² For a short selective review see J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (1967) 146, note 1.

³ e.g. "teuflische Bosheit" (U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Griech. Tragödien* III, 267), "kind of devil" (G. Murray, *Euripides and his Age* [1913] 89), "wilde Rachsucht," "teuflische Entschlossenheit" (M. Pohlenz, *Gr. Tragödie*² [1954] 279-81), "avenging demon" (A. Lesky, *History of Gr. Literature* [1966] 373-74), "mad fury" (T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* [1967] 124).

⁴ Some critics infer from the plural in 750 that Hecuba wishes to make Polymestor pay for the death of all her sons killed in the war, or at least for that of

exclusiveness of the usage seem significant, seeing that *τιμωρός* and its derivatives occur rather rarely in the plays of Euripides⁵ and, moreover, that words of this group are entirely absent from the part concerning Polyxena in the *Hecuba* as well as from the *Trojan Women* which, like the *Hecuba*, deals with the aftermath of the fall of Troy through the presentation of the fates of Hecuba and members of her family. In classical Athens no less than in archaic Greece "when a person was killed . . . the killed person had suffered a wrong . . . and required . . . *τιμωρία*, and it was the duty of his family to obtain it for him."⁶ Therefore *τιμωρός* and its derivatives could obviously not be used in the episodes of Polyxena and the *Trojan Women*, as the atrocities suffered there were committed in the context of war. On the other hand, it stands to reason that when an Athenian audience heard Hecuba apply words from the *τιμωρός*-group to the action against Polymestor, she would be understood as fighting for her right to do her duty by her child, the only of her many sons not killed in action but foully murdered.⁷

Equally important as the words of the *τιμωρός*-group seems to be *δίκη* in the expression *δίκην δίδόναι* (or *ὑπέχειν*) which, again, occurs in the *Hecuba* only after Polydorus' body is found, but then frequently. This expression implies the action of a judge⁸ and is so used when Hecuba tries to induce

Polyxena. However, the use of the plural for the singular is often found in Greek tragedy (See Schwyzer II, 45-46) and this episode is explicitly concerned with avenging Polydorus only (760ff.; see also 1256 + 1258). Note that the plural is used by Hecuba also to refer to herself (798), to the murderer (756), to Agamemnon (1237).

⁵ Allen and Italie in their *Concordance to the Writings of Euripides* (1954) cite a total of 37 instances of the use of *τιμωρός*, *τιμωρία*, *τιμωρέω* (act. and middle) in all the plays and fragments.

⁶ D. M. MacDowell, *The Athenian Homicide Law in the Age of the Orators* (1963) 1.

⁷ In the *Iliad* Polydorus is not the son of Hecuba (22.46-48) and he is killed in action long before the fall of Troy (20.407-18). The Euripidean version is not known so far from any other source. It may be worthwhile to recall in this context that the Thracian Polymestor, Polydorus' murderous host, is not mentioned anywhere else.

⁸ R. Hirzel, *Themis, Dike und Verwandtes* (1907) 178 note 1: ". . . indem sie vom Richter verhängt wurde verwandelte sich die Rache in Strafe und konnte nun erst *δίκη* heissen."

Agamemnon to act on her own and her murdered son's behalf (803) by reminding him of the duty of the ruler in upholding justice in society. The application of this expression to what is due (or given) to Hecuba from Polymestor, first by Agamemnon himself (853), and then by the chorus (1024), Hecuba (1052-53, 1274) and Polymestor (1253) seems intended to represent "Hecuba's Revenge" as an official act of justice, while each occurrence of the usage also carries special weight in its own context. When, e.g., the chorus use it in 1024 they believe that Polymestor will pay with his own life for his crime (1032-33), as was assumed by Agamemnon, too (856). But Hecuba decided on death for the murderer's children and blinding for the murderer himself, and it is with emphasis that she uses the same expression for the retribution exacted from him (1052-53 after 1045ff. esp. 1048). And when Polymestor himself, at the end of the *ἀγών λόγων* (1130ff.), uses *δίκη* for what he suffered (1253), it is in acceptance of Agamemnon's sentence against him.⁹ This reflects back on the court-atmosphere of that "trial after execution" and suggests that Hecuba's revenge is a legal punishment.

The action taken against Polymestor is made to look compatible with fifth-century Athenian concepts of justice and legal procedure: Hecuba, far from craving personal revenge on Polymestor, expects Agamemnon to act on behalf of justice as well as on her own behalf (787-845, esp. 803ff., 789-90, 842-43). Agamemnon refuses to do so, although he agrees in principle that her claim is just (852ff.), and reluctantly consents to assist her provided he does not suffer in consequence (861-63). Only now does she undertake to act on her own. Even so, according to her own plan and contrary to Agamemnon's expectations (876ff.), not she herself but the Trojan women will be the executioners of her revenge (882). And indeed, when her plan is carried out, Hecuba does not with her own hand perpetrate either the killing of Polymestor's children (1161-62)¹⁰ or his blinding (1167-71).¹¹ This agrees with the spirit of Attic law

⁹ Note the future (*ὑπέξω* . . . *δίκην*) when his children are already killed and he blinded; = "I shall bear as penalty, without trying to exact vengeance"; cf. 1125ff.

¹⁰ From 1161-62 it follows that *ἔκτεινα* in 1046 and 1051 = "I sentenced to death" or "I had (them) killed"; cf. Pl. *Apol.* 39c4:38d1-2.

¹¹ 1169-71 is in striking contrast with Ovid. *Metam.* 13.560ff.; the latter description may have influenced Hecuba's image ever since.

which specifically forbade to hand over a convicted murderer to the injured party.¹²

In addition, the principle that the wrongdoer must suffer is repeatedly stated in the story of Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor. While it is formulated differently according to the different contexts in which it is found, it is always conspicuous by its position, as (a) (844-45) at the end of Hecuba's long persuasive speech, as its culminating argument; (b) (902-4) at the end of the entire episodion as Agamemnon's reason for granting Hecuba's request; (c) (1086) immediately after the revenge has been carried out, as the chorus evaluates the deed; (d) (1250-51) at the end of the *ἀγῶν λόγων* (which takes the place of the regular trial procedure familiar to classical Athens) as the reason for Agamemnon's decision against Polymestor.

The solemn and emphatic reiteration of this commonly held principle cannot have been intended to drive home a new truth or to convince the audience to take sides on a controversial issue. When Euripides stresses this notion in conjunction with *δίκη* in its first occurrence (844) and *δικαίως* in its last (1254) he probably wanted to induce his audience to regard the action on stage as one to which this principle should and, after the execution, could be applied.

But the poet has also other ways of prompting the audience to side with Hecuba:

In the meeting between Hecuba and Polymestor (953-1022), where she lures him and his sons into the tent where the captive women of Troy are ready for revenge, Polymestor is all lies, flattery and greed. Had Euripides wished to stir the slightest feeling of pity toward him, he would have granted Polymestor some redeeming feature, as he did to other characters in other plays.¹³

¹² Dem. 23.69: ἀν δὲ δόξη τὰ δίκαι' ἐγκαλεῖν καὶ ἔλη τὸν δεδρακότα τοῦ φόνου, οὐδ' οὕτω κύριος γίγνεται τοῦ ἀλόντος, ἀλλ' ἐκείνου μὲν οἱ νόμοι κύριοι κολάσαι καὶ οἷς προστέτακται, τῷ δ' ἐπιθεῖν διδόντα δίκην ἔξεστιν, ἦν ἔταξ' ὁ νόμος, τὸν ἀλόντα, πέρα δ' οὐδὲν τούτου. The Trojan women here serve in a way as οἷς προστέτακται (sc. κολάσαι).

¹³ e.g.: Jason in *Med.* 866-975 is different from Jason of 446-626, so that after 866-975, at 989ff., the chorus for the first time express concern for him; this guides the audience to disassociate themselves partially from Medea and to feel some sympathy for Jason at the end. Similarly Pentheus in the *Bacchae* arouses sympathy just before disaster befalls him; see also Dodds on *Bacch.* 973-76.

Nowhere is Hecuba described as a barbarian, while Polymestor is accused by Agamemnon of barbaric behaviour when he tries to attack Hecuba and revenge himself on her (1127-29). Hecuba's act, therefore, does not place her outside of civilized society.

Hecuba's transformation into a bitch prophesied in 1265 is often interpreted as a symbolic condemnation of her treatment of the murderer of her son. But closer examination of this prophecy in its context suggests another interpretation:

Polymestor (1259-81) predicts that (a) Hecuba will be covered by the sea (1259) when she falls from a mast-top (1261) whither she will arrive (by climbing?) (1263) having turned into a fiery-eyed bitch (1265); this fall will apparently be her end (1270-71), as her tomb,¹⁴ named in memory of her shape at the time of her end, will serve as a signpost to sailors (1271-73); (b) Cassandra also will die (1275), killed by Agamemnon's wife (1277); (c) Agamemnon too will be killed by his wife who will perpetrate the murder with an axe (1279) in Argos, while he takes his bath (1281).

Prophecies dealing with the future of participants in the dramatic action are found also in many other plays of Euripides between the conclusion of the plot and the actors' final departure from the stage. In these passages Euripides re-establishes his heroes in the world of traditional myth by revealing some detail or details of what they will do or of what will happen to them, often in connection with still existing rituals, customs, institutions, names of places,¹⁵ etc., claimed to have originated from the plot. To give it acceptance, this revelation of the future comes either from the mouth of a *deus ex machina*, a human with superhuman powers,¹⁶ or one who, while not himself possessed of such powers, relates the prophecy of an acknowledged authority.¹⁷

¹⁴ This *τύμβος* cannot be her sepulchre as she will have drowned.

¹⁵ Compare with the explanation of the name *Κυνὸς Σῆμα* here that of the name *Ταυροπόλος* in *IT* 1453-57.

¹⁶ Thus Medea in the play of that name; the fact that she is on the chariot of the Sun, her ancestor, confers occult powers on her.

¹⁷ Compare with Polymestor here who prophesies in the name of "Dionysus prophet of the Thracians" (1276) (and not, as stated in *OCD*³ s.v. 'Euripides' IV 9, is himself "suddenly allowed to develop prophetic powers"), Eurystheus in the *Heracleidae* who transmits the oracle of Loxias (*Heracleid.* 1028ff.) and

Since the prophecies of Polymestor in the *Hecuba* belong to this category and all of them fulfill the same function, the particulars about Hecuba's end ought to be treated like those about the ends of Agamemnon and Cassandra. From the way in which Euripides alludes to them it would seem that he is using current legend in both cases. We know that neither this death of Agamemnon and Cassandra, which is familiar to us from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, nor that of Hecuba, which we do not know from any other source,¹⁸ was the only version available to the poet.¹⁹ Consequently, it seems that not more can be inferred for the meaning of the play from Euripides' choice of this specific end of Hecuba than is inferred for the same purpose from that of Agamemnon and Cassandra.

Moreover, if Hecuba's metamorphosis is viewed in its context, it becomes clear that the prophecies of Polymestor have a common denominator: all those responsible for what was done to Polymestor—Hecuba who took her revenge, Agamemnon who let her have her revenge, and Cassandra for whose sake he let Hecuba have her revenge—will die soon²⁰

Polyphemus in the *Cyclops* who quotes a *παλαιὸς χρησμός* already proven true by the realization of one part of its twofold prediction (*Cyc.* 696ff.).

¹⁸ It may be worthwhile to recall that not only is this version of Hecuba's end not known from any other source, but also the story of the murder of Polydorus by Polymestor; see note 7.

¹⁹ As to Agamemnon:

according to other preserved traditions he was murdered by Aegisthus (*Od.* 1.36+299); by Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus together, on his throne (7th c. illustration), with a sword (6th c. illustration); by Clytaemnestra alone with a sword (Pind. *Pyth.* 11.20). For the illustrations see K. Schefold, *Myth and Legend in Early Greek Art* (1966) fig. 43 + plate 33, and text on p. 94.

As to Hecuba:

(a) death: (1) according to Stesichorus (Paus. 10.27.2) she was transferred by Apollo to Lycia; from this follows that her death neither followed the fall of Troy nor occurred on the Hellespont; (2) according to a scholium to Lycophron 1181 (which, however, need not refer to pre-Euripidean tradition) she was stoned to death by the Greeks (place and reason not stated).

(b) metamorphosis: many, mostly late, testimonies; see Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* ed. J. G. Frazer (Loeb Class. Libr.) 1963 II, 241 note 4; none of them seems to connect the metamorphosis either with prior revolting behaviour or with consequent death.

²⁰ The existence of an early tradition according to which Hecuba's death did

and a violent death.²¹ This observation, too, points to the conclusion that Hecuba's transformation into a bitch should not be treated in isolation and, consequently, should not be taken as a moral evaluation of her revenge.

It should also be borne in mind that the metamorphosis of human beings into animals in similar contexts—as that of Cadmus and Harmonia into serpents prophesied at the end of the *Bacchae* (*Bacch.* 1330ff.)—is not considered to express any similarity between man and animal, or any moral evaluation of the human being.

Last but not least it seems worthwhile to point out that, whether Euripides was the first to identify the *Κυνὸς Σῆμα* near the Hellespont with the tomb of Hecuba²² or not, the underlying equation Hecuba = *κύων* is here already taken for granted: what is aetiologically explained in Polymestor's prophecy is not how Hecuba and *κύων* but how the *Κυνὸς Σῆμα* near the Hellespont and the *Ἐκάβης τύμβος* came to be one and the same.

It thus seems that in presenting the story of Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor Euripides guided his audience to distinguish between the death of Polyxena in the aftermath of the war²³ and the murder of Polydorus. By doing so he

not follow the fall of Troy (see note 19 (a) 1) may have called for the detailed allusions to the version preferred by Euripides.

²¹ At Hecuba's age and in her circumstances a natural death would have been a blessing. Euripides could not, of course, use a version according to which Hecuba was killed by the Greeks (if this version already existed; see note 19 (a) 2) as in this play Hecuba is Agamemnon's protégée.

²² This "signpost for sailors" (1273) will have been known to Euripides and his audience (Thuc. 8.104.5; 105.2; 106.4). The identification is still known to Strabo (7 fr. 55; see also 13.1.28). Its first attested mention is in the *Hecuba*. That Thucydides does not refer to it à propos the Cynossema (loc. cit.) need not mean that he was ignorant of it (cf., e.g., his lack of mention of Teucer à propos Salamis in 1.112.4 and contrast with Strabo 14.6.3).

²³ Hecuba tries to save Polyxena with the argument that since she was not killed in the sack of Troy it is not permissible to kill her afterwards (288-90); but this argument receives no response. The demand of the spirit of Achilles that the girl be sacrificed on his tomb is universally considered a result of the war and Polyxena, as the last of Hecuba's children to be killed "in the war," as it were represents all of them in this respect.

intended them to understand with Hecuba that there was nothing to be done in the first case, but that in the latter revenge was not only permissible but required. He wished them to see in Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor the punishment appropriate to the crime²⁴ and to realize that the execution of this revenge was the last duty, and thus the only positive action left to Hecuba in the circumstances of her life.

Whether such an act should be considered tragic is beyond the scope of this paper.

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²⁴ Hecuba's revenge can be claimed to agree with the spirit of the *lex talionis* much more than a sentence of death upon Polymestor, for as she was by his act, so was he by her revenge, doomed to a life of bereavement without hope or light. What seems of real importance in this respect is the similarity of Hecuba's revenge to the punishment inflicted by Nebuchadnezzar on Zedekiah (II Kings 25.6-7; note also the *κρίσις* prior to the punishment); it would be enlightening if it could be proven that blinding and extermination of seed was a penalty for treason in the Ancient Near East, and that this was or could have been known to Euripides and his audience. In such a case "Hecuba's Revenge" would have been the (*δίκη*) ἣν ἔταξ' ὁ νόμος; see note 12; moreover, 5th cent. Greeks are known to have killed the offspring of a very special offender before his eyes with Athenian consent (Hdt. 9.120).