

## The Hero and the Hound: Odyssean Transformations in Euripides' *Hecuba*

Of all the peculiarities that readers and critics encounter in Euripides' *Hecuba*, one of the most striking and most often commented upon is the absence of any divine figures on the stage or in the text. At a glance this observation appears valid—no god speaks a single line in the play and the drama's core religious conflict lies in the sacrifice of Polyxenia not to a god, but to the outraged shade of Achilles. However, several scholars (Kastley, 1993; Meltzer, 2006) follow Froma Zeitlin (1991) in taking precisely the opposite perspective: in a play where every figure is stuck in a liminal state—the captured Trojan women between nobility and servitude; the ghosts of Polydorus and Achilles between life and death; the whole Greek army between the battlefields of Troy and the peace of their homeland—the transformative presence of Dionysus can be felt throughout, especially considering the Thracian setting. Of course, Hecuba undergoes the most drastic changes of all as she is forced to adapt in order to navigate her new world and role, and the play captures a critical period in her transformation from the queen of Troy to a firey-eyed drowned dog, as foretold by Polymestor in the closing lines. In addition to these more physical transformations, the action occupies an ethical free space where the meanings of key terms like *dike*, *charis*, and *xenos* are no longer fixed and rigid, but malleable to the advantage and convenience of whomever invokes them. The play is intimately concerned with the redefining of terms such as these, and in particular the ways that individuals apply them to one another in this ethical border land.

In this paper I examine a variety of instances where Hecuba expands and reorients the meanings of key ethical terms such as these, and in particular I explore ways in which Hecuba's character and rhetorical ethos take on specifically Odyssean qualities after her failed attempt to persuade the master rhetorician to spare her daughter from sacrifice. First, I identify the

rhetorical strategy by which Odysseus is able to sidestep Hecuba's invocation of *charis* by shifting the meaning of the term to one that is more advantageous to him. This strategy is quite consistent with the ones employed by Odysseus in his other *agones* on the tragic stage—in Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*—and therefore bears a strong association with his traditionally wily persona. Next, I examine Hecuba's persuasion of Agamemnon as she secures his aid in her plot to take vengeance on Polymestor for the murder of her young son and find that she employs this very same Odyssean strategy, here by manipulating Agamemnon's conception of the bonds of *philia*. In doing so, Hecuba expertly reorients her and her daughter Cassandra's relationship to Agamemnon from slave and spear-bride to spouse and mother-in-law. Finally, I consider Odyssean aspects of Hecuba's vengeance against Polymestor that extend beyond the rhetorical. As Hecuba, now bearing a strong Odyssean resemblance, gouges the eyes of Polymestor—a tyrannical violator of the codes of *xenia*—and as the blind man shouts curses at his departing assailants, Euripides recalls the similar sequence in book nine of the *Odyssey*. Indeed, this blurring of boundaries between tragic woman and epic hero gives the play one of its strongest Dionysiac qualities.

### Working Bibliography

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